Dialogue

Austronesian Youth Perspectives on Language Reclamation and Maintenance

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Re-Presenting Melanesia: Ignoble Savages and Melanesian Alter-Natives

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A Sea of Warriors: Performing an Identity of Resilience and Empowerment in the Face of Climate Change in the Pacific

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Re-Presenting Melanesia: Ignoble Savages and Melanesian Alter-Natives

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In his statement to the 19th Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) leaders summit in Noumea, New Caledonia, on 21 June 2013, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo couched his speech around the theme "MSG: Our Place in the Sun in Oceania" and called on "Melanesians to rise up to the challenges facing their region and find their place amongst the nations of the world" (Lilo 2013). This was a bold statement, especially given the enormity of the social, political, and economic challenges that Melanesian countries face. Further, it is daring, given over two centuries of generally negative representations of Melanesian peoples and societies in Western discourses—negative representations that have over time been internalized by Pacific Islanders, including Melanesians, and used to perpetuate relationships with Melanesia that have racist, essentialist, and social evolutionary elements. The challenges for re-presenting Melanesia are therefore not just socioeconomic but also epistemological. But Prime Minister Lilo's call illustrates the fact that Melanesians have now appropriated the term "Melanesia" and are using it to challenge the negative representations—to "re-present" and "alter" the images of Melanesia as it vies for its "place in the sun." Lilo's statement therefore acknowledges both the potential for economic developments in Melanesia due to its comparatively large population and land area and rich terrestrial and marine resources[1] as well as the opportunity for people from this southwestern corner of Oceania to carve their place in the region and beyond.

In this essay, I examine the dominant representations of Melanesia as a place and Melanesians as peoples and how these have influenced understandings of and responses to contemporary developments in this subregion.[2] I begin with an overview of the discourses that influenced the map-

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ping of Oceania and the negative representations of Melanesians. These have, in turn, framed and influenced discourses about and relationships with Melanesia and Melanesians, including Melanesian perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others.

Against this background, my focus is on how Melanesians have recently appropriated the term "Melanesia" and are using it in positive, empowering, and progressive ways to mobilize, redefine, and re-present themselves. In the process, they have constructed a pan-Melanesian identity (or identities) that embraces and celebrates the subregion's ethno-linguistic and cultural diversities. This is manifested through the concepts of "the Melanesian Way" and "wantokism,"[3] intergovernmental organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the arts, and popular culture. Through all of these, Melanesians are "altering" the native and "re-presenting" what might be called the "ignoble savage." This process and discourse constitute "Melanesianism."

The Black Islands

The mapping and naming of Oceania as Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia has been extensively discussed and critiqued elsewhere (see, eg, Campbell 2010; Douglas 1998, 2010, 2011; Tcherkézoff 2003; Thomas 1989). Here, I provide a brief overview of how the division and naming of Oceania was influenced, not only by Europeans' search for Terra Australis or Zuytlandt (South land) but also by ideas of race that were dominant in Europe from the mid-eighteenth century or earlier (Douglas 2010; Tcherkézoff 2003).

French botanist and explorer Rear Admiral Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville is the person most often credited for the tripartite division of Oceania. His 1832 paper "Sur les îles du Grand Océan" (On the Islands of the Great Ocean) popularized the terms and the divisions (Dumont d'Urville 2003). However, variations of these terms and the meanings attached to them existed among many Europeans—especially aristocrats, scholars, navigators, explorers, and natural scientists—prior to the presentation and publication of Dumont d'Urville's paper. He was, therefore, popularizing and reiterating terms and ideas that were prevalent in Europe at that time (Tcherkézoff 2003).

This was not just a geographical mapping of the region; it was also a racialist mapping that reflected long-held ideas about race and social evolution (Tcherkézoff 2003; Douglas 2010). Bronwen Douglas discussed

how the "science of race" influenced how places in Oceania (and elsewhere) were named and how people were categorized. She pointed to the "systematic efforts made in various branches of natural history—particularly comparative anatomy, physiology, and zoology—to theorize physical difference between human groups as innate, morally and intellectually determinant, and possibly original" (Douglas 2008, 5). She clarified, however, that "the word 'race' (then a concrete genealogical term connoting a nation or people of common ancestry) was hardly used before the mid-18th century, while the modern biological sense of a race (denoting permanent, innate, collective physical and mental differences) did not emerge until the 1770s" (Douglas 2010, 198).

Serge Tcherkézoff, on the other hand, proposed a much longer history of European essentialist and negative representations of other races, especially black people, dating back to the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century enslaving of Africans by Spanish and Portuguese traders (2003). This was reinforced by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave trade to America.

In mapping Oceania, Melanesia was the only subregion named after the skin color of its inhabitants: the "black-skinned people" or "black islands." The names "Polynesia" and "Micronesia" describe the geography of the islands.[4] The term "Melanesia" was deployed to invoke "blackness," reflecting discourses about race in Europe that categorized human beings worldwide within a racial hierarchy that placed "white" or "Caucasian" people at the top and "black" people at the bottom (Douglas 2008, 2010). Tcherkézoff stated that the tripartite division of Oceania "was not a simple matter of geography and map-making, but of race. . . . long before Dumont d'Urville's invention, the 'black' races were already labelled in the most disparaging terms. . . . The history of the contrast between Polynesia and Melanesia is not the story of a 19th-century French navigator, but the history of European ideas about 'skin colours', between the 16th and the 19th centuries" (Tcherkézoff 2003, 175, 195, 196).

In Oceania, Dumont d'Urville identified two broad "varieties" of people: "Among the many varieties of the human species that live on the various islands of Oceania, all travellers, without exception, have reported two that differ very markedly from one another. Their many peculiar moral and physical features no doubt require us to regard them as two separate races" (2003, 164). He described Polynesians as "people of average height, with relatively pale olive-yellow complexions, sleek hair usually brown or black, a fairly regular build and well-proportioned limbs. . . . Moreover,

this race displays almost as much variety as the white race of Europe, that Duméril called *Caucasian* and Bory de Saint-Vincent, *Japhetic*" (Dumont d'Urville 2003, 164). The group that he called Melanesians, on the other hand, "comprises people with very dark, often sooty, skins, sometimes almost as black as that of the Kaffirs, and curly, fuzzy, fluffy but seldom woolly hair. Their features are disagreeable, their build is uneven and their limbs are often frail and deformed. . . . Nevertheless, there is as much variety in skin colour, build and features among the black people of Oceania as among the numerous nations who live on the African continent and make up the race that most authors have referred to as Ethiopian" (Dumont d'Urville 2003, 164).

Europeans—as demonstrated in Dumont d'Urville's writings—drew a parallel between the physical features, morality, and social organizations of Melanesians and Africans, implying that the dark-skinned people of Oceania were similar to and therefore should be treated in the same way as dark-skinned people elsewhere.

To illustrate this point, let me turn to our neighbor Australia, a place where race relations were of great concern by the mid-eighteenth century and continue to be an issue today (see Wolfe 2006; Anderson 2003). Writing about people of mixed descent in Australia, historian Henry Reynolds argued that racial categories that had already taken root in Europe and North America were transmitted to Australia and helped define race relations there. Reynolds described how, at the first Commonwealth Parliament meeting in 1901, "members and Senators agreed about the centrality of race. They agreed that there was a demonstrable hierarchy of races with the northwest Europeans, the Nordics or Caucasians at the top and the Africans, Melanesians and Aborigines at the bottom" (2005, 85).

In this racialist mapping, the "Oceanic Negroes," which included Australian Aborigines and those from the southwestern Pacific, were placed in the same category as black people from Africa, who by then had long been subjected to European-perpetrated slavery in the New World. This categorization reflected discourses that influenced European interactions with the rest of the world. Notions of racial hierarchy and references to "black-skinned people" as the most primitive of human races were, its proponents argued, supported by science (Douglas 2008; Ballard 2008). One popular pseudo-scientific approach was phrenology, which involved the measuring of human skulls and brains to determine the place of their owners in the racial hierarchy. In these studies, the Oceanic Negroes—like their African "relatives"—were placed low in the hierarchy (Rochette

2003). In a lecture in 1819, the British biologist Sir William Lawrence asserted that the distinction of color between white and black was not more striking

> than the pre-eminence of the former in moral feelings and mental endowments. . . . The later . . . indulge, almost universally, in disgusting debauchery and sensuality, and display gross selfishness, indifference to the pains and pleasures of others, insensibility to beauty of form, order and harmony, and an almost entire want of what we comprehend altogether under the expression of elevated sentiments, manly virtues and moral feeling. The hideous savages of Van Diemen's Land [Tasmania], of New Holland [Australia], New Guinea, and some neighbouring islands, the Negroes of Congo and some other parts exhibit the most disgusting moral as well as physical portrait of man. (quoted in Reynolds 2005, 86)

Reynolds quoted French aristocrat and novelist Joseph Arthur De Gobineau as saying that the Oceanic Negroes "had the special privilege of providing the 'most ugly, and degraded and repulsive specimens of the race' that seemed to have been created to provide a link between man and the brute" (Reynolds 2005, 68). Similarly, in dividing Oceania into Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia, Dumont d'Urville, like his predecessors, emphasized skin color. He identified Melanesians—which included the inhabitants of New Holland (Australia) and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania)—as "more or less black in colour, with curly, fuzzy or sometimes nearly woolly hair, flat noses, wide mouths and unpleasant features, and their limbs are often very frail and seldom well shaped. The women are even more hideous than the men, especially those who have suckled children, as their breasts immediately become flaccid and droopy, and the little freshness that they owed to youth vanishes at once" (Dumont d'Urville 2003, 169).

The racialist mapping of Oceania was also influenced by pseudo-evolutionary ideas about cultures and sociopolitical organizations. Dumont d'Urville, for example, stated that Polynesians "are often organised into nations and sometimes powerful monarchies." This was in contrast to Melanesians who "are organised into tribes or clans of varying size, but very seldom into nations, and their institutions are far from attaining the degree of refinement that can sometimes be found among people of the copper-skinned race" (Dumont d'Urville2003, 164). The measure of the "development" of a society—and therefore race—was according to how similar to or different from European forms of government it was. Consequently, the absence of centralized authority and the relative egalitar-

ian nature of societies in the southwestern Pacific and among indigenous Australians implied social deficiencies and therefore inferiority. Indigenous Australians were seen as the lowest in the social and racial hierarchy because of their nomadic hunter-gatherer societies (Ballard 2008; Reynolds 2005).

Another important aspect of this discussion is the link between race and gender. The difference between Polynesia and Melanesia was based not only on the color of people's skin or the relative "development" of their sociopolitical organizations but also on how women were viewed and how they were seen to relate to both indigenous men and European strangers. Margaret Jolly suggested that, long before Dumont d'Urville's 1832 paper, Europeans made strongly contrasting judgments between the women of Polynesia and Melanesia in terms of beauty, sexual allure and access, work, and status vis-à-vis indigenous men (2012). While Polynesian women were often portrayed as "dusky maidens" (Tamaira 2010), Melanesian women were portrayed in derogatory terms. This "gendering of race" affects perception of Melanesian women and their place in contemporary societies (Jolly 2012).

Given European attitudes, it is therefore no surprise that the "darkest" of the Pacific Islanders were identified by the color of their skin, rather than by the geographical characteristics of the places where they lived. Right from the beginning, the term "Melanesia" was impregnated with racialist overtones. Papua New Guinean scholar Regis Tove Stella discussed how race was used in European colonial discourse to describe and represent Papua New Guineans as inferior to Europeans and other Pacific Islanders, partly because of their darker skin. He stated, "Colonial discourse produced and circulated knowledge and imagery that regularly depicted Papua New Guineans as inferior and subordinate, portraying them in positions of subjection, savagery, and powerlessness in accordance with the widespread operation of the discourse" (Stella 2007, 21). This is true of depiction of the rest of Melanesia, as discussed above. This essentialist and racialist view of Melanesia set the tone for how the peoples and cultures from Melanesia were represented in the centuries that followed colonization.

Islands of Ignoble Savages

European images of Oceania were also influenced by the concept of the "Noble Savage," which glorified a "natural life" that was seen as uncorrupted by civilization and therefore represented humans' innate goodness

(Ellingston 2001). The portrayal of Pacific Islanders as "noble savages" was influenced largely by the accounts of European explorers like James Cook and Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who had documented and shared their encounters with South Seas peoples and places, especially Tahitian and Marquesan peoples and landscapes (Jolly 1997). I have often wondered how the view of Pacific Islanders as "noble savages" would have developed had it been based on European encounters with my ancestors from the Solomon Islands or with those from other parts of Melanesia. Perhaps the descriptor of the "savage" would have shifted from "noble" to "ignoble."

Scholarly enterprises that developed with European and North American higher education also contributed to the construction and perpetuation of the negative representations of Melanesia. Central to this was cultural anthropology, a discipline that pioneered scholarly descriptions of Melanesian places, peoples, and cultures. While this field of study has contributed to knowledge about Melanesia, it also added to distortions and misunderstandings and perpetuated the racialized division of Oceania. Epeli Hau'ofa commented on the role of anthropology in perpetuating what he called "distorted" images of Melanesia:

> after decades of anthropological field research in Melanesia we have come up only with pictures of people who fight, compete, trade, pay bride-prices, engage in rituals, invent cargo cults, copulate, and sorcerise each other. There is hardly anything in our literature to indicate whether these people have any such sentiments as love, kindness, consideration, altruism, and so on. We cannot tell from our ethnographic writings whether they have a sense of humour. We know little about their systems of morality, specifically their ideas of the good and the bad, and their philosophies. (Hau'ofa 2008, 6)

Hau'ofa took issue with the tendency to describe Melanesian polities as "underdeveloped" and "backward" compared to "advanced" Polynesia. He argued that anthropological description "denies that traditional Melanesian leaders have any genuine interest in the welfare of their people and insists that their public actions are all motivated purely by selfishness." He went on to say that this kind of ethnographic work is "erroneous" and "an invidious pseudo-evolutionary comparison between the 'developed' Polynesian polities and the 'underdeveloped' Melanesian ones." He decried the fact that Europeans have long romanticized Polynesians and denigrated Melanesians, and he warned that this kind of anthropology "has the potential of bolstering the long-standing Polynesian racism against Melanesians" (Hau'ofa 2008, 6).

Hau'ofa was referring, in particular, to the work of social anthropologists who often describe Melanesian polities as comparatively smaller and ethno-linguistically diverse with no "centralized" authority. In discussing the difference between Melanesia and Polynesia, Marshall Sahlins, for example, stated that "the Polynesians were to become famous for elaborate forms of rank and chieftainship, whereas most Melanesian societies broke off advance on this front at more rudimentary levels" (1963, 286). He went on to say that, "measurable along several dimensions, the contrast between developed Polynesian and underdeveloped Melanesian polities is immediately striking for differences in scale" (Sahlins 1963, 289). Such descriptions resonate with early European writings and invoke pseudo-evolutionary comparisons. They are based on the fact that Melanesian polities did not resemble the models of the centralized state that were established in Europe and exported to the rest of the world through colonialism. Polynesian societies, on the other hand, had hierarchical chiefly systems that resembled the feudal systems in Europe. Furthermore, by the 1800s, centralized "governments" had been created in parts of Polynesia. The establishment of monarchs in Hawai'i, Tahiti, and Tonga was often pointed to as a sign of "development" in Polynesian social organization (see, eg, discussion in Howe 1984, 59–65). In Fiji, the rise and establishment of Bau as the central power was never complete because Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau did not have control over all of Fiji (Lal 1992). The perception that having large centralized institutions—in the form of states—was the best way of organizing societies contributed to the denigration of Melanesian sociopolitical organizations.

The descriptions of Melanesian sociopolitical organizations as "underdeveloped" and "backward" were also due to Europeans' inability to relate to and understand the complexities of Melanesian societies. For instance, the Kula Ring in Papua New Guinea entailed complex interactions among peoples from different language groups, involving trade, politics, ceremonial exchanges, and social relationships that held these societies together and survived for thousands of years (Malinowski 1920; Ziegler 1990). Another example is the shell-money trade between the people of Langalanga Lagoon on Malaita in Solomon Islands and Bougainville as well as other parts of island Papua New Guinea. This continues today, largely outside of the purview of the state and despite the trade and immigration regulations that the governments of Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea impose (Guo 2006; Connell 1977). Perhaps Melanesian societies baffled early European visitors because they were vastly different and unfamiliar. Europeans therefore employed pseudo-evolutionary

ideas that placed European social organization at the top along with those that resembled them and those unfamiliar and dissimilar at the bottom.

Such attitudes are often reflected—albeit implicitly—in contemporary discussions of social, political, and economic developments in Melanesia. In the last three decades, Melanesia has been portrayed predominantly as a place of conflicts, political instabilities, and poor social and economic development. The diversity of cultures and languages is often presented as a problem rather than as a rich cultural heritage. Ethno-linguistic diversity, it seems, does not fit into the idea of a homogenizing world, where collective "imagined communities"—to reference Benedict Anderson (1991)—and national identities are normative and regarded as more "civilized." Political scientists often describe Melanesian states as "weak" and "failing" and as part of an "arc of instability" that stretches from Indonesia to Fiji (May 2003; Duncan and Chand 2002). Furthermore, these states were often referenced as the primary contributors to what some called the "Africanisation of the Pacific" (Reilly 2000). This viewpoint invokes a perceived connection between Africa and Oceania—especially Melanesia—that was made in early European writings. It implies that these connections were "natural" and the same challenges were expected of black people, whether they were in Africa or Oceania. Jon Fraenkel (2004) and David Chappell (2005) have challenged Ben Reilly's "Africanisation of the Pacific" thesis, arguing that it made broad and erroneous generalizations and did not fully consider the colonial histories and experiences that have contributed to Oceania's contemporary challenges.

Political scientists explain contemporary issues and developments in Melanesia almost exclusively vis-à-vis Western ideas and models of governance. They measure the failures and successes of Melanesian societies by using Western criteria, often in the guise of universalizing theories of governance. This is usually done without reference to the ways that Melanesians organized themselves in their own terms and how these strategies have kept their societies surviving for thousands of years. Terence Wesley-Smith pointed to this problem in his discussion of how the concept of the state is exported and promoted as if it were the most natural and appropriate institution for organizing all human societies, including those in Melanesia (2008). The state is often presented as unproblematic, or at least taken as "given" in ways that ignore the violent history of the development of the Western states.

The negative representation of Melanesians—and hence the construction of the "ignoble savage"—is found not only in academic research and writings but in visual images as well. I am often troubled by images of

Melanesians that are framed and hung on the walls of university buildings. To me they look uncomfortable, trapped in time for the entertainment, curiosity, and amusement of those who walk the corridors. When I first went to the Australian National University, I found that the only picture of bare-breasted women on the walls of the Coombs Building was one of Solomon Islanders. I have written about that elsewhere (Kabutaulaka 1997). When I joined the East-West Center in Honolulu, I noticed that the only pictures of half-naked people on the walls of Burns Hall were those of people from Tanna in Vanuatu. These images were on the third floor, where the Pacific Islands Development Program—where I once worked—is located. As I walked along the corridor, I passed the half-naked Tanna people and then came to pictures of Micronesians who were dressed and represented in studio poses, as though they had been liberated from savagery, unlike the Melanesians at the other end of the hallway. I often wondered what those people in the pictures might have been thinking as they stared at me from their framed existence. They probably wondered why I was walking along the corridor and not framed and hung on the wall with the rest of them. Perhaps I am framed in a different way—still stuck in the racialized map of Oceania constructed by early Europeans and sustained by contemporary discourses.

This kind of stasis is what Homi Bhabha, in his discussion of representation in colonial discourses, referred to as the "dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (1994, 66). The display of colonial subjects, or "others," as naturally and permanently fixed in a particular time and state-of-being in turn naturalizes and justifies their domination (see Hall 1997; Spurr 1993). The constant representation of Melanesians in books and in paintings on the walls of academic buildings as well as museums as naked or half naked posing in jungles or villages portrays them as naturally trapped in a particular state-of-being and unchanging. These "ignoble savages" are therefore "backward" compared to the West (and the rest of Oceania), which is constantly changing and "progressing."

Negative representations of Melanesia are also found in popular writings. For example, in writing about his travels through Solomon Islands in 1911, Jack London had little good to say about the island group. In fact, he stated, "If I were a king, the worst punishment I could inflict on my enemies would be to banish them to the Solomons. On second thought, king or no king, I don't think I'd have the heart to do it" (London 2003, 178). Travel writer Paul Theroux, writing in the 1990s, said that he found the Solomons to be "the most savage islands in the Pacific" (1992, 155). In

his book *The Happy Isles of Oceania,* Theroux had a go at nearly all the Pacific Islands, but he reserved his most horrendous comments for Melanesians, describing Solomon Islanders in Honiara as "among the scariest-looking people I had ever seen in my life" (1992, 155). For Fiji, Theroux made a distinction between the people of eastern Fiji and those that he referred to as "Melanesian Fijians." He wrote that "the Lau Group is one of the pretty little star clusters in the universe of Oceania. Melanesian Fiji is another story. Fiji is like the world you thought you left behind—full of political perversity, racial fear, economic woes, and Australian tourists looking for inexpensive salad bowls" (Theroux 1992, 219). While such descriptions may raise eyebrows, they also appeal to European curiosity about the savage Melanesians. It is no surprise that Theroux's book became a *New York Times* best seller—it fed the Western imagination about Melanesian "backwardness" and savagery.

The media also contribute to the "ignoble savage" representation of Melanesia. In 2007, a British television company produced a three-part documentary series titled *Meet the Natives*. The producers promoted this as "reverse anthropology," in which "natives" would be taken to metropolitan cities and their interactions with the peoples and cultures of the West would be filmed. The first task was to find the "native"—and, of course, where did they look but Melanesia. In the first part of the series, five men from Tanna in Vanuatu were taken to London and filmed as they interacted with "English peoples and cultures." Although I have not watched the series, I found the idea of "reverse anthropology" troubling.[5] On 8 September 2007, the British newspaper *The Independent* carried a story titled, "Strange Island: Pacific Tribesmen Come to Study Britain" (Adams 2007). In this article, the five men from Tanna had no voice; they were merely the exotic objects of media commentary.

After the London episode of *Meet the Natives* was aired, I received an e-mail from the producers asking me to facilitate the production of a sequel to the documentary. This time they wanted to take men from the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal in Solomon Islands (where I come from), and especially the followers of the Moro Movement, to New York. I seriously considered their request, knowing that many of my *wantok* would love to go to New York, even if they had no clue where it was or what they were required to do. However, after careful consideration, I refused to facilitate the project and e-mailed the producers saying that I was unable to help. I saw the project not as "reverse anthropology" but as simply a relocation of the "native" or the "ignoble savage" who continues to be an

object of Western curiosity. This time, however, the "native" was being placed in an unfamiliar environment and gazed at through television cameras and screens. I could imagine English families in their living rooms, gazing at the television and commenting on the "natives," the faraway places they came from, how they must be fascinated by English culture—and I thought about how all of this would contribute yet again to the production of denigrating "knowledge" about Melanesians. It made my "intellectual spirit" quiver.

(When I was approached, the mischievous side of me—which makes up quite a bit of me—was tempted to facilitate the project. I thought that since they didn't know what I looked like, it would be fun if I could fly home, dress up in *kabilato* (bark cloth) like the "native" they wanted to see, and get myself recruited as part of the "delegation" to New York. I thought that it would be amusing if, in the middle of filming, I would start discussions about the politics of representation, demand to be taken to Broadway or to the United Nations headquarters, and ask to be wined and dined at the most expensive restaurants. I would suddenly break out of the native binary and run amok in New York. Perhaps that part of the series could be titled, "Native Runs Amok in New York." However, in the end, the sensible side of me prevailed and I dropped the idea.)

While my focus in this essay thus far has been on European representations, it is important to note that the "ignoble savage" images of Melanesian have spread beyond the European imagination and become entrenched among non-Europeans as well. To illustrate this, let me recount an event that occurred in Canberra in the late 1990s when I was a PhD student at the Australian National University (ANU). One afternoon, I was in a bus with John Naitoro—another Solomon Islander who was also working on his PhD at the university—on our way to ANU housing at Hughes, a suburb of Canberra where we lived. We sat at the back of the bus chattering away in Solomon Islands *pijin*. Next to us was a black man, whom we later learned was from Somalia. After listening to us for a while, he asked, "Are you from Papua New Guinea?"

"Yes, we are from Papua New Guinea," John quickly responded before I could say anything.

The man was quiet for a while and then asked, "Do you eat people in Papua New Guinea?" I was shocked.

"Yes, we eat people," John quickly responded.

"But that was long time ago, right?" the man asked, after a moment of silence.

"No, we still eat people," John quickly answered with a serious expression on his face. I looked at him and then at the man, wondering where this conversation was going.

After a while and as though to assure himself of his safety, the man asked, "But you only eat white people, right?"

"No, we eat black people as well," John said looking straight at him and more seriously than before. The man stood up and went to the front of the bus.

That incident set me thinking about where and how an African had gotten the idea that Papua New Guineans in Canberra in the late 1990s could be cannibals. Perhaps he thought that you could take the man out of cannibal land, but not cannibalism out of the man. I also wondered what he would have asked if we had told him that we were from Tahiti. Perhaps he would have asked if in Tahiti we danced *tamure* all day, ate from abundant breadfruit trees, and made love under coconut trees. I also wondered why John responded to him in the way he did. John said to me afterward, "Hem na wat fo talem long pipol karage olsem" (That's what you say to people who are ignorant like that).

The "ignoble Melanesian savage" exists not only in European and African minds but also in Pacific Islander minds. The negative representation of Melanesians—and darker-skinned people more generally—has, to some extent, been internalized by Pacific Islanders, including Melanesians. This is reflected in the languages, perceptions, and relationships among Pacific Islanders. This topic is not usually discussed openly because it is sensitive and people fear being labeled "racist" or causing unsettling waves in our *wan solwara*.[6]

Let me take the risk and raise some of these languages and perceptions here. In Sāmoa, for example, black people (including Melanesians) are commonly referred to as *mea uli. Uli* is the word for "black," and one of the most common meanings of *mea* is "thing." Hence, one could argue that the use of the term *mea uli* (either consciously or unconsciously) strips the black person of his or her humanity and reduces him or her to a "thing"—*mea uli.* In March 2009, there was a debate in the *Samoa Observer* following the use of the term *mea uli* to refer to the then newly elected first black president in the United States, Barack Obama. One of the contributors suggested the use of the term *tagata uli,* which literally means "black man," and *taine uli* as appropriate for "black woman" (*Samoa Observer,* 23 March 2009).[7] In Tongan, a black person may be referred to as *ʻuliʻuli* (black) or, more rudely, *meʻa ʻuli* (black thing). As *ʻuli* is also the word for "dirty," one wonders whether black people are considered dirty.

In June 2010, I presented a version of this paper at the University of the South Pacific (USP) as a way of starting conversations about the perceptions associated with the divisions of Oceania and how Melanesians are represented. The USP student newspaper, *Wan Solwara,* published a story about my presentation and comments from USP students and faculty. This was later reprinted in the Auckland University of Technology Pacific Media Centre's online publication, Pacific.Scoop. The comments by two prominent Pacific Islander scholars were insightful and important in this conversation. Education Professor Konai Helu Thaman was reported to have said that "referring to black-skinned people as 'uli or 'uli'uli is purely for descriptive purposes and not meant to be offensive." She said, "When Tongans say 'uli'uli it does not mean that they are superior, being a Tongan. They are just describing the person, but if there is a feeling that whoever is 'uli'uli is black and is compared to white, then that is problematic." Historian Morgan Tuimaleali'ifano explained that the expression *mea uli* in Samoan meant black people without negative connotations. But he added that there were people who put "value" behind the term (Pacific. Scoop 2010).

Epeli Hau'ofa, who was born of Tongan missionary parents in Papua New Guinea and spent his early years in that country, provided a slightly different perspective. In an interview with Nicholas Thomas in 2006, Hau'ofa stated: "My upbringing in Melanesia was very important. I am extremely sensitive to Polynesian cultures and the contemporary situation and modernization, but they are rather dominant. Always, when I went to Tonga, I found that the way Polynesians feel and think about Melanesians [is] rather appalling. It's racist. There is a feeling of superiority. Because part of me is Melanesian, I'm always trying to go beyond that divide" (Thomas 2012, 126).

Polynesian views of Melanesians were perhaps influenced also by the experiences of Polynesian missionaries. The eastern Pacific was the first to have extensive contact with Europeans and to convert to Christianity. Polynesian missionaries were subsequently recruited to work in Melanesia. Sione Latukefu provided an insightful discussion of Polynesian and Fijian missionaries' interactions with Papua New Guineans and Solomon Islanders, as well as with their European counterparts. In commenting on the relation between Polynesian missionaries and Melanesians, Latukefu wrote, "The Tongans and Samoans had no doubt whatsoever of their physical, mental and cultural superiority to the Melanesians, an attitude that was reinforced by their role of 'bringing light to the darkness of Melanesia'" (1978, 98). He noted that Samoan missionaries found it most

difficult to adjust, attributing this to the fact "that Samoans had (and still have) a tremendous pride in their culture, the fa'a Samoa 'Samoan tradition.' Believing themselves to be the cream of the Pacific, they tended to look down on others, particularly the Papua New Guineans and Solomon Islanders" (Latukefu 1978, 98). This, Latukefu suggested, might also have been influenced by the fact that Samoan pastors were treated as special at home and therefore expected that treatment elsewhere. The situation was different with Fijian missionaries, whom Latukefu described as "closer to the local people. Since they were Melanesians themselves, there were few barriers between them and the people, either racially or culturally. Marriage between Fijian missionaries and local women was quite common, especially among missionaries who became widowers during their term of service, but marriage between Samoans and Tongans and local people was extremely rare" (Latukefu 1978, 98). I raise this not to accuse Tongans and Samoans (and other Pacific Islanders) of being racist toward Melanesians but rather to highlight and begin examinations and discussions about how we Pacific Islanders have internalized the racial divisions of Oceania and the prejudices associated with their European constructions. This signifies the extent of the impact of colonial discourses and its role in preventing us from achieving the Oceanic identity that Hau'ofa aspired to in his essay "Our Sea of Islands" (2008).

It is important to note that prejudice toward darker-skinned people also exists among Melanesians. Relatively lighter-skinned Melanesians sometimes speak in disparaging ways about darker-skinned Melanesians and associate them with more "savagery" because of the color of their skin. In Solomon Islands, for example, a month prior to independence in July 1978, the government newspaper published a poem titled "West Wind," written by a man from Malaita, in which he described those from the Western Solomon Islands, who are generally darker than other Solomon Islanders, as "Black and ugly, proud and lazy" (*News Drum,* 9 June 1978).[8] The poem incited debates (*News Drum,* 23 June 1978) and fueled sentiments for the Western Solomons to secede from the rest of the country (Premdas, Steeves, and Larmour 1984). The issue was deemed so serious that the author of the poem was charged with sedition (*News Drum,* 8 Sept 1978).

Consequently, in order for the discussions—especially among Pacific Islanders—to transcend the colonial binaries and establish and reinforce the trans-Oceanic identities that Hau'ofa talked about, it is important that Pacific Islanders acknowledge how these binaries have influenced how we perceive and relate to each other. This is a discussion that might be

uncomfortable, but it is one that is important and that we must not shy away from.

Some have proposed the need to shift beyond these geographical and racial binaries and to emphasize the interconnections between Islanders. This, it was envisaged, would foster the construction of pan-Oceanic identities and connections that had existed prior to European contact—or, if they hadn't existed, that should be established because we belong to *wan solwara*. The late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, prime minister and president of Fiji, for example, started this by proposing the concept of the "Pacific Way." He was credited for coining and first articulating the term at a United Nations General Assembly meeting in October 1970. In that address, Ratu Mara used the term to refer specifically to Fiji's smooth transition from colonial rule to independence as reflecting a "Pacific Way" that was consensual and peaceful (Mara 1997, 238). However, the term has since been used broadly as anticolonial and representing Oceania as a region with similar cultures that is politically united, can address issues through collective diplomacy, and invokes a Pan-Oceania identity (Crocombe 1976). But, as Stephanie Lawson pointed out, the term also reflects Polynesian values, especially Ratu Mara's aristocratic background, more than those of Melanesia and Micronesia (Lawson 2010, 2013).

Epeli Hau'ofa was also a proponent of pan-Oceanic identities. He highlighted how pan-Oceanic connections transcend national and subregional boundaries, arguing that the ocean connects rather than divides the Pacific Islands. He described Oceania prior to European contact as "a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers. From one island to another they sailed to trade and to marry, thereby expanding social networks for greater flows of wealth. They travelled to visit relatives in a wide variety of natural and cultural surroundings, to quench their thirst for adventure, and even to fight and dominate" (Hau'ofa 2008, 33).

While I agree with Hau'ofa's proposal to strengthen our trans-Oceanic connections and identities, it must be noted that national and subregional boundaries persist and have become "realities" for most Pacific Islanders. In fact, while scholars have been engaged in critical debate about and deconstructions of the tripartite divisions—conversations that are important and must be encouraged—there is relatively less discussion about how the terms "Polynesia," "Micronesia," and "Melanesia" have taken on lives of their own, appropriated by Pacific Islanders and used to frame their identities and influence relationships among themselves

and with others. Political and cultural organizations in the region have adopted these names, indicating that Pacific Islanders have taken on these terms and used them for their own purposes. Examples of these include the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Micronesian Chief Executives Summit, and the Polynesian Leaders Group. On one hand, these subregional organizations could be viewed as perpetuating the colonial and essentialist divisions of Oceania. Alternatively, they could be seen as appropriating these terms and using them to construct new, useful, and empowering identities. Melanesians, as will be discussed in the next section, have certainly taken the term "Melanesia" and built an identity around it.

Melanesianism & Alter-Natives

While negative representations of Melanesia linger in the shadows of scholarly and popular discourses, Melanesians are proactively trying to shed the "ignoble savage" image and aspire for "a place in the sun." They have appropriated the term "Melanesia" for self-identification and are "altering" the "native," creating "alter-natives." They are showing that Melanesians have complex experiences and cultures that are rooted in centuries of traditions while at the same time adapting to new and dynamic futures that draw from within Melanesia and beyond. As Lawson stated, "Melanesia has acquired a positive meaning for many of those to whom it applies, providing a basis for the assertion of an identity that is confident and imbued with pride, thus clearly transcending its origins and establishing a new 'reality'" (2013, 21).

Since the 1970s, Melanesian political and intellectual leaders have attempted to construct and assert a collective Melanesian identity (or identities). Lawson provided a detailed discussion of the complex postcolonial histories and politics behind the idea of "Melanesia" and the construction of "Melanesianism" (2013). This was a reaction to the negative representations of Melanesia that started with the mapping of Oceania in the mid-eighteenth century and persisted through scholarly and popular discourses with mainly Euro-American and Australian origins. It was also a reaction to Melanesians' perception that Fiji (under Ratu Mara) and the Polynesian countries that gained independence earlier were dominating regional organizations such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and discourses about and representations of Oceania (Lawson 2013).

But the idea of "Melanesia" and the process of "Melanesianism" were influenced not only by past experiences but also by the awareness of future potentials. I will return to discussions of the future potentials later. Here,

let me explain what I mean by "Melanesianism." This is a concept and a discourse that creates an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) and invokes shared values—both imagined and real—that are fluid, dynamic, and constantly reinvented through ongoing *tok stori* (conversations) and shared experiences. Melanesianism is therefore a process rather than an ideology or a state of being. It is a discourse about an "imagined community" that takes form and becomes "real" through pan-Melanesian connections that are manifested in the idea of "Melanesia" and in organizations that forge political, economic, and cultural cooperation. A common pidgin language that is spoken in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu reinforces Melanesianism.

Melanesianism is also manifested and expressed through parallel and overlapping concepts such as the "Melanesian Way," "Melanesian socialism," and "wantokism." Stephanie Lawson (2013), Ralph Premdas (1987), and Michael Howard (1983) provided detailed examinations and analyses of the history and politics of the Melanesian Way and Melanesian socialism. I do not need to repeat those here except to point out that Bernard Narokobi, the Papua New Guinean intellectual and public servant who popularized the term "Melanesian Way," never provided a precise definition for the term. He argued that it would be futile to attempt to define "a total cosmic vision of life" (Narokobi 1980, 8). Since then, nobody that I know of has attempted to concisely define the "Melanesian Way." Perhaps it is this ambiguity and the fact that it was never framed and confined by specific definitions that have enabled Melanesianism to evolve and adapt in the last four decades, encompassing new experiences and innovative and creative forms of expressions. Melanesianism is rooted in and draws strength from the past but is not confined by it. It exists and is "real" because it is talked about, lived, and experienced, not because it is defined.

Furthermore, Melanesianism, as expressed through the Melanesian Way, embraces the subregion's ethno-linguistic and cultural diversities.[9] Narokobi suggested that the Melanesian Way does not necessarily imply a single Melanesian identity. Rather, it is a celebration of Melanesia's diversity and the fact that such diversity is a source of strength rather than of problem and weakness (Narokobi 1980). This view advocates harnessing and celebrating the common worldviews that one often finds woven amid the diversities. Western scholarship and popular representations of Melanesia have tended to focus on and emphasize the differences, rather than the similarities. But in an attempt to assert Melanesianism, emerging Melanesian elites often use slogans such as "unity in diversity"

to mobilize for decolonization (Scheyvens 1988) and invoke an idea of a community founded on the basis of shared diversities. Francis Saemala, for example, discussed how the foundations of decolonization and post-colonial nation building in Solomon Islands were built on "uniting the diversity" (1982).

But translating the idea of "unity in diversity" into reality is challenging, as we have seen in violent events such as the Bougainville Crisis and the Solomon Islands conflicts that emphasized the differences, rather than the unity. The causes of these conflicts, however, lie in a variety of socio-economic and political issues that have more recent history, rather than primordial ethno-linguistic differences (Regan 1998; Moore 2004). The causes of the Fiji coups in 1987, 2000, and 2006 are also more complex than simply an expression of the differences between the iTaukei (indigenous Fijians) and the descendants of Indian migrants (Tarte 2009).

Melanesian Spearhead Group

The political manifestation of Melanesianism was the establishments of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) in 1986, following informal discussions by the heads of the governments of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu and a representative of the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) in Goroka, PNG. The "Agreed Principles of Cooperation Among the Independent States in Melanesia" was signed in March 1988. The formal "Agreement Establishing the MSG" and the "MSG Constitution" were not signed until March 2007, followed by the opening of the MSG Secretariat headquarters in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in 2008. The reasons that are often given for the creation of the MSG were political, especially in relation to Melanesian leaders' frustrations over what they saw as the region's indecisiveness on issues such as the decolonization of New Caledonia (Lawson 2013; Grynberg and Kabutaulaka 1995; MacQueen 1989). Ron May asserted that "the MSG had its origins in a broad sense of Melanesian cultural solidarity and a desire to assert a Melanesian voice among the members of the Pacific Islands Forum, which some island countries perceived to be dominated by Australia and New Zealand" (2011, 6).

However, beyond these publicly expressed views, another reason for the establishment of the MSG was Melanesian leaders' concerns about the sense of superiority and domination that Polynesian leaders exerted at the regional level in the years after independence (MacQueen 1989). There were feelings that in the early days of Pacific Islands regionalism, Melanesians were looked down on. At that time, as noted earlier, this included

Fiji under Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who came from Lau and had close connections with Tonga and Sāmoa. This was demonstrated, among other incidents, by Ratu Mara's opposition to Papua New Guinea's inclusion in the South Pacific Forum (later renamed the Pacific Islands Forum) during its inaugural meeting in Wellington in 1971. He was also opposed to the nomination of a PNG national, Oala Rarua, for the position of secretary-general of the South Pacific Commission (later renamed the Pacific Community) (see Lawson 2013, 10). Furthermore, there were perceptions among Melanesian leaders that the concept of the Pacific Way as articulated by Ratu Mara, while pretending to be inclusive of the region, actually marginalized Melanesia and privileged Polynesian values, especially aristocratic leadership systems (Lawson 2013, 8–12).

Consequently, Fiji was not part of the initial discussions and did not become a member of the MSG until 1996. According to former Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, "Fiji was not part of the initial group that joined the MSG because at that time Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was regarded as one of the founding members of the Pacific Islands Forum with Australia and New Zealand so it would have appeared like Fiji was deserting the rest of the Pacific and going with the rest of the Western group, or Melanesian group" (*Islands Business* 2013). In spite of this, Fiji is now embraced as an important member of the MSG.

Today, the MSG has emerged as a political and economic force in the region. It has "expanded its purview to include climate change and security, and is leading the process of regional economic integration" (Tarte 2014, 312). Fijian academic Wadan Narsey described the MSG as "the Western Pacific Powerhouse":

> the MSG offers very real and significant economic benefits to the Melanesian countries, and especially Fiji, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands, who can work linkages with the new found minerals, LNG [liquified natural gas] wealth and booming economic growth of PNG. The MSG may well expand to include West Papua and FLNKS (Kanaky New Caledonia) both also resource rich, and both of whom will at long last find the regional support for their independence struggles, long denied them by [the] Forum Secretariat. Should Timor Leste also be included in the future, the MSG will be even further strengthened as the most powerful regional integration movement, totally overshadowing the economic possibilities from the Pacific Plan [a strategy for Pacific-wide regional cooperation endorsed by leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2005]. There is also every likelihood that the resource rich MSG has far more complementary benefits to offer the atoll countries (Kiribati, Tuvalu, FSM etc) than the Eastern Polynesian countries. (Narsey 2013)[10]

In March 2013, the University of the South Pacific, in collaboration with the Government of Fiji, hosted a "Melanesian Week" to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Melanesian Spearhead Group. The celebrations were laced with the theme "Celebrating Melanesian Solidarity and Growth." In his address, USP Vice Chancellor and President Rajesh Chandra pointed to the fact that the three MSG countries that are USP members—Fiji, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands—accounted for 82 percent of the university's enrollment in 2012 and that the subregion "represents most of the population of our region, and its largest economies. MSG has given a stronger voice to the 90% of Pacific islanders that it represents. It embodies the spirit of Pacific pride and honour, and is a positive, complementary organization to the PIFS [Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat] framework, and contributes to maintaining the balance between metropolitan powers and smaller Pacific island nations" (MSG 2013).

The MSG countries' potential for economic development contributes to their rising political power in the region. As Ron May stated, "In terms of population, land and resources, the Melanesian countries—particularly Papua New Guinea—are the dominant forces in Pacific island politics and economics, and have been largely responsible over recent years for the growing Chinese and European interest in the Pacific" (May 2011, 1).[11] As a block, the MSG is already beginning to make its weight felt in regional politics, especially in countering the influence of Australia and New Zealand. This was vividly demonstrated when the MSG continued to support Fiji following its suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth and received "diplomatic cold shoulders" and sanctions from Australia, New Zealand, and the European Union following the 2006 coup. In 2011, defying pressure from Australia and New Zealand, the MSG elected Fiji's coup leader and interim prime minister, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, as chair of the subregional organization. This poured cold water on Australian and New Zealand attempts to use the Pacific Islands Forum to turn up the heat on Fiji. Papua New Guinea's foreign affairs minister told the 18th MSG Summit held in Fiji in March 2011: "We must never lose sight of the fact that the MSG is a regional organization that consists of nations who are an integral part of the Pacific. We also have an international persona that cannot be subjected to the dictates of nor subjected by instructional decisions of anybody or entity whether they be regional or international, including the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth" (Loanakadavu 2011).

The MSG is the political and economic manifestation of the idea of

"Melanesia" and the assertion of Melanesianism. It is the body in which this "imagined community" becomes "real."

Wantokism

Wantokism is reinforced by a common pidgin language. The Melanesian subregion has a high "language density" with about 1,319 languages (Landweer and Unseth 2012).[12] But Melanesia also constitutes the largest population in Oceania—a little over eight million people—who speak a common language other than English. Although there are slight differences between PNG *tok pisin,* Vanuatu *bislama,* and Solomon Islands *pijin,* the people of these countries can carry on conversations entirely in pidgin. This is empowering and marks the pidgin-speaking Melanesian countries as *wantok* countries. Although Fijians do not speak pidgin, their interactions with other Melanesian countries through the Melanesian Spearhead Group have made them increasingly part of the *wantok* community. New Caledonia has long been viewed as part of the *wantok* community, although the Kanaks speak French, rather than pidgin.

This raises the importance of the concept of the *wantok* system or "wantokism." Some scholars have often identified this as a factor contributing to poor governance and economic mismanagement. Francis Fukuyama, for example, in writing about post-conflict and development challenges in Solomon Islands, argued that wantokism is one of the major obstacles to post-conflict development in Solomon Islands (2008). Morgan Brigg, however, argued in favor of "the innovative possibility of drawing on wantokism as a culturally recognised and valuable resource for addressing the current challenges faced by Solomon Islands" (2009, 148). Brigg suggested that wantokism could be used to mobilize locally emerging national identities, that it does not necessarily drive corruption, and that it could be utilized to facilitated governance at the local level. Gordon Nanau also discussed how the *wantok* system could potentially be an important network that enhances relationships both within and between countries (2011). Wantokism or the *wantok* system could therefore be the foundation on which Melanesianism thrives.

Melanusic

"Traditional" and popular cultures are often used to reaffirm the idea of Melanesia. This is best demonstrated through the Melanesian Festival of Arts and Culture, a biannual event that started in 1998 and includes "traditional" and contemporary cultural and artistic expressions that assert and celebrate the idea of Melanesia. The 5th Melanesian Festival of Arts

and Culture was held in Port Moresby from 30 June to 31 July 2014 and had the theme "Celebrating Cultural Diversity." This reaffirmed the notion of "unity in diversity" that I mentioned earlier.

Music is another medium through which Melanesianism is often expressed and reaffirmed. Contemporary Melanesian music combines elements of indigenous musical styles with popular musical genres like reggae, hip-hop, folk, and rock that have their origins elsewhere. It is the Melanesianization of global music genres, similar to what Kalissa Alexeyeff has observed in the Cook Islands (2004).

To illustrate this, let me refer to a few songs from Melanesian bands. The PNG band Haos Boi has a song titled "Melanesia," with lyrics about "living in paradise on this land I'll never give away" and about going to other places and realizing that there is no place like PNG in Melanesia. The lyrics also affirm the values of Melanesian cultures and *tubuna pasin* (ways of the elders) (Haus Boi 2009). Popular US-based Papua New Guinean–American musician Oshen (Jason Hershey), in his song also titled "Melanesia," sings about "Melanesia my Pacific Islands paradise."[13] The lyrics combine PNG *tok pisin* and English and reflect the musician's experiences growing up in Papua New Guinea and valuing his connections with Melanesia (Oshen 2009). Fijian musician Jale Maraeau also celebrates his Melanesian connections with his song "Melanesia," which he sings in the Fijian language (Maraeau 2010). A Solomon Islands band called Onetox (which is a play on the term *wantok* and the concept of wantokism), popular in Melanesia and Micronesia, celebrates the idea of Melanesia and reaffirms Melanesianism. Melanesian musicians have popularized pidgin, creating awareness about Melanesia in ways that transcend the negative representations. They also reach out to younger people who might have never read academic papers. Nowadays, Melanesian musicians are also using audiovisual technology and the Internet—especially YouTube and websites such as Papua New Guinea's www.CHMSupersound.com—to promote their music and positive images of both Melanesia as a place and Melanesians as peoples.

Challenges

It would be remiss of me to leave the reader thinking that Melanesia and Melanesianism are unproblematic. Melanesian places face enormous social, political, and economic challenges, and Melanesianism continues to be contested, discussed, and changed.

In spite of their resource endowment, Melanesian countries (especially Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands) lag behind in social and economic development and are unlikely to meet their commitments under the Millennium Development Goals. The countries suffer from economic mismanagement and weak governance. In the last three decades, Melanesia was the site of some of the most violent conflicts that the Pacific Islands region has seen since World War II. These include the violence associated with the demands for decolonization in New Caledonia in the 1980s (Chappell 2013); the Bougainville crisis (Regan 1998); the Fiji coups (Tarte 2006); the Solomon Islands conflicts (Moore 2004); and the ongoing violence associated with the demands for independence in West Papua (King 2004). The law and order problems in Papua New Guinea are real and affect social and economic development (Dinnen 2001).

Apart from that, Melanesian unity has, in recent years, been tested by disagreements between countries on various issues.[14] In late 2010, a row between Fiji and Vanuatu ensued after the then Vanuatu prime minister, Edward Natapei, refused to give up the MSG chairmanship to the Fiji prime minister and coup leader, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, arguing that "there are basic fundamental principles and values of democracy and good governance that our organisation is built on, and we must continue to uphold them" (Radio Australia, 13 July 2010). The issue was resolved after a change of government in Vanuatu and the election of Sato Kilman as prime minister; reconciliation between Fiji and Vanuatu took place in December 2010, sponsored by Solomon Islands. Bainimarama subsequently became MSG chair (Solomon Times Online 2010). In another incident, Fiji expressed disappointment with Papua New Guinea after the election of a PNG national, Meg Taylor, as secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat during the Forum meeting in Palau in late July–early August 2014. On 4 August 2014, the *Fiji Sun* published a front-page article titled, "Back Stabbed: PNG Betrays Fiji, MSG, and Derails Agreement to Back Tavola for Top Regional Job" (Delaibatiki 2014). The article argues that Papua New Guinea had reneged on an MSG agreement to support a Fijian, Kaliopate Tavola, for the position. The three finalists for the position—Meg Taylor (PNG), Kaliopate Tavola (Fiji), and Jimmie Rodgers (Solomon Islands)—were all from MSG countries. The third incident was the civil aviation row between Fiji and Solomon Islands that saw the two countries suspending rights for each other's national carriers—Fiji Airways and Solomon Airlines—to land in their respective countries (Pareti 2014a).[15]

The issue of West Papua has been a difficult one for the Melanesian Spearhead Group. While Vanuatu has been consistent in its support for West Papuan independence, the other MSG countries insisted that it is an issue for Indonesia to resolve and have expressed their respect for Indonesian sovereignty. In July 2014, a membership application by the West Papua pro-independence movement, the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation, to join the MSG was blocked because MSG leaders asked for a more representative bid from West Papua. The issue has also caused tension among the MSG members because of the increasing influence of Indonesia, which was admitted as an MSG observer during Fiji's tenure as MSG chair (Pareti 2014b).

Such incidents could be perceived as evidence of Melanesian disunity, suggesting therefore that Melanesianism is a social and political façade and that the "imagined Melanesian community" is simply that—imagined. I would argue, however, that such incidents do not necessarily imply disunity or the absence of Melanesianism. Rather, they demonstrate the continuing discourse *(tok stori)* that embodies the idea of Melanesia and are part of the process of appropriating and owning the term "Melanesia" and asserting Melanesianism.

Conclusions

The early European mapping of Oceania, especially the tripartite division into Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, was fraught with essentialist, racist, and social-evolutionary elements. For centuries, Melanesia and Melanesians were generally represented in negative and derogatory ways in scholarly and popular discourses. That perspective has, to some extent, been internalized by Pacific Islanders, including Melanesians. It has also influenced contemporary representations of and relationships with Melanesia and Melanesians.

However, since the 1970s, Melanesians have appropriated the term "Melanesia" and used it for self-identification, turning it from a derogatory term to a positive one: a source of pride and self-identification. They have appropriated a colonial concept and deployed it as an instrument of empowerment. Since the late 1980s, they have used it to mobilize through subregional organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group and events such as the Melanesian Festival of Arts and Culture. This has enabled Melanesian countries to assert political and economic power in Oceania and to redefine and re-present themselves.

This has engendered "Melanesianism"—a process and a discourse *(tok stori)* that celebrates the idea of Melanesian. They have subsequently created "alter-natives" who are clawing their way out of the "ignoble savage" cocoon where they have been encased for centuries. Melanesians, armed with diverse and rich cultures, have captured the "ignoble savage," turned it on its head, and used the term "Melanesia" to establish their place in Oceania and beyond, creating new and empowering images.

Melanesians are asserting their "place in the sun in Oceania."

* * *

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Notes

1 Taken together, the four Melanesian countries and one territory—Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and New Caledonia—comprise 98 percent of the total land area, 98 percent of land-based resources, 88 percent of the total population, and 28 percent of the total exclusive economic zones (SPC 2014). (This does not include West Papua whose indigenous populations are Melanesians. This western half of the island of New Guinea is part of Indonesia, but there is an ongoing struggle for independence that has been taking place since the 1960s when the Indonesians took over the territory from the Dutch.)

2 Here, the term "Melanesia" is used to refer to the islands in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, consisting of the island of New Guinea—Papua New Guinea and West Papua—and its outlying islands; Solomon Islands; Vanuatu; Kanaky/New Caledonia; and Fiji.

3 "Wantokism" is derived from the term *wantok,* which is pidgin for "one talk," meaning people who speak the same language. It is also about relationships and looking after each other as people who are related through kinship, language, island, and region.

4 The terms "Polynesia," "Micronesia," and "Melanesia" were derivatives of the Greek words *poly* (meaning "many"), *micro* (meaning "tiny" or "small"), and *melos* (meaning "black"). "Nesia" comes from the Greek word *nesos,* which means "islands."

5 I am sure that if I had watched the documentary series *Meet the Natives,* it would have provided a close and useful reading and deconstruction of contemporary European visions of Melanesia.

6 *Wan solwara* is a Papua New Guinea *tok pisin* (pidgin) term that literally means "one salt water" or "one ocean." It is also the name of the newspaper published by the journalism program at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji. The name is an attempt to create a sense of Oceanic identity among USP students and faculty.

7 Malama Meleisea used the term *tama uli* to refer to the descendants of Melanesians who were taken to work in the plantations in Sāmoa in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Meleisea 1980). This is seen as a more respectful way to refer to black people.

8 The "West Wind" poem was written to ridicule the demands for greater autonomy being made by the people of the Western Solomons, who believed they could achieve that through a federal system of government, or "state government," as it was commonly known in Solomon Islands at that time. The poem was therefore not primarily about race, although it made reference to race.

9 Melanesia is one of the most ethno-linguistically diverse places in Oceania and the world. As Tom Dutton stated, "Here, scattered across New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, the Loyalty Islands and Fiji are to be found over one thousand languages, or approximately one-quarter of those spoken in the world today" (2006, 207). Papua New Guinea has about 800 languages, Solomon Islands 87, and Vanuatu 118.

10 While there is widespread support in the Pacific Islands Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group for an independence referendum in New Caledonia, the case of West Papua has proven more complicated. In the past five years, Indonesia has increased its presence in the region and asserted pressure on the MSG countries not to support West Papua independence. Vanuatu is the only country that has offered unwavering support for West Papuan independence.

11 Papua New Guinea's growing power in the Pacific Islands region is evident through its increasing influence in the Pacific Islands Forum and its emergence as an aid donor to smaller Pacific Island countries, including those in Melanesia (see Hayward-Jones and Cain 2014).

12 "Language density" here refers to the number of languages in relation to land area. Lynn Landweer and Peter Unseth reported that there is a proportion of about 716 square kilometers per language in Melanesia, giving it the densest rate of languages in relation to land area on earth (2012). This is almost three times as dense as Nigeria, a country famous for the high number of languages per land area.

13 Oshen is a US-based musician who was born of American missionary parents and grew up in Papua New Guinea. He regularly visits Papua New Guinea and other Melanesian countries to seek inspiration for his music. He writes, performs, and records songs in *tok pisin* and English.

14 At the center of this is Fiji, a country entangled in the Melanesia/Polynesia binary. More importantly, since 2009, Fiji's regional and international diplomacy has been influenced by its attempts to reestablish its "legitimacy" following its marginalization from the Pacific Islands Forum as a result of the 2006 coup.

15 By September 2014, when this paper was submitted, the civil aviation row between Fiji and Solomon Islands had not yet been resolved. There were calls for the prime ministers of the two countries to be involved to help resolve the impasse (RNZI 2014). This was, however, resolved in January 2015, allowing Fiji Airways and Solomon Airlines to resume flights to Honiara and Nadi (RNZI 2015).

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Abstract

In this essay, I examine the dominant representations of Melanesia as a place and Melanesians as peoples and how these have influenced understandings of and responses to contemporary developments in this subregion. I begin with an overview of the discourses that influenced the mapping of Oceania and the negative representations of Melanesians. These have, in turn, framed and influenced discourses about and relationships with Melanesia and Melanesians, including Melanesian perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others.

Against this background, my focus is on how Melanesians have recently appropriated the term "Melanesia" and are using it in positive, empowering, and progressive ways to mobilize, redefine, and re-present themselves. In the process, they have constructed a pan-Melanesian identity that embraces and celebrates the subregion's ethno-linguistic and cultural diversities. This is manifested through the concepts of "the Melanesian Way" and "wantokism," intergovernmental organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the arts, and popular culture. Through all of these, Melanesians are "altering" the native and "re-presenting" what might be called the "ignoble savage." This process and discourse constitute "Melanesianism."

KEYWORDS: Solomon Islands, Melanesia, Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Melanesian way, representation, culture areas, wantokism