

The Outremer of Europe's Outremer: Pitcairn Island, Mangareva and the Persistence of Interaction between Îles Oubliées

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Îles Oubliées in the Outremer

The islands of the Europe's Outremer inhabit a certain sociological and geographical imagination (Harvey 2005), a collective conceptual orientation in which they are perceived in their colonial or post-colonial articulations to various European metropolises or to each other. We cannot help but note, however, that the geosocial imaginary of Europe's overseas is always at risk of misperception in which a profound plurality of historical, cultural or political relationships are unnoticed due to a myopic metropolitan self concern. In Oceania, this risk is compounded by the way that certain extremely well-known islands cast long shadows--penumbrae which often obscure close ties between regional neighbors.

In this chapter we draw attention to Pitcairn Island, a British Overseas Territory, and Mangareva, the main island of Gambier, one of the five archipelagos that constitute Polynésie Française, currently a Pays d'Outremer under the French Constitution. These two insular spaces are illustrative of key dynamics within the imagined outremer, revealing the limits of Europe's geosocial consciousness, and at the same time suggestive of the subtle tracery of inter-island relations across national frontiers. For Pitcairn and Mangareva, the current political and cultural separation is a result of the colonial division of Oceania, which produced the region as an outremer from the perspective of the colonial powers. However, as closest neighbors, Pitcairn and Mangareva have a kaleidoscopic history of inter-island relations well beyond the last two centuries, into what the Pacific historian Greg Denning (2005) called deep time.

Queen Pomare IV, the last ruler of an independent Society Islands, once called the Gambier the lost islands, "*les îles oubliées*." And in some ways, her quip during the period of colonial consolidation characterizes the Gambier both regionally and extra-regionally. Prior to contact with Europeans, all the islands of the chain were a densely occupied center of a large Ocean world. That changed with the arrival of the French, who leveraged, finessed or simply annexed all of what was to become French Polynesia beginning in the 1830s and by the *fin de siècle* achieved a sort of administrative focalization on Tahiti in which the Gambier were increasingly

marginalized. Despite a number of challenges to obscurity including their 19th century role in Catholicism's mission project in Oceania, the islands proximity to and role in French nuclear weapons testing from the 1960s to 1997, and the extraordinary value of its contemporary black pearl industry, located some 1,600 km. south-east of Tahiti, the Gambier remain firmly in the shadow of the regional center and better known, more touristed islands.

Pitcairn Island, in contrast, retained a privileged status in the anglophone imaginary across the last two centuries, even as the colonial office in practice regarded it as a burdensome *île oubliée* on the empire's far periphery--4.6 km² in size, home to one village, Adamstown, and located some 5,500 km to the Northwest of Wellington, New Zealand. Pitcairn had been home to a significant settlement as late as the 15th century; however, it was uninhabited when the mutineers of the *HMAV Bounty* and their Tahitian captives arrived in 1790. The island's attachment to the famous *Bounty* story generated considerable interest on the part of English-speaking writers, readers, film-goers, and scientists, who fetishized the mutineers' culturally hybrid descendants. However, Pitcairn only received its first constitution in 1838, and since then has experienced intermittent oversight by colonial authorities. The island's governance came under scrutiny in 2004, when six Pitcairn men were found guilty of sexual offences against minors. Today, Pitcairn remains a British Overseas Territory, literally and figuratively preventing the sun from setting on Britain's Pacific Empire.

In the four following sections, we draw on Mangareva and Pitcairn to problematize the geosocial imaginary of Oceania as a "European outremer." First, we draw attention to the observation that the overseas has its own peripheries. Pitcairn Island and Mangareva are, in a sense, the overseas of the European overseas (Pitcairn relative to New Zealand, and Mangareva relative to Tahiti). We note that, subject to various evolutions over time, the pre-European contact era historical interaction sphere in which these two island groups were entangled persists. Because of this enduring entanglement, we note that continental Anglo-French interactions are in some sense reproduced on this "deep periphery," where their overlap is complicated by alternate histories rooted in local visions of Pacific worlds or, in Ballard's terms, "oceanic historicities" (Ballard 2014). In the second section, we draw attention to the sometimes transformative role of charismatic individuals who crossed various overseas contexts, weaving distinct overseas communities and their local histories (politics, socialities) into regional or global tapestries. In the third section, we draw attention to the archival context of overseas communities and complicate the geospatial imaginary of these islands, noting that many overseas histories have been deterritorialized and distanced from home lands. As is evident in archives, islands like Mangareva and Pitcairn exist in many places. Sometimes the overseas have been fractionated across space and distributed and significant, indeed, foundational or essential facets of some overseas places may now be physically 'in Europe' but also, curiously, elsewhere 'overseas.' Finally, we turn to the Pitcairn Island language and its linkages to neighboring islands and across several oceans and multiple histories, demonstrating again that the overseas context may better

be imagined as a manifold or an interaction sphere rather than a singular, readily delimited, and historically bounded context.

Interaction Spheres when the “Margins” are Navels

In drawing attention to Pitcairn and Mangareva as exempla of general dynamics with specific realizations, we cannot help but note a certain fractal irony. Islands have frequently served as “model systems” for various biological and ecological (Kirch 1997; Graham et al. 2017), or even historical processes (Diamond 2005). Mangareva and Pitcairn, in particular, have long served as model “model islands” (Anderson et al. 2003; Kirch 2007; Conte and Kirch 2008, Young 2016). However, other conceptualizations are possible. Long before Oceania’s land and seascapes were re-visioned by Europe as an outremer or framed as *îles oubliées* by more focalized regional neighbors, they were imagined and experienced through local conceptions. In the islands of the Eastern Pacific, sometimes referred to as “remote Oceania,” within the so-called Polynesian triangle, many indigenous communities experienced their islands as *piko* (navels), which centered local worlds within a sea of islands (Hau‘ofa 1993) connected by an active, expansive network of encounter and exchange.

In the case of a vast seaspace between the Pitcairn group and the Gambier archipelago, beginning around AD 1000 this network of ongoing encounter and exchange was vibrant enough to constitute an “interaction sphere” in which Mangareva held a “critical role” (Weisler 2004). As Molle and Hermann note, it is now increasingly established that Pitcairn was inhabited by and regularly interacted with Mangareva and Mangarevans in a variety of culturally significant ways (Molle and Hermann 2018).

However, as Weisler and subsequent work in regional archeology has also suggested, “By western contact in the early seventeenth century, all islands in the Pitcairn group were abandoned, signaling a contraction of the sphere” (Weisler 2004:57). That contraction is materially evident in the archeological record, with various significant implications for regional history (Weisler 1994, 1995; Green and Weisler 2002; Walworth 2014) or ecological science (Kirch 1997; Conte and Kirch 2008; Rick et al 2013). Moreover, the imposition of colonial frontiers threatened to render that closure permanent in the 19th century, when Pitcairn fell under Britain’s union flag and Mangareva under the tricolore. Perhaps most severely, the advent of French nuclear testing during the 1960s, for which Mangareva served as one of the most significant French military outposts in support of the Centre d’experimentation du Pacifique (CEP) at neighboring Moruroa, imposed a regime of surveillance and isolation which seemed to cut off the islands from each other still further.

And yet, this story of contraction and separation from former neighbors misses a fundamental point about the perdurance or even replication of relationships in the face of massive structural

change. The islands remained connected, even if those connections are too often elided: Pitcairn persisted as a site in Mangarevan culture history and oral traditions; Pitcairners and Mangarevans married across the 19th century and 20th centuries; both islands contested rights to access and exploit nearby Henderson, Oeno, Ducie; inter-island trade of fruits such as watermelons or other produce continued (see Mawyer 2016). These imbrications intensely contrast with, problematize, and complicate the geosocial imaginary of Europe's outremer in Oceania, in which these supposedly distant forgotten islands were understood to have relations with their respective metropolises, but not each other. In the remaining sections of this chapter, we seek to further complicate and problematize such conceptions, showing "margins" and "navels" to be eminently relative and historically contingent notions.

Joshua Hill and Charismatic Histories across Seas

That the vision of Mangareva and Pitcairn as peripheral *îles oubliées* elides other potential relationships and framings is particularly visible if we attend to a notable case from Pitcairn's early-nineteenth century past. Histories of the British Empire often omit reference to Pitcairn Island; indeed, Pitcairn might be considered a prime piece of evidence to support J.R. Seeley's classic argument that the English "conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind" (Seeley 1971, 12). The near-mythical narrative of Pitcairn's settlement hinges on a historical model that centers itself at London and in which Pitcairn could only ever be represented as a forgotten accident of the *outrémer*. However, charismatic regional and global travelers developed their own engagements and intersectional entanglements to re-imagine the geosociality of the *outrémer* as it was expressed in colonial, scholarly, or popular representations. One such figure is Joshua W. Hill who arrived at Pitcairn in 1832 (Nechtman 2018) and is sometimes described as having "administered" Pitcairn from 1832 to 1837 under false pretenses. Notably, Hill imagined Pitcairn as not marginal at all, but as a "navel," a center of the world.

As Hill saw the early-nineteenth-century Pacific, colonial policymakers in London were underplaying their hand, particularly vis-à-vis other Euro-American influences. The island's inhabitants, Anglo-Polynesian in both their ethnic origins and linguistic abilities, could, he proposed, be trained as "native missionaries" carrying British Protestantism to the wider Pacific. It was a project meant to compete not only with the Russians and Americans, but with a Catholic mission project on neighboring Mangareva, which had displaced Hill's predecessor, the British reverend Nobbs, to Pitcairn in 1828, before establishing a mission college and seminary on Mangareva with the goal of forming Mangarevan persons for the priesthood. Hill dramatically repositioned the place of Pitcairn, reframing it as an advantageous site at the center of the British Pacific for "a school, in furtherance of Native Missionaries, & that too of our own missionaries already...stationed in the Southern hemisphere of the Pacific Ocean" (Letter to Mr. George Hodson). As Hill envisioned it, Pitcairn was hardly the last island in the vast Pacific but a center in a contest of faith with global, or indeed, cosmological stakes.

During Hill's voyage from Liverpool to Adamstown, stops at Oahu and Tahiti further indicate the complex overlay of local, Pacific, and global forces in the 1830s. In the Hawaiian Islands, Hill encountered American missionaries with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and the community's leader, Hiram Bingham. In the summer months of 1831, Bingham recorded an ABCFM prayer service that included a Captain J.W. Hill. "Here," Bingham wrote, "you would have seen Christian brethren at the table of our common Lord from England, Scotland, the United States of American & from the Society Islands, and from the...churches at Kauai, Honolulu, Lahaina, Kailua,...& Hilo all bowing at the same altar" (ABCFM Papers). Hill similarly connected himself to the missionary community of the London Missionary Society (LMS) when he arrived at Tahiti. Perhaps because the LMS leader, George Pritchard, was on a missionary visit to the Marquesas when Hill arrived, Queen Pomare IV turned to Captain Hill (as she identified him) for guidance and counsel, particularly in the case of the whaling ship *Venilia* whose captain had turned out thirteen rebellious members of his crew at Tahiti, in violation of both Tahitian law and the Queen's wishes. So impressed was Pomare that she asked Britain to appoint a permanent consul to her kingdom and further requested that Joshua Hill be tapped to fill the new post (Hill 1841, 18-19).

Hill's experiences *en route* to Pitcairn, then, engaged him simultaneously in both national and transnational histories. The archival record assures us he was familiar with the national monarchies at Tahiti and Hawaii and that he had a part to play in those histories. But, he was also engaged in the transnational forces like missionary evangelicalism, European imperialism, and the globe-spanning commerce of whaling. History has long marveled that Hill bamboozled the Pitcairn Islanders and London's colonial leadership for as long as he did. To have governed at Adamstown for half a decade does seem to point to a degree of colonial neglect, if not outright absent-mindedness. Yet Hill's agenda was a model of colonial planning, one that imagined the Pitcairners as "indigenous" Pacific missionary agents for Britain's broader empire in Oceania. And, to achieve that imperial purpose, Hill had to connect Pitcairn to a wider network that included neighbors like Mangareva and more distant linkages to, Tahiti, Oahu and across the region. These other islands, themselves the centers of their own national histories were, in Hill's frame of reference Pitcairn's *outremers*, peripheral islands in a British Pacific that centered on Pitcairn. When moved to the geographic center, as it was in Hill's mind and in his plans, Pitcairn de- and reterritorializes the outremer even as it ceases to be an accident of imperial history.

Archival Seas: Distanciation and Deterritorialization in the Outremer's Historicities

That so many of our histories tell us otherwise is perhaps unsurprising. Histories of Pitcairn and Mangareva are built on archives themselves generated by investigations across the last two centuries, most of which assumed and deliberately leveraged both islands' supposed peripherality. The amount of ink spilled on that project has been voluminous.

For instance, after surveying the extant literature on Pitcairn in 1964, New Zealand photographer and adventurer Hardwicke Knight claimed that “some 2,500 historical, scientific, and romantic books and articles have been published on various aspects of the subject” (Knight 1964). His count was a generous one, though if one tallied every newspaper article, encyclopedia entry, travel narrative, poem, novel, history, and scientific study then one might reach something close to that number. Thanks to the Anglophone world’s fascination with the *Bounty* mythos--and especially to its image of Pitcairn as an isolated “natural laboratory” for understanding questions of racial and linguistic hybridity--Pitcairn’s inhabitants rank among the most written-about people ever to have lived, at least on a per capita basis. The result has been that Pitcairn exists as a texted object across the globe, but also that those texts are distributed unevenly. Publishing houses in London churned out books on the island and Anglophone libraries collected them in abundance. Inevitably, only some sit on Pitcairn’s shelves.

The same is true of the island’s primary sources, produced by outside observers and deposited in distant collections. Knight himself was part of a 1964 archeological survey of Pitcairn, one which brought field notes, expedition reports, and material culture to the Otago Museum and the University of Otago’s Hocken Library; artifacts, including many relics from the *HMAV Bounty*, left the island, and were gathered elsewhere (Young 2018). Pitcairn’s archive became a distributed and fragmented one, the product of Europe’s attempt to understand its own colonial history and identity by studying its most outremer possession. Accordingly, from the perspective of Pitcairn (as in the case of so many colonies and postcolonies), the island’s archive is dispersed across *its* outremer. Though Pitcairn’s families do collect personal archives, often genealogical material held on USB drives, major collections *about* Pitcairn exist overseas, in the University of Auckland’s archive of the Western Pacific High Commission in Wellington’s Alexander Turnbull Library, Sydney’s Mitchell Library, at the Pitcairn Island’s Study Center in California’s Pacific Union College, and most abundantly in the British National Archives.

The fractured and uneven distribution of Pitcairn’s archive is in large part structured by the way London engaged with its most overseas of overseas colonies. While administrators in the colonial office tended to regard the island as of no meaningful strategic or economic value, it maintained some interest in Pitcairn as a site of intelligence gathering--mirroring the attention scientists and authors had long shown it as a site of knowledge making. A case in point is the archive of British and US observations of French nuclear testing, which reveals starkly the informational asymmetries generated by Europe’s use of Pitcairn as a place to observe and know itself. Air Force observers stationed on the island beginning in 1966 produced observational data, reports, and correspondence in extraordinary abundance, classified material which now sits in the British National Archives. Pitcairn and Mangareva, heretofore often construed as the most marginal of outremer colonies, became a junction where three great powers, the French, the British, and the Americans, drew together in space as they flexed and observed nuclear power. At the same time,

Pitcairn and Mangareva, once tightly bound within the same interaction sphere, became severed from each other as military cordons transformed the oceanic space between the islands into a formidable barrier.

However, though vessels would no longer travel between the two, seismic shock waves and particulate radioactive material generated by nuclear detonations certainly would. Small amounts of the latter could be collected by RAF observers to determine the size and type of French nuclear devices; large amounts would threaten the lives of both airmen and the islanders who hosted them. The data those airmen collected were transmitted to Fiji, on to London, and then on the “Five Eyes” anglophone intelligence community of the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The RAF coded its transmissions using a Playfair cypher, largely unconcerned about foreign actors intercepting those communications, but fearing that knowledge about dangerous levels of fallout might reach the Pitcairn Islanders. RAF technicians were ordered that any data “not (repeat not) be decoded by the islanders in case it is necessary to avoid premature alarm” (Lee 1966). Rather, Whitehall would work to evacuate first its military personnel and then the island’s population, though it acknowledged the task would be difficult.

Knowledge made on Pitcairn or, similarly, on Mangareva, has thus travelled around the world, disseminated across British, French and Anglophone intelligence networks, but not across Adamstown or Rikitea. The purposely opaque nature of “classified” information generated by French nuclear testing was only a particularly stark instantiation of a more general set of relations. Knowledge from and about Mangareva and Pitcairn has long been unevenly distributed, their archives always elsewhere. Stone fishhooks, traditional Mangarevan ethnographic objects, relics from the *Bounty*, sailors’ diaries, anthropological field notes, Mangarevan pearls, government reports, analyses of radioactive material—all have floated far on the currents of empire, washing up in British, French, Tahitian, Vatican, New Zealand and American repositories, the distant shores of Pitcairn and Mangareva’s outremer.

“Europe” as a Linguistic Problematic in the Outremer

However, these islands, too, are the site of their own uneven and variegated distributions, especially in matters of language. Pitcairn’s contact language has long been regarded as the product of the outremer’s encounter with Europe and continues to be an energetic site for linguistic study. The development of the island’s language and culture began in an initial 1789 Anglo-Polynesian encounter in Tahiti and was cemented when the 9 *Bounty* mutineers and their 18 adult Tahitian and Tubuaian partners arrived on Pitcairn in 1790. The island was new to all inhabitants then, Oceanian settlers and European dreamers in search of a safe haven away from the British Empire. Pitcairn Island’s hybrid linguistic *thereness* began with these arrivals, from a blend of European and Polynesian ways of speaking and being and relating to surroundings. A language, which eventually became the native of some, formed around people and place. Its

inscription of people, both insiders and outsiders, into a landscape of names anchored memory in distinct concrete realizations: maps and worlds, words and edges, people and things, all cutting across the spaces between Pitcairn, Mangareva, and manifold outremers.

Because Pitcairn Island has always seemed on the fringe and margin—periphery to French Polynesia (you can sense Pitcairn Island from the harbor of Mangareva’s principal town Rikitea but it still feels far away) and in the extreme-hyper outskirts to any sense of European geographical or cultural proximity—it has (sometimes) invited new arrivals because these bring with them things yet known, objects and ways of thinking possibly beneficial to the island and its people. As Nash argues vis-à-vis the Norfolk Island language (Nash 2016), Pitcairn’s ‘sister’ language spoken in political Australia, small islands offer the possibility to hamster, to accumulate, to collect, and to prevent from leaving. This is because you never know when you will need things--and in a society like Pitcairn Island, so far-flung from French Polynesia and Europe yet nestled among its own individual, self-referential orbit, the safe keeping of abstract and concrete devices is warranted.

Pitcairn Island toponymy (placenames) inscribes memories of insiders doing their thing, represents outsiders coming in and trying to do their thing, and demonstrates how European memories and memories of Europeans (and others) oscillate within and across this tiny speck of rock. The same goes for the introduction of, for example, life forms—vegetable and plants—which are dubbed according to those who brought them forth or those who named them. The sweet potato named ‘Herbert’ was brought in from Polynesia by, well, Herbert. The passionfruit called ‘Darralyn’ was brought from Brisbane by Darralyn Warren. These fragmented and distributed relationships signify micro-linguistic, toponymic, and biotic relationships both within across the supposed boundaries of France and Britain’s two outremers, indicating the dynamic fluidity of subtle and easily overlooked inter-island and regional relationships which are, nevertheless, quotidian and material in the day to day.

Counter-margins, anti-peripheries, or lingering shadows?

We close our chapter with the observation that from the point of view of mobility, environment, intercultural and inter-regional dynamics, and autonomies and relations with colonial or post-colonial metropolises—the mots-clés of this volume—perspective on the outremer depends on the positioned stance of the perceiver. European legacies and contemporary metropolitan politics about Europe’s perceived frontiers and edges, particularly the *outremer of the outremer*, need further consideration. This is quite evidently the case when one takes into account that a metropole’s overseas is, from the point of view of a home (is)land community, a deeply historically rooted *piko* or ‘navel’, a center from which the world expands out over that horizon. Mangarevan and Pitcairn communities project their own outremer out of another horizon, one in which Europe is the distant margin. From the point of view of any so-called ‘outer-island’ in

French Polynesia or a putatively isolated overseas territory often overlooked in official histories, it may be France, England, or Europe itself which is, in fact, overseas.

In our present reflections on four dynamics of the ‘thereness’ or ‘is(land)ness’ of Europe’s overseas, we note that reflexivity is a fundamental dynamic as evident in noting that questioning what is Europe to Pitcairn or Mangareva is just as fundamental as asking what either of these islands are to Europe.

This tug-of-war, mediating that which is near and that which is far, is a dialectic of persistence within relationships between Pitcairn Island and Mangareva, and a micro-depiction of the persistence of relationships between the outremer and Europe. Pitcairn Island and Mangareva have both frequently been described as on the margins of the margins of the English and French empires. At the same time, they are both the centered navels of their own outremer in a now almost-always connected late-modern world. The Pitcairn Island-Mangareva dyad is too often viewed as inconsequential, as out-of-sight and out-of-mind pieces of empire, or at best as archaic holdovers of a colonial era, the last remaining reasons in the South Pacific why the sun literally never sets on the British or French empires.

But as part of an archipelago of imperial persistence in a postcolonial world, relations remain entangled. Perhaps it is worth considering how Brexit, a literal cracking and fracturing of Europe, or any other event which opens up a locale like Pitcairn Island to the world, involves bidirectionality—centrifugal and centripetal—away and towards the outremer. This was highly evident than when Nash attended a community meeting on Pitcairn Island on 29 July 2016, the day after the Brexit vote, where the 40-odd islanders became instantly concerned about what changes in British politics might have meant for their livelihoods.

What can the study of the smaller and more easily overlooked pieces of empire tell us about what that project has meant and continues to mean? While Pitcairn and Mangareva have sometimes been described as “*îles oubliées*,” forgotten islands, such margins of the margins of British and French imperial projects have persisted longer than many other overseas contexts (Prinsen and Blaise 2017). As we have noted above, both Pitcairn and Mangareva exist as local, regional, *and* global islands. They are situated on both peripheries *and* at centers. They have emerged and receded from view at different moments. That they have done so in a supposedly post-colonial age is provocatively disruptive our overly reductive and common-sense geographical and sociological imaginaries of Europe’s *outramer*.

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