“Cargo: Material Entanglement in the Post-Contact Pacific”

Material exchange has been a hallmark of cross-cultural contact in the Pacific since the closing decades of the eighteenth century, when sustained interaction commenced between native islanders and voyagers from the West. In light of this long history of exchange, the word “cargo” has taken on special significance in Pacific studies. Most familiar in the context of the twentieth-century “cargo cults” surrounding John Frum and Prince Philip in Vanuatu, “cargo” are the material artifacts of another culture whose meanings have been reinvented as they cross the cultural boundary of the beach. This paper outlines the parameters for thinking about cargo as a specific class of objects, focusing on the prolonged exchanges between the inhabitants of Eastern Polynesia and the explorers, missionaries, and traders who traveled overseas from Europe and America. Beginning with the earliest objects of exchange—iron adzes, muskets, pieces of fabric—I trace the life history of cargo and its behavioral chain after crossing the span of the beach as a way of exploring the cultural entanglement that resulted from centuries of exchange. Those things that have crossed the beach have varied afterlives, running the gamut of artifacts curated in far-flung museums around the world, to quotidian items that form the backdrop to contemporary life in the Pacific. In aggregate, their textured histories offer a way of making sense of the past.

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