Rugby Island style: Paradise, pacific people, and the racialisation of athletic performance

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INTRODUCTION: ISLAND IMAGINARIES

In western eyes islands are almost invariably unusual or alien. Even when close to home, islands have long held something of the allure of the isolated, of the foreign. Functioning as something akin to Said’s Orient, the moral geography of the imagination islands have formed part of the political map by which the west has historically – and negatively – oriented itself. In what follows I wish to suggest that this image of “the island” has proved to be both remarkably enduring and remarkably consistent. This has obviously been especially apparent in a textual sense, in that, in matters of writing, thinking, reading, and speaking about islands, they have been persistently defined in terms of cultural difference. This “library or archive of information,” manifest in a set of powerful stereotypical representations, can be traced back at least as far as the Age of Enlightenment and, as a discursive system, still has a tremendous influence in determining how those in the west conceive of and understand islands. What I wish to proffer also is a case study in how such regimes of knowledge, though born in the colonial era, play themselves out in the current moment. I turn in particular to the sport of rugby to explore how contemporary physical culture can function – both figuratively and literally – to embody and preserve the discursive legacies of colonialism. My goal is to link the present with the knowledge production of a colonial past by showing how the tenets of what Elizabeth Deleougrhey has called “islandism” have been reworked and re-inscribed to characterise Pacific people and the athletic bodies of Pacific peoples more specifically. Ultimately, I propose sport to be a fruitful context within which to demonstrate how islandism must be understood as a discursive system built not only on institutions or internalised regimes of knowledge, but dependent on seemingly banal reproductions, performed, practised and (re)negotiated in daily popular cultural life.

What I also wish to trace is the way in which character is mapped onto geographic space – more specifically, how islands seem to confer a kind of determinant identity at odds with the so-called mainland. Put simply, island dwellers echo islands themselves in their difference. Much of this probably has to do with the idea of insularity, which maps the geographic presence of islands, borders them by the sea, which is therefore understood as both a barrier and a set, and their people, apart. Yet, insularity, as we know, is a word that carries with it much semantic baggage. It is not merely an allusion to being confined in space. To be insular is not only to be separate, but to be parochial and, frequently, provincial or backward. In the contemporary sense this exhibits itself in the stereotype of the islander of territorial mentality, antagonistically local, and prone to a distaste for modern life. But many of us also have preconceived ideas of islands as unspoiled, standing aside from the march of civilisation. From there the loop has not been far to make the same assumptions of islanders. To inhabit an island is the very marker of alterity to civilisation, and knowledge, to be the happy-go-lucky child of nature – primitive, honest and intuitive.

This is especially true of the South Pacific. For many, these are islands par excellence, the stuff of romance and fantasy and of tourist brochures bursting with white sand beaches, turquoise lagoons, and swinging palms. Indeed, the role of the Pacific as one of the archetypal locales for the western representation of paradise is well known. A European-derived cultural imaginary of the region reaches back in excess of 200 years to the first encounters between European voyagers and islanders, tracing from Louis Antoine de Bougainville’s writings in the eighteenth century, through missionary declamations and the rise of anthropology, to the fiction of Stevenson and London and the paradisal images of modern tourism. Consistent with this Eurocentric perspective has been the way in which depictions of the region borrow from centuries-old imagined representations of the New World – the earthly Pacific paradise through which one could flee civilisation. In addition, and despite the almost complete westernisation of most of the Pacific, Islanders themselves have been similarly caught up in this discourse of primitive alterity. Free from stifling western culture and form, they are frequently envisioned in terms Jane Desmond describes as “at one with the forces of nature,” variously “hula girls” or “beacboys,” living close to the natural world, secure in their Pacific paradises. And, of course, we always go back to nature. In connecting to nature we are connecting to the primitive – thus, the enduring stereotype of Pacific Islanders as “pleasant but basically ignorant natives in subsistence social structures. Even after western contact, they cling to their picturesque but primitive customs and mores.” Such clichés persist even today in the way Pacific Islanders are still consistently characterised “as primitive types inhabiting an unchanging Eden that [do] not participate in the Western world of technology, progress and time.” The people, like the islands themselves, are all too frequently preceded by the (western) imagination.

It is not extending this argument too far to suggest that the Pacific is a physical environment that also inscribes racialised meanings. Borrowing from Rona Tamiko Halalani I wish to begin by suggesting that the cultural representation of the geographic – in this case, the Pacific – is a racialised discourse in which difference is articulated, and in which “islandness” is mapped onto the Pacific body. Over the course of more than two centuries Pacific space has been suffused with meaning. The space in turn has imbued this history on the materiality of bodies. That is, the Pacific as a place must be seen as critical to articulating racial difference or what may be termed Island Otherness. E Valentine Daniel has argued of the Sinhala people of Sri Lanka that “the historicization of a place by its transformation into space is accompanied by the historicization of a people through their transformation into a race.” In one sense, there is a temporality of the Pacific as a space. It symbolises a place and time. It is what Halalani has dubbed an “achronistic space” that condemns Pacific Islanders to the past. And, in constituting the Pacific Other through temporal tropes, by using terms such as “primitive” and “savage”, the Pacific Islander has long been implied to be inferior or less developed than those of the European west. Likewise, the Otherness of Pacific Islanders is constructed through the geographic, through an imagined topography of islands. The very imagining of the Islands themselves has served to reproduce images of Pacific peoples as exotic and distant, by locating them in geographic and cultural spaces wholly separated from the west, their isolation ensuring their peripherality from the European centre. All this is not to say that space wholly determines race. Pacific space and Pacific race are dialectically entwined in discourse. As much as the conceptual phenomenon of the Pacific Islands produces social categories of racial difference, the very materiality of physical difference locates race. In their appearance the brown bodies of Pacific Islanders are naturally placed in the Islands, regardless of their self-identities. In the same way as Radhika Mohanram has said of the cartography of bodies that blackness is “always static and immobilizing,” so too do the brown bodies of Pacific Islanders are forever tied to the Pacific – and all that it connotes.

Obviously, then, the process of representing Otherness as marked in and on the body “is not peculiar to the colonial period and will not disappear with it.” Certainly there is evidence to suggest that it is among the many cultural residues of the colonial era still lingering in the postcolonial world. And it is certainly salient to the analysis of contemporary sport. What I therefore wish to consider is how colonial pathologies are manifest within and disseminated through popular understandings of sport, and the sport of rugby more specifically. I wish to focus on two main strands in which the readings of athletic performance are directly informed by the analytical distinction between mind and body, which I suggest to be impacted on not only by Cartesianism, but by a specific geographic imaginary that juxtaposes primitivism with civilisation. In the first instance, as Brett St Louis has argued, the “racially ascribed paradigm where one is either physically capable or cognitively endowed” has important repercussions in understanding the relation between racial representation and modern sporting performance. Secondly, we cannot ignore the fact that the body constitutes “the material core of sporting activity.” This is significant because there is a long tradition in social and popular thinking of seeing...
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In setting the Pacific and Pacific bodies in context, it is important to note that in my main concern is with the outsider or European/Euro-American view of islands, and the Pacific more specifically. This conventional western picture of the Pacific is, as Geoffrey M White and Ty Kawka Tengan succinctly describe it, "one of an area of a multitude of indigenous societies where both geography and culture appear as 'islands' – small, bounded, and isolated."

Such insularity and essentialisms, indeed, relate to the Pacific as it may have been produced by their respective topographic and figurative positions in Europe's "centre of gravity". Other, that illuminated European intellect and in whose person the factitious Pacific doctrine of lost innocence and unspoiled virtue, of "primitive" otherness – of athletic ability is seen as so natural that it requires no comment at all. Overall, I wish to argue that these two strands of the way in which colonial discourse is articulated with the racialisation of Pacific physically can be more directly related through the popular stereotype of "island style," an imagined aesthetic that purports to best the characteristics of the stereotypical Pacific body. It should be noted here that I am not so much preoccupied with the way in which Pacific people actually play rugby but rather with the way in which they are represented when playing it.

Island Style: Rugby and the Racialisation of Pacific Physicality

During the most recent New Zealand census in 2006, those identifying with Pacific ethnic groups numbered 265,974, up some 14.7 per cent from 2001. Moreover, by 2021 the Pacific population is projected to grow by some 59 per cent over 2001, with the proportion of Pacific peoples estimated to rise from 6 per cent to 9 per cent of all New Zealanders. It is scarcely surprising that rugby in New Zealand should in some way reflect this shifting social milieu. In fact, to use the word "reflect" here is to underplay the changes: once rare in rugby's élite ranks, the increase in the number of Pacific players now far outstrips their population growth generally.

What I wish to borrow from Hau'ofa for my purposes here, however, is the way in which he is critical of enclosed thinking – in which insularity came to have both a topographic and figurative significance – and his suggestion that outsiders' representations of the Pacific matter not just because of their discursive hegemony but because Pacific people themselves have, in part, come to see themselves through an outsider's lens. On the former point, obviously an island is a space unto itself. But as a consequence it becomes "an ideal metaphor for a traditionally conceived, unified and unitary identity."

Identity is, in essence, rendered secure by insularity: islands structure certain beliefs about national character and destiny. These prevailing notions of the Pacific since European "discovery" have painted a picture of a series of islands limited by their absolute size and by their isolation. Common to the Utopian narratives of the colonial Pacific was the way in which they rested on a kind of primordial image of the Pacific: the place and its people were distinguished by a kind of "timelessness which refuses[ ] to evolve towards the modern world."

In all respects, the Pacific was assumed as backward or behind. Vis-à-vis the European centre, they stood aside from the march of civilisation. Again, this was not necessarily endemic to the Pacific. Islands in general have come to signify perhaps "the ultimate gesture of simplification."

Yet it is again telling that the Pacific was discovered in the Age of Enlightenment. Even as modern science flourished in Europe, insecurity and mistrust were also taking hold as cities grew and communities were uprooted from the countryside.

Led by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosophy of the time increasingly decried the supposedly corrupting influence of civilisation, alternatively romanticising the primordial, the world in its natural state.

In the "ersatz exotic, erotic attribute to the Polynesian body was also used to orient and ground the modernity of civilised society: "a profound impact upon representation of the Pacific."

In the "ersatz exotic, erotic primitive" of the Pacific, the body became a way of conferring the native-nature coupling. If the body was a link to nature, notable too was the way in which this naturalism discourse frequently set in contrast the 'vigorous and healthy savages in the state of nature and modern man in the 'civilized' world."

In particular, to society's critics, men (again, sic) had become alienated from their physical condition. As Rousseau himself wrote: "The body of a savage man being the only instrument he understands, he uses it for various purposes, of which ours, for want of practice are incapable." Following the traditional Cartesian dualism of body and mind, it could be said that the natural body, typified by the Pacific, was a physical world – and, of course, vice versa. And, this relation was maintained by the Pacific physical environment dependent on the constitution of the physical body. Or, to put it differently, the primitive offered an alternative model of social organisation rooted in the body. In the "ersatz exotic, erotic primitive" of the Pacific, the body became a way of conferring the native-nature coupling. If the body was a link to nature, notable too was its very centrality to European perception and discourse. With increasing frequency after the 1770s "what could be seen was paramount, and what Europeans were looking at above all else were bodies."

Visual records increasingly focused on the bodies of islanders to such a multitude of indigenous peoples "have been silenced, misrepresented, ridiculed or condemned". In particular, in both popular and academic discourses. Of note is the way in which visual locations is often displaced, with Europeans almost invariably overlooking the numerous connections among Island societies. In his seminal, and by now universally quoted, 1993 article "Our Sea of Islands," Epeli Hau'ofa has argued that western social scientists have misunderstood the Pacific by consistently envisioning the ocean in terms of "islands in a far sea." In western eyes, he argues, the Pacific came to be defined not by its connections but its isolation, insularity not only in the geographic sense, as an objective or state-of-mind. In the great Ocean of Hau'ofa's vision, in contrast, Pacific peoples are not confined to and by their islands, but exist in a world of blurred boundaries, of connections between Islanders beyond and within nation-states. As much as Hau'ofa provides a corrective of history, his argument resonates not only with the long-term migration patterns of the past, but presentday lifeworlds as well. The flow of people, culture, and capital between the Pacific, Europe, and America has intensified dramatically since the mid-twentieth century.

Hau'ofa's work is thus a telling reminder of the need to recognise and include the perspectives, knowledge, and worldviews of the indigenous peoples of Oceania and to reconnect with indigenous ways of thinking about both islands and society more generally.

The Polynesian body is the given privilege of representing the Pacific as a whole. Unlike the female body that attracted the most notoriety, the bodies of men were almost equally admired among early European visitors to the Pacific. One missionary of the early-1800s, for instance, described Polynesian men as "amongst the finest specimens of human beings." He notes how "many European travellers romanticized the savage Other as part of a natural physical world."

On one hand this was a discourse of reverence and admiration: the natural Polynesian man reputedly possessed superior health and physical strength. But the Polynesian body was also used to orient and ground the modernity of civilised society: physically acted as the opposite side, or Other, that illuminated European intellect and rationality. Hence, the discourse also replicated the Cartesian dualism famously premised on the belief that the material body is distinct from that which inhabits and motivates it, that the body and mind are separate. It also had the effect of racialising primitivism. Originally a non-race-based concept, as Mary Breuer notes, "increasingly came to be registered visibly as a physical demarcator: mental and moral differences became linked to physical differences in an updated, color-coded version of the Great Chain of being."

Vis-a-vis the modality of the body, and in whose person the factitious Pacific doctrine of lost innocence and unspoiled virtue, of "primitive" otherness – of athletic ability is seen as so natural that it requires no comment. That the athletic performances of Pacific peoples are frequently described via recourse to the body has the effect of placing such performances within the "state of nature." Popular understandings of sport abet this equation of brown bodies/Pacificness/Nature/natural. The consequence is that brown sporting masculinity is overdetermined from the outside as both physical and natural. The net effect is that the racialisation – what could be termed, imputed otherness – of athletic ability is seen as so natural that it requires no comment at all. Overall, I wish to argue that these two strands of the way in which colonial discourse is articulated with the racialisation of Pacific physically can be more directly related through the popular stereotype of "island style," an imagined aesthetic that purports to best the characteristics of the stereotypical Pacific body. It should be noted here that I am not so much preoccupied with the way in which Pacific people actually play rugby but rather with the way in which they are represented when playing it.
Though they may only comprise 6 per cent of New Zealand’s population, by one recent estimate, Pacific peoples make up near half the players in the country’s five provincial rugby sides.\(^1\) One local reporter has even gone as far as suggesting that, such as the “browning” of New Zealand rugby, that “it’s not inconceivable that the come 2011 World Cup, New Zealand as hosts kick-off the first game with a match-day 22 that consists solely of players who come from a Pacific Island background.”\(^2\) What factors explain this over-representation are likely myriad. They include the perception of rugby as a path to social mobility and the fact that playing for the All Blacks has long been a goal for many Pacific peoples, both from the Islands and New Zealand-born. More often than not, however, the favoured shibboleth is that Pacific players are “natural” athletes, possessied of intellect and culturally reared. In this respect, New Zealand rugby has become a prominent arena of social life in which the idea that Pacific men are biologically different – in a meaningful way – is encouraged. The success of Pacific boys in junior rugby, for instance, is frequently reduced to commensurate presumptions of their precarious physical development. As one high-school coach is recently quoted as saying, “There’s no doubting that Polynesians, especially, mature early. They are often wonderful physical specimens.”\(^3\) (emphasis added) This pernicious discourse carries through into explanations of Polynesian success in the senior ranks. Perhaps the most explicit example is an article published in New Zealand Fitness magazine titled “Lomu and the Pacific Influence: The Notorious ‘Pākehā’ Rugby Impact”\(^4\) that posits interestingly that Samoan-Māori players are “uncovered” to “uncover” the basis of “Polynesian people’s obvious assets: natural muscularity, hand to eye co-ordination and sense of rhythm.”\(^5\) (emphasis added) Most of the article is based on the “scientific evidence” gathered by University of Otago anatomy professor Philip Houghton, whose research was later published as the book People of the Great Ocean: Aspects of Human Biology of the Early Pacific. In brief, Houghton traces the roots of Polynesian sporting success to the inheritance of body types from “early Polynesian navigators.” As Leulua explains it, “Houghton’s theory is that their [Polynesians] muscle comes from their ancestors enduring extreme cold temperatures while exploring and settling the Pacific Islands hundreds of years ago.”\(^6\) Houghton suggests that the type of muscle fibre involved – “fast twitch” (i.e., those muscles “particularly suitable for sprinting”) – is explained by a similar case of evolutionary pressure: “Their demand was for a muscle type that was warm and as fast twitch, to keep the engine and type two, fast twitch, was ideal for the game.”\(^7\) Supposing this to be the case, Houghton then goes on to attribute the “recent phenomenon of Polynesian prowess in sports” to “the fact that, previously, Polynesians weren’t reaching their genetic potential because of their lifestyle.” (emphasis added)

Houghton’s argument is but one of many examples of what Donna Haraway calls the contemporary “pseudo-objectivity” of “genetic fetishism”\(^8\) which suffuses any discussion of Polynesian success in New Zealand rugby. Biology makes its way into several recent commentaries on Pacific sporting performance. Two recent television documentaries, The Brown Factor and Polynursaturated, both appeal to “science” in their attempts to trace “the physical reasons for the Polynesian superiority in rugby.”\(^9\) (emphasis added) I use emphatic quotes here because the apparently obvious “scientific evidence” – in these programs as elsewhere – seldom extends beyond the anecdotal evidence of athletic trainers, coaches, or ex-players. Jim Blair, the All Black fitness trainer, for example, is quoted in a recent piece on “the growing dominance of Pasifika players”\(^10\) as saying that significant numbers of Pacific Islanders possess fast-twitch muscle which makes them genetically predisposed towards building mass around the critical joints and being quick over short distances. It is an explosive game and the Islands produce huge numbers of explosive athletes.

Elsewhere, the rugby writer Lindsay Knight suggests that “Fijians have such an aptitude and flair for playing on the wing” because they have more of “what physiology experts describe as ‘fast twitch fibres’.”\(^11\) On these lines, the Fijian-born All Black Joseph Rokocoko is similarly praised by columnist and author Chris Laidlaw for his “sinuous talents….Just where all that leg power and electrifying acceleration come from only a physiologist really knows,” he concludes.\(^12\) Other examples are numerous, but not wishing to belabour the point, we can see even from this small sampling the way in which the myth of natural Pacific physicality is assimilated into “commonsense” discourse via the putative objectivity of science. As TasiTe Te evale has noted in regard to Pacific peoples, the putative biological basis of racial atheleticism has been absorbed by the popular media in such a way that theory and hypothesis have been quickly turned into truism.\(^13\)

These pseudo-scientific-styles often take a more subtle rhetorical guise in allusions to Pacific players as “naturally gifted.” Surveying the New Zealand press over the past three years we find a rich number of examples. For instance: Ma’a Nonu is variously described as “naturally gifted”\(^14\) and a “sublime natural talent”\(^15\). Viliane Waqaeseduadua is a “God-given talent,” a “natural athlete,”\(^16\) according to the All Blacks assistant coach, Isaa Toeva has “all the physical gifts”\(^17\) Rodney So’oialo is an “instinctive player;”\(^18\) and Siliveni Sivivatu is cited by Laidlaw as “another classic example of a completely instinctive, undisciplined firecracker of a player.”\(^19\) (emphasis added) Such examples clearly illustrate how a cultural stereotype can be made to look like a natural difference; so much so that athletic ability has come to be viewed as a characteristic of Pacific peoples as natural sportsmen is derived from various European discursive representations of Pacific Islanders from the late eighteenth century. We see, in particular, a repition of the Noble Savage ideal and a related kind of “soft primitivism”\(^20\) conflating such attributes as childlike, libidinous, free, and, of course, natural. Notably, in this primordial state, romanticised by European Enlightenment philosophers, the body, and idealtic nature, was possessed of intellect and cultured of mind. The sum in the case of Pacific Islanders is a kind of circular, and inescapable, “discourse of naturalism”\(^21\) in which nature, and bodies are conjoined: the state of nature is metaphorised in islands, the island way of life in bodily practice, with the body, preordained and given in nature, closing the circuit.

To demonstrate how this “discourse island” frames the comprehension of Pacific performances in rugby, consider the widespread belief that there exists a particular island style of play, an aesthetic reputedly born of genetic and geographic heritage. This is perhaps best embodied in the notion of “flair.” Flair, in the rugby sense, incorporates unpredictability, innovation, and unorthodoxy.\(^22\) The antithesis of controlled, methodical play, flair notably gives emphasis to the physical over the cognitive. It is largely synonymous with body movement unmediated from the mind. From their very beginnings in New Zealand rugby, Pacific Islanders were viewed as being unable or unwilling to play structured rugby or what Colin King may have described as “the white man’s game.”\(^23\) The popular picture of Pacific players during the 1970s, for instance, was that they played a quick game, was “all about flair and winning.”\(^24\) Given the tendency among Pākehā to make unfounded associations between Pacific Islanders and Māori,\(^25\) these stereotypes perhaps unsurprisingly mirrored those pegged to Māori rugby during the same era. If New Zealand’s largely Pākehā national teams through the 1970s and 1980s were “dull, staid and rigidly controlled,” as writes Malcolm MacLean, they found their counter in a “traditional style” of Māori rugby “somehow freer than regular.”\(^26\) The same could easily be said of have been said of Pacific Islanders at the time. Even today, the former All Black Frank Bunce suggests “the brown guy” as preferring “the free-flowing game, he likes to roam in the wide open spaces.”\(^27\) Likewise, the erstwhile Australian coach Eddie Jones believes that “the Islanders generally play with a lot of flair and natural talent.” They like to throw the ball around and run it from anywhere, which usually makes for a fast, free-flowing match…The great strength of Pacific Island rugby is that it is visually exciting and full of passion and open play.\(^28\)

While such comments may appear approbatory they must be seen in the context of a long history of racialising athletic ability, particularly given that the physical occupies a social space in strict opposition to the cerebral and scientific. As already noted, all too frequently the intellectual and the physical are assumed as antithetical and antagonistic. St Louis describes the synergy as a kind of “zero-sum proposition”\(^29\) in which physical superiority is twinned to intellectual inferiority. In this case we could say that Island flair is implicitly counterpointed by an assumed deficiency in reasoned cognition. What Island flair doentes, then, is the popular shibboleth that Pacific peoples lack both intellect and application and are, consequently, “difficult to coach in more strategic and technical elements of the game.”\(^30\) The idea that Pacific players are short on tactical thinking is based on the widespread assumption that they either have little time for, or are simply incapable of controlling, methodical play. Sometimes this is framed as a matter of rugby philosophy. Strategy, safety and efficiency are presupposed as anathema to Pacific players. Instead, they favour a brazen style that privileges the aesthetic – and is notably born from improvisation and open play.\(^31\) To keep as to why Fiji has been so successful at the abandoned seven-a-side version of rugby while underachieving in the full-blown game, Chris Laidlaw’s comments on Fiji sides are indicative of such preferred truism:

The Fijian game was built around dexterity, an eye for a sudden gap and the “hail Mary” pass which might or might not have come off. The Fijian seven and open team prospered on the back of this inventiveness but the 15-a-side game languished as more and more positional specialization became necessary.\(^32\)

The presupposed contrasts in play originating between Pacific players and their Pākehā counterparts evoked in such remarks are notable both in the way Pacific performances are reduced to innate physicality and in their very ambivalence. Island style is at once admired – if an air of voyeuristic superiority – and and reviled. Some, such as the rugby writer Gregory Paul, see the growing influence of Pacific players as a boon, the “Pacific influence” bringing “pace, power, [and] flair” to the “happy melting pot” of New Zealand rugby.\(^33\) Others are more circumspect in their suggestion that there will always be a need for the more methodical (read: intelligent) “Pākehā style.” This is borne out in ambiguous suggestions that Indigenous Pacific Islanders are not thinkers on the field and that too many of them in a team means a dumbing-down of tactical acumen isn’t a very persuasive argument,” it is nonetheless
a factor in some teams because, on balance, Māori and Pacific Islanders tend to be more instinctive than measured in their approach and every team at the top level needs someone who can plot and plan, adjust and adapt. There will always be a place for a Grant Fox [a former Pākehā All Black] and that is so appealing about rugby.\[26\]

A further, and exemplary, illustration of this type of race-based cleaving of the muscular and the cerebral is the representation of the Auckland provincial rugby team. Auckland is widely touted as the “largest Polynesian city in the world.”\[22\] and its teams through the years have included a large number of Pacific people. Though Auckland has won the National Provincial Championship (NPC) a record 16 times, it is frequently chided in times of lesser fortune for fielding “too many Polynesians.”\[23\] For instance, after winning the NPC in 2003, Auckland began 2004 with several heavy losses. As they sat near the bottom of the points table, one rugby writer was moved to ask, “What’s wrong with Auckland?”\[24\] Answering his own question, he proffered the high quotient of Pacific players, the coaching staff (notably all of Pacific descent), and too many “Flash-Harry players.”\[25\] In a similar vein, reporter David Leggat suggested that while "some of the broken-field running (wash out) — when they needed to light up, to play percentages, there was relucance.\[26\] Seemingly with Auckland in mind, Tea Ropati in an article titled “Island Magic” sums up this course of reasoning:

The superlatives are endless when it comes to commentary [on Polynesian] athletes — however, there are also an endless number of detractors who make assumptions about natural physical strength and superior skill being diluted by lack of discipline and ability to concentrate.\[27\]

As an aside, it is perhaps worth noting that Auckland went on to win the NPC the following year — with the same coaching staff and largely the same playing personnel.

If Pacific players are invariably described as lacking the cognitive capabilities of their white peers, this intelligence myth is compounded by the under-representation of Pacific athletes in positions of authority. This fact was recently observed by well-known local radio host Martin Devlin when asked about rugby’s “success stories.” “It’s a tough subject to get around when you consider the hierarchies,” he is quoted as saying. “The coaches, the management, the administrative white faces and they’re all white and they’re all white. I mean I don’t know how that work.”\[28\] On a related theme, it is also worth noting that the accomplishments of Pacific players are frequently mitigated and undercut by ascribing successes to the guiding influence of a white coach or white authority figure. The most obvious example is the current New Zealand All Black coach Graham Henry. Henry was coach of the famed Kelston Boys High School First XV during the 1980s and 90s when the school emerged as a rugby powerhouse.\[29\] The dominance of teams during this tenure has been largely attributed to the Pacific talent drawn from Auckland’s western suburbs as well as Henry’s professed ability to “press the right buttons for many of these Pacific players.”\[30\] His later successes with the Auckland Colts, Bs and Auckland A are explained in similar terms. One writer, praising “The Henry Touch,” suggests Henry has “been able to get the best out of [the] raw ability and flair [of Pacific players] and harness it to the team structure within the very best of New Zealand rugby.”\[31\] In an interview with the British reporter Brendan Gallagher puts down to Henry’s ability to “realise and fully incorporate the massive rugby talent of New Zealand’s ‘island’ [sic] community and, it has to be said, those who started their playing careers on the islands themselves.”\[32\]

What we can begin to discern here is, much as the spectacle of Polynesian bodies triumphant in rituals of masculine competition reinforces the fixed idea that Pacific men are “all brawn and no brains,”\[33\] this racialised polarity is also dependent on white paternalism — embodied in a figure like Henry. The Pacific athlete in essence becomes a kind of raw talent to be honed by white guile. They are objects to be shaped and controlled. It is in this way a modern replication of colonial culture/nature opposites: the Polynesian other is denied subjectivity — that is, objectified — while the known (white) self is separated from the known object.

RESISTANCE AND THE ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE OF ISLANDNESS

Obviously, what I am suggesting of Pacific rugby players is that their bodies are deeply enmeshed in social relations and practices, and, more specifically, are located within a particular historically-engendered, and geographically-imagined, racial schema. Island (playing) style, whether real or merely perceived as such, can be seen as a particular historically-engendered, and geographically-imagined, racial schema. Island (playing) style, whether real or merely perceived as such, can be seen as a particular historically-engendered, and geographically-imagined, racial schema. Island (playing) style, whether real or merely perceived as such, can be seen as a particular historically-engendered, and geographically-imagined, racial schema. Island (playing) style, whether real or merely perceived as such, can be seen as a particular historically-engendered, and geographically-imagined, racial schema.

In borrowing from Foucault both directly and via Said, however, I do not wish to ignore the intellectual capacity. Performance is not just a reflexive understanding of the body underpins much of my argument here, in that it offers a way of understanding the emplacement of the Pacific body into the realm of the physical via association with nature and the natural as they are actualised through islandness. “The body,” as writes Elina Penttinen, “belongs to the natural world” and follows “its natural laws.”\[34\] Islands, in being coupled to nature, provides a means by which to understand how the athletic performances of Pacific peoples are constructed and read as innate natural characteristics existing prior to significance. They are simply born to run, to jump, to tackle, to play. Given the above argument, islandness is read from the brown body even prior to such performance. Typical of the assumed isomorphism of space, place, and culture, and that the Pacific body is at once a vehicle for the imposition of a regime of knowledge and a vehicle for resistance to these discursive forces. Although the brown athletic body may serve as a powerful symbolic medium of islandness, it is also endowed with the capacity to participate in the creation of — potentially subversive — social meaning.

To be sure the Pacific body, as the body generally, is a text upon which socio-historic meanings are inscribed. On one hand, here, I am indeed adopting a “profoundly coercive understanding of physical experience,”\[35\] as offered in the early work of Michel Foucault. A Foucauldian understanding of the body underpins much of my argument here, in that it offers a way of understanding the emplacement of the Pacific body into the realm of the physical via association with nature and the natural as they are actualised through islandness. “The body,” as writes Elina Penttinen, “belongs to the natural world” and follows “its natural laws.” Islands, in being coupled to nature, provides a means by which to understand how the athletic performances of Pacific peoples are constructed and read as innate natural characteristics existing prior to significance. They are simply born to run, to jump, to tackle, to play. Given the above argument, islandness is read from the brown body even prior to such performance. Typical of the assumed isomorphism of space, place, and culture, and that the Pacific body is at once a vehicle for the imposition of a regime of knowledge and a vehicle for resistance to these discursive forces. Although the brown athletic body may serve as a powerful symbolic medium of islandness, it is also endowed with the capacity to participate in the creation of — potentially subversive — social meaning.

In borrowing from Foucault both directly and via Said, however, I do not wish to ignore the fact that what is signified by “the body” remains a source of creative tension. The body is a site of oppositional agency. It is central to the productivity of power, and the question of power relations are given the impression that identities become fixed without having to be constantly maintained. When he argues in “The Subject of Power” that we need to “understand how we have been trapped in our own history,”\[36\] he would seem to normalise the body within discourses of power, implying also a certain fixity to bodily identity. While Foucault was more alert to the problem of agency in his later writings, even his early account of the body is potentially powerful in the way he “re-embodies agency, yet allows for change in terms of new discourses of the body.”\[37\] Simply put, if perceptions of the body are constituted in discourse, then they can be changed by changing the forms of discourse through which they are expressed. Perhaps more saliently, power and resistance are ontologically inseparable as they exist as conditions of possibility both for the other. Power, in the Foucauldian sense, creates the conditions for counter-flows of resistance to emerge: where there is power there is resistance, for they are symbiotic or agonistic. Thus, as much as the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and counterpoint, the site of what Foucault dubbed “knowledge-power,” it is also a site of resistance “for it evokes a recallance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways.”\[38\] One thinks here also of Judith Butler’s notion of “performativity” and her suggestion that “agency is required of each subject to sustain identity by constantly repeating it.”\[39\] Butler insists that “performance” provides the possibility of redefinition and change, since all such “citations” – the “reenactments of norms” – are always incomplete.\[40\] In assuming power as productive of resistance, and taking power not final but multiple, the possibility for a more expanded and complex set of questions of repetition is opened.\[41\] For instance, that island style is a particular performative act that encodes and articulates notions of identity and difference in Pacific bodies through bodily practice. The performing, and especially the kinetic, body may, as Randy Martin suggests, “instigate a tension in the social world is to offer only a partial account of Island style. The Pacific body is at once a vehicle for the imposition of a regime of knowledge and a vehicle for resistance to these discursive forces. Although the brown athletic body may serve as a powerful symbolic medium of islandness, it is also endowed with the capacity to participate in the creation of — potentially subversive — social meaning.

In using the term “political” here I wish to also link island style to critical discussions of the body in post-colonial spaces. Such work has stressed the complexity of the ways in which the body can be constructed, as well as “its ambivalent role in the maintenance of, and resistance to, colonizing power.”\[42\] A useful model in this regard is the work of C L R James and, especially, his seminal book Beyond a Boundary.\[43\] In Beyond a Boundary James provides a lucid illustration of the political role of sporting perfor-
sense of West Indian identity during colonial rule by the British. For James, cricket was an idiom through which both creativity and resistance flourished in the face of colonial subjugation. Via the game, colonised West Indians were able to translate colonial discourse into sporting events and translate colonial discourse in sporting terms.

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28. See Edmund, Representing the South Pacific and O’Brian, The Pacific Muse.
40. Leilua, “Lomu and the Polynesian Powerpacks.”
42. Leilua, “Lomu and the Polynesian Powerpacks.”
44. The Brown Factor (TV One, 2004) and Polynsynchronized (TV3 Network, 2003).
45. Paul, “Pacificia Players Dominating Ranks.”
46. Ibid.
50. Paul, “Pacificia Players Dominating Ranks.”
54. NZ Rugby World, August 2006.
57. Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 3.
64. Quoted in Jim Kayes, “All Black – Or is the New Breed All White?” The Dominion Post, 19 July 2002, Sport, 1.
66. St Louis, Brilliant Bodies, Fragile Minds, 119.
68. Laidlaw, Bula Bullets, 28.
69. Paul, “Pacificia Players Dominating Ranks.”
73. Ibid.
74. “Flash Harry” is British slang reference to “a self-confident, vulgar person” (see Cassell’s Dictionary of Word and Phrases, 2002).
77. Quoted in The Brown Factor (TV One, 2004).
80. Ibid., 23.
86. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge.
87. Said, Orientalism.
91. Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 64.
94. Simons, Foucault and the Political, 109.
99. Epifanio San Juan, Jr., Beyond Postcolonial Theory (New York: St Martin’s Press), 228.
Andy Grainger is a senior lecturer at Liverpool Hope University, UK. Broadly interested in the relationship between globalisation, immigration, and identity, Grainger’s recent work examines the cultural politics of race and nation as played out through physical culture, and the sport of rugby in particular. Despite the nature of this research, and in a classic case of Orwellian doublethink, he remains a fan of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team.

Pacific warriors: Samoa players perform the Siva Tau (Getty Images). TAGS: Featured Fiji Investigation Samoa Tonga. Special Report: The opportunities and the obstacles for Pacific Islands rugby. Some describe rugby as being almost like a religion on the islands, yet that is not to reduce the significance of their faith. To see players bedecked in red and white kneeling arm in arm in prayer after Tonga’s win over Fiji is no surprise while you notice how the Fijians come together to sing a hymn at the end of key sessions. Fiji has athletes who have a natural talent for playing rugby. For talent and athletic ability, they’re a nine out of ten. It’s the technical and tactical side that we’re working on. “My experience with Fijian players is that they’re keen to listen to new ideas. But not everything is rosy with rugby in the Pacific Islands. Neither Samoa, a one-time powerhouse of the sevens format, nor Tonga have qualified teams for Rio. Read More. And the three rugby-proud nations are losing top talent to an increasing number of tier-one teams -- an age-old problem -- with many stories of players then being blocked from playing for their countries by their club employers. Read: Englishman relishes pressure in paradise. Qera first withdrew from Fiji’s northern hemisphere tour in November 2012 in order to focus on playing for Gloucester in what he described as a series of important games coming up.” He was captain for the 2015 World Cup but made himself unavailable for June’s home internationals.