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Interview with Robbie Shilliam and Nicholas Faraclas

Interview conducted during the international conference “Postcolonial Oceans: Heterogeneities and Contradictions in the Epistemes of Salt Water,” University of Bremen, May 30–June 2, 2019¹

RSZ: It’s been an honour having you with us. Tell us something about yourselves.

RS: I am Robbie Shilliam and I teach International Relations at Johns Hopkins University. I work on race, colonialism, and anticolonialism, and the ways that anticolonial thought, and practice opens up different ways of explaining global politics.

NF: I am Nick Faraclas. I teach linguistics at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras and my family is actually Romani (aka Gypsy) and Greek. I do my intellectual work at the University—that is how I get paid—but most of my work is in communities. I work in the South Pacific, mainly in Vanuatu, and I also work around the Caribbean, especially with Indigenous peoples in literacy and popular education programs where children can learn to read and write first in Indigenous languages rather than the colonial languages and where adults can learn critical literacy.

RSZ: How do some of the themes in this conference “Postcolonial Oceans” speak to and resonate with some of your writings, and probably even future forays?

NF: Well, for me, coming here and meeting Robbie was amazing because so many of the things that I have been thinking about over many,

1 The interview partners and editors would like to thank Stephanie Najjar for transcribing the interview.

many years, Robbie has also been thinking about but in different ways, in ways that open new doors and new possibilities for me. So, one of the highlights of the conference has actually been meeting Robbie.

And then it is amazing to come to some of the sessions and hear people talk about, for example, pirates. In our work at the University of Puerto Rico, where we look at marginalized peoples and the role marginalized peoples have had in the emergence of creole languages, one group of marginalized peoples we focus on is pirates. And it has been a treat to come to a conference where people are looking at pirates in ways that are interesting and ways that are not like *Pirates of the Caribbean* but which actually see pirates as agents in cultural and linguistic transformation. There are not many conferences I can go to where I see people speaking like that about pirates.

RS: And I think for me it is something similar, and it has to do with the way a lot of the literature and the discussions that I take part in. They often have a center of gravity around what they call the Black Atlantic. There is a lot of amazing work being done in that field. But one of the things it is not quite so good at doing is figuring out the ethical, political, and historical connections between Indigenous peoples and peoples of the African diaspora, the interlinked issues of expropriation of Indigenous lands as well as the enslavement of African populations. In this respect, you cannot ignore the Pacific. It is the most significant topological feature in the world. And of course, in the Pacific, these connections are complicated and much more interrelated. Yet these complications and interrelations can help us to examine more acutely the Atlantic—as trope and as history. And this is why I was really happy to meet Nicholas and to hear his lecture yesterday, because that is precisely what he is doing with his work on the Atlantic and Pacific Creoles. He is showing in real detail how these areas are interconnected and what kinds of complexities we need to deal with if we are going to adequately address the key questions in postcolonial and decolonial studies.

NF: I was telling Robbie just after his presentation this morning that I was almost in tears by the time I was looking at the last slide because in that slide you had a person from the Afro-Atlantic looking at a symbol that has emerged from the Pacific, from New Zealand, and reading it in a way that was so powerful and made all of these connections. That is something Robbie talks about a lot: establishing deeper relations and establishing this connectedness. I see that time and time again in the way Indigenous peoples approach their understanding of the world. In other words, in the ways that they do their science.

Something else that Robbie has talked about is Indigenous science. My experience of living in Indigenous communities has shown me that Indigenous science has as its goal, not control or accumulation of wealth, but instead establishing connectedness between people, healing trauma, and healing things that have torn people apart. That kind of healing is powerful.

This morning, Anne Storch² gave a great talk that connects with something that Robbie and I were discussing earlier, namely, the situation among people in Europe and other places where Indigenous understandings and sovereignty have been made invisible or erased, or where people have lost their memories of Indigenous sovereignty and science. So, for example, in New Zealand/Aotearoa, some Māori still have a memory of sovereign power over land, and some are still living that sovereign power over land. In Vanuatu, almost ninety percent of the land is still under the sovereign control of the people, basically under their Indigenous laws and not under state law. This means that the state has no power over ninety percent of the land in the country. Ni-Vanuatu and other Indigenous peoples who have retained this type of sovereignty over land have so much healing knowledge that could be shared with other Indigenous peoples like Native Americans, whose experience of invasion has been much more traumatizing. Think of the healing that could happen by those kinds of connections being made. But then what about the people right here in Europe? What about the people in the US who are looking for healing? Their trauma is extremely deep because whatever the metropolises did to people in the colonies they came right back and did it to their own people. That is what the Industrial Revolution was about—they tested slavery on the plantations and impressed labor on the ships and once they perfected it in the colonies, then they established wage slavery on the assembly lines and in the factories here. So people are traumatized here in Europe as well.

Anne made this wonderful presentation in which she was “selling” products in her satirical video [running in the background as she presented] and showed how the ruling classes and the symbolic elites who represent them are promising you that they can heal you with the very things that have made you ill. The real healing, and the people who have the greatest capacity to do it, are in New Zealand/Aotearoa, Vanuatu, and West Africa. But nobody is listening. Nobody

2 Anne Storch, “Terrible Magical Ways of Healing—Sea, Spa and Skin.” <https://postcolonialoceans.blogspot.com/p/anne-storch.html>.

is recognizing them as having something very, very important to contribute to how we are going to heal the damage to ourselves, not only from the traumas and the apocalypses that have been brought about through colonization but also the ones that are on the horizon now as well.

RS: And I think that is really important. It does mean that if we are engaging with postcolonial oceans, we need to think in terms of knowledge formations as well. What are the sources of this knowledge? What difference does it make? One of the things I noticed when I lived in Aotearoa New Zealand was real insecurity over taking on the nomenclature of *Pākehā*—a Māori word referring to people of European descent. Almost every white New Zealander I ever taught at university would say something like, “oh but my uncle said *Pākehā* means white pig so I cannot call myself that.” No, it really does not. There are many different stories about what *Pākehā* means. One of those stories talks about the breath that turned the world upside down, meaning the English language, which came with the settlers, which then was part of the settler project. So, that is not derogatory. That is quite a sacred marker. To be called *Pākehā* means you have significance—and a place.

One of the things about white New Zealand culture is that it suffers from a suspicion of non-creativity. Settlers, after all, brought cultures from Europe. Regularly, *Pākehā* individuals would tell me that when they undertook their “OE” —Overseas Experience—and travelled to Europe or the Americas, people would ask them, once they knew they were from New Zealand: “Can you do a haka?” A haka, of course, is a Māori thing. I also noticed that many *Pākehā*—though they might not be in any way “anticolonial”—would often use two or three words from Te Reo, the Māori language, regularly. For instance, the Māori word for food is *kai*, which intonates collective sustenance; the word for work is *mahi*, which intonates collective endeavor towards a collective purpose; and the word for family is *whānau*, which intonates an extended set of loving relationships. So, all the basic human pursuits like food, work, and family are often presented in Māori terms. All I can think is that settler culture extracts all the joy from these pursuits, even for the settlers.

NF: And this, I think, connects, for example, with the whole experience that immigrants are now facing in Germany. I think it would be very interesting for Germans to look at how people who come to this country, fleeing apocalypses at home, and facing new apocalypses here, manage to survive and even thrive. There is so much to be learned

from how immigrants are taking Indigenous ways that they bring from where they were born and raised and creatively adapting those knowledges and ways of relating to people and to everything around them in order to recreate incredibly complex and ingenious systems of survival and subsistence right here in Germany. And I think that if more Germans looked seriously at that and opened their eyes in such a way that they could give themselves permission to see that, this would give them permission to see themselves.

This is important because in the US and Europe, we are living in a system that seeks death. One very powerful thing you said this morning, Robbie, is that the western academy has been a death-seeking academy and that western science has been a death-seeking science. In societies such as that of Germany or the US, which are defined by death-seeking science and by death-seeking economics, in other words, in places where our whole society is defined by death, how do people manage to survive and even thrive? The fact that people survive in a death-seeking system must mean that they are constantly, but mainly subconsciously, bucking the system by inventing and deploying countless subaltern strategies for creating life despite the odds stacked against them, just to live and love another day. Once we start opening our eyes to that, I think this can be very powerful in the healing process for the people of Germany who are looking for healing and are erroneously thinking the *Alternative für Deutschland* and other far-right movements are going to give it to them. No, that is just like the fake healing products that are being sold in Anne's satirical video that never give us real healing.

The real healing that is going to give people fulfillment and give people what they are seeking, I think, is at least in part, the one that is going to come from opening our eyes to what Indigenous people have been doing for thousands and thousands of years in places like the Pacific and West Africa. This healing can come as well from opening our eyes to how those Indigenous peoples who have experienced invasion have creatively managed to confront it, and all the knowledges they have created to basically subvert those colonizing systems and transform them into something that can give them life and fulfillment. And then, once we open our eyes to that, we can also open our eyes to how the non-Indigenous people in Germany and the rest of Europe or the US, or the *Pākehā* in New Zealand are actually doing the same thing, because if we have managed to survive in this system, we must be doing all sorts of things to re-establish our life-giving sovereignty, even though we may not acknowledge it or give ourselves credit for it.

It is important to remember that all of our ancestors were Indigenous and sovereign. Once those linkages are made and those healings are done, I think we have something really transformative going on, and something very dangerous to systems that seek to just accumulate wealth or systems that seek to claim that one group of people is better than another group of people, or systems that claim that men are better than women. Once we remember our sovereignty, our indigeneity, all of these patriarchal, ethnocentric, and economically accumulative systems of domination become threatened, really threatened.

RSZ: That was fantastic, because I was going to pose some further questions on those very points.

NF: Another thing that Robbie said that touched me today was about how we become maps and the relationship of those maps to places. That really resonated with me because my ancestors are Romani, and I have been trying to figure out how being Romani intersects with Indigenous sovereignty, which is normally so closely associated with particular places, at least under the colonial gaze. My ancestors were people who moved a lot, so what does Romani sovereignty look like? My first breakthrough came when I heard Indigenous people say, “I have sovereign power not *over* this land, but *with* this land.” This helped me change the way I see sovereignty from something that is mechanically asserted over nature and the land, to something that is lived with nature and the land. As such, sovereignty is not static, defined and dead, as is ownership, but instead it is living, moving, dynamic, reinventing itself wherever one might find oneself. This made me think of the Levellers, Diggers, and Ranters who reclaimed sovereignty for all of the people in relation to the recently enclosed land in England at the dawn of the colonial era. By daring to radically reconceptualize the entire world as the commons of all of creation, I came to understand that sovereignty can be established by anyone, anywhere.

This connects with another powerful thing that Robbie said this morning about Indigenous peoples, movement, and interconnectedness, or what might be understood as a radical re-reading of “cosmopolitanism.” The colonizing view of Indigenous people sees them as people who live in small “enclosed” inward-focused communities, who never connect with the outside until the colonizer arrives and “opens them up” to the world. My work with Indigenous peoples in Africa, the South Pacific, and the Americas has convinced me that before the colonial invasion, most Indigenous peoples had millennia of experience with pluri-lingualism, pluri-culturalism, and pluri-identification.

This makes sense, because a sovereign relationship with the earth guarantees complete land security, food security, housing security, employment security, and social security. If you are secure, there is no need for conquest or invasion. That is why in many regions where Indigenous peoples live, there is tremendous diversity in language and culture, since no one has felt the need to invade and impose their language and culture on anyone else. Indigenous peoples who have not experienced colonial invasion do not know landlessness, homelessness, starvation, unemployment, and destitution. If you have never known those things in your life, if you have that level of security, you can be totally open to others, their languages, their cultures, their lifeways, you can be totally hospitable. If you have that strength in your own understanding of your lineage, your own culture, then you can be completely open to those of other people.

Every Indigenous group that I have worked with has stories in their oral tradition about how new people came to their communities and how they welcomed them. It is only people who have been traumatized, who are insecure, who have never known the security that comes with sovereignty, who demonize immigrants and run to fascist and other right-wing groups like Alternative für Deutschland, who think that they are better than somebody else and shut other people, other languages, other cultures, and other identities out of their lives, erroneously thinking that they will find healing for their traumas there. They are the ones who are enclosed, who cannot open up to others, not Indigenous peoples. Repeatedly you hear Indigenous stories about people coming from other places to join their communities, for example you hear the story that Robbie told this morning about the shipwrecked Africans who arrived on the shores of an Indigenous community in the South Pacific. And what did the local people do when these new people came? Did they shut them out? No, they embraced them. And that is another really powerful thing that I think can be learned from Indigenous peoples. This openness comes from the memory and the understanding of sovereignty and assuming sovereignty in your own life. And for the Romani, I think it is very similar, but the attachment, perhaps, is not to one particular area, but it is more to every place or to the roads that link places.

And then we come to the theme of this conference: the seas, the oceans. Some speakers in some sessions talked about oceans as *tabula rasa*, as “flat spaces” or “smooth spaces” or abstract places for the creation of utopias created from zero. My work in the South Pacific and elsewhere has taught me that the oceans and seas have

incredible living histories of all sorts of interactions and connections among peoples. As such, the oceans are not empty, but instead they are overflowing with real experiences of real interconnectedness and real sovereignty. The oceans are rich with knowledges and memories that can serve both as inspiration and as a foundation for healing processes that can promote the (re)creation of societies that serve our needs rather than the needs of just a greedy few, and that provide us with real fulfillment. This means that utopia does not need to start from zero or from an abstraction. Instead, humanity has hundreds of thousands of years of rich and diverse concrete experience, concrete science, concrete understandings, and concrete knowledges of building communities in the image and interest of everyone, where everyone has access to land, water, food, work, and everyone has agency as creators of knowledge and culture.

I think I would rather construct a utopia by creatively using and reconfiguring these tried and true methods and materials that have been created by all of our ancestors who actually realized sovereignty and fulfillment in the past, rather than try to realize sovereignty and fulfillment by pretending to imagine something completely new, but in practice falling back on the methods and materials of a system that has perpetuated so much trauma and apocalypse on ourselves and others. From all of that trauma, how do you create a new utopia from all of that? I would rather go to the people who have been making it work for thousands of years in societies where there is no accumulation of wealth, in societies where you only have to work for a couple of days a week to have food and housing security.

If you are doing subsistence, you have abundance, so after two days you have time to make music, to sit down and reflect on the world, to create and practice science. People have time to do philosophy. For example, I have never experienced such sophisticated philosophy as I regularly encounter in kava drinking sessions in villages in Vanuatu, and that is because people have days and days to do it. They do not devote their lives to this idea that survival is something that has to consume all their time, that they have to make themselves available to be used as labor power to enrich someone else. They are living in a state of subsistence abundance. One or two days is enough. The other five days you can do things that create connectedness between peoples and sciences that establish that connectedness.

That said, I think this conference has been a wonderful experience because of the kind of connections we can make among ourselves across the oceans.

RSZ: Robbie, I am so glad you also brought up the question of ancestral wounds and healing ancestral wounds, can you comment more on this and notions of past and future?

RS: That is right. If you think about Western social and political theory, what you get is this sense that no one's past is authentic except for the past of Europeans. Europeans have the only past that they can draw upon which is adequate for the present. All other pasts are retrospective or just antiquarian. I am often told: "Oh, you are talking about theory and philosophy before colonialism. Well surely all of that got displaced by colonialism and what you are really talking about is a colonially induced new canon which masquerades as authentic." Europeans, though, always seem to be able to rely on Ancient Greece. It is not even that Greece was admitted to the cultural heritage of European nations relatively late in the day. It is also that, somehow, we can still use ancient Greece to think about the ethical quandaries of the present. Only in this instance is the past allowed to be contemporary. Of course, that did not stop Greece being made into an EU colony by the financial crisis of the early 2010s. Still, that did not displace ancient Greece from the canons of Western social and political thought. There is a phrase: love Black culture, hate Black people. I wonder if you can apply that to Greece too. Anyway, it is similar to what you said, Nicholas, about languages vs. creoles: this other conceit is tradition vs. modernity. Tradition is fixed, modernity is fluid except for ancient Greece. But really, everything is a tradition and everything is fluid. All pasts are retrievable, for better or worse.

NF: I really like what you said about how in Māori, the past is in front of you and the future is behind you. So it really changes the frame of reference.

RS: Exactly, and of course, in a lot of Western societies, especially the US, Europe, and most of the settler colonies, there is this idea: "Do not talk about the past, about fixing the past. What you have to do is focus on the future and just go forward because things will naturally sort themselves out." Except when you talk about the war dead. Then everybody is suddenly Indigenous, and the past is in front of them and it is not going to go away, and it needs a reckoning with. The only time when Western societies think indigenously is when it is to do with the war dead. And again, there is this thing about death.

NF: The discourse about Greece is so important because my ancestors are also Greek. So the way that people understand Greece has nothing to do with Greece. Like you say, Robbie, it is a conceit. It is a completely artificial creation, based on cherry picking. In ancient Greece,

before Greece became an empire, it was a lot like Indigenous societies, although patriarchy had gone further than in many other Indigenous societies. The accumulation of wealth was starting, but there were still a lot of memories of sovereignty and indigeneity. There were lots of sciences, lots of ways of looking at the world, lots of philosophies. For example, Pythagoras had this philosophy where language is not a particle, it is not seen as something you can separate into units, it is waves, resonances between people. Somehow, Pythagoras's theory got marginalized in Western philosophy. We do not talk about Pythagoras too much. We talk about Plato, whose philosophy fits an agenda of domination. If you can convince people that what they experience in the world is not reality, if you can convince them that the real reality is somewhere up there—your whole talk on religion, Robbie, was spot on concerning that—then you can create a class of people whose responsibility it is to tell people what the real thing is. According to Plato, what is up there is not only the real reality, it is the good reality, so this conceit/deceit has a moral side too. Then you have a class of people whose work it is to tell everybody else what is real and what is good. It starts out with priests and religion, but then it becomes academics, and of course, now it has become the mass media and other things. But still, that was our job. Our job was to convince the world that what is real is what conforms to patriarchal, ethnocentric, and economically accumulative agendas of domination, so when we start to do our work in ways that question those things, it becomes dangerous. And that is another reason why I like this conference and the people that I am meeting with because I am meeting with a lot of dangerous people and it is a very dangerous conference. I love that.

I am just wondering about another thing that we did not talk about, because I am still trying to grapple with how Romani fit in this whole picture. I am thinking about Aboriginal Australians, and there I see a lot of commonalities with Romani. I am thinking about Australian Aboriginal paintings, where the focus is on the routes that people travel, not on a fixed position. In those paintings, you see all these dots that are the routes; then every once in a while, the chain of dots is interrupted by these heart-shaped marks. What are those heart-shaped marks? They are imprints of people's buttocks: this is where we sat down, and we connected with the land, we grounded. Because when you sit down, you talk. And you did "grounding" in that sense that you, Robbie, talked about this morning. That is what the people in Vanuatu are doing in their kava sessions. They are grounded. That, to me, connects with the Romani experience.

RS: I think that is really important. All traditions are fluid and present, meaning they are not the opposite of what we think modernity is. In fact, we might even conceive of modernity as a tradition itself. If we start from that conception, then a lot of binaries start to break down. And one of those is the apparent opposition between sedentary and nomad, which is heavily imbued with eighteenth-century European ideas of civilization. And of course, nomads do not just go anywhere; there are maps, routes, and circuits. I used to know a number of people who are in what they call the Black Power gang [in New Zealand]. In Te Reo, their name is Mangu Kaha. They came about initially from the predicament that young children, mainly boys, who came from rural areas to work in towns found themselves in. They did not have the support structures that they had in the rural areas, so the Black Power gang was an attempt to provide a social security net. Not saints by any means, lots of issues to do with drugs, to do with rape, even in the early days—there was a big confrontation with the practice of rape over the last ten or so years and people are trying to account for that now. This is not about saints and heroes.

Nonetheless, one of the things that one of the members—Eugene Ryder—was trying to agitate for was to say that Black Power should be understood as what they call an *iwi*, which means tribe, in the same way as all the other tribes. In that way, under the Waitangi Tribunal, they would then be able to move not for land restitution, but for reparation for growing up in racist urban areas.

So, of course, amongst many Māori, Ryder's claims and aspirations towards an *iwi* were a non-starter. Even some Māori politicians agreed that these guys were just thugs. But Ryder's argument was strong. He argued that the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which most northern tribes signed, hypostatized *iwi*. Before 1840, it was not always evident what the bounds of an *iwi* were, and *iwi* were occasionally morphed through other groupings. In any case, the prime allegiance that people held was not always to the *iwi*. So why did all this mobility stop in 1840? That is Ryder's challenge to those who say there can be no new *iwi*. That is how he argues—along traditional lines, if you like—that Black Power is a new *iwi*.

NF: This connects to the work we are doing with Indigenous peoples in Louisiana. I was working with one called the Houma, who originally lived somewhere in the Appalachians when the Europeans arrived and were pushed by the colonists to the lands that nobody wanted, which are the last bayous, the swamps at the end of the Mississippi river. Nobody wanted that, and that is where they ended up. They

ended up there and they enjoyed this Indigenous security and sovereignty over who they were, what they were, their culture, their language, so they were very open. They welcomed a lot of people. Over time, they switched from speaking their ancestral language, Houma, and to speaking French.

It just so happens that this land nobody wanted before has rich deposits of oil under it, petroleum. They received Louisiana state recognition as Indigenous people long ago, but now they are seeking federal recognition to be able to officially claim sovereignty over this land, and the government in Washington, mindful of the fact that the land has petroleum deposits, is saying “you are not Indigenous people; you speak French; where is your language?” It is like the federal government is saying, “Dance for us!” “Prove that you are Indigenous!” “Where is your chief?” The government agencies were expecting a male chief, but the chief was a woman, and they said, “No, that is not a chief,” because for the government, women cannot be in those kinds of positions of responsibility under the colonial gaze on indigeneity. The Houma conveniently did not fit into the official “Indigenous” box, because their land has a lot of resources under it that the US government wanted to get their hands on.

So a Houma community asked me to come in to look at their variety of French, asking, “How can we prove to the US government that part of our indigeneity is this openness and this ability to shape-shift and to move from one culture to another? To move from one language to another, that is part of who we are and makes us the Houma people.” We started looking at the variety of French that they speak, and all of a sudden the vowels were going all over the place. In French, you have quite a complex vowel system, with something like fourteen vowels. What we found in Houma French was all this variation; vowels being realized in all kinds of different ways. Within that, we saw that there were clusters, not neat clusters but three clusters that centered around [a], [o], and [i]. The ancestral Houma language is no longer spoken and there are not a lot of written records of it, but all of the other languages related to it that are still spoken that have grammars and have accounts of their sound systems. Most of them have three vowels [a], [o], and [i]. In other words, their ancestral linguistic practices are living on in the way that they speak French. So, we tried to use arguments like that to convince the US government that these people do have sovereign control over this land and they cannot touch their land. This connects to this idea of authenticity that you raised, Robbie, with your example of the Black Power gang’s

claim. In other words, if you do not look and act according to how European-descended people think of Indigenous people, that is, if instead of living in an enclosed, isolated time-capsule, you have retained your Indigenous openness to the rest of the world and taken on new languages and cultures, you are somehow no longer “authentically” Indigenous. According to the US government, Indigenous people are supposed to be those people living in a little corner over there, closed off from the rest of the world, with a hierarchical social order dominated by a male chief.

RS: Bob Marley had a lyric for that in a song called “Babylon System”: “We refused to be who you wanted us to be, we are who we are and that is the way it is going to be.”

NF: That’s it! And this is something that you, Robbie, mentioned this morning in relation to how the Indigenous mariners of the Atlantic and Pacific practiced their Indigenous sciences, even when they sailed on European and US ships in the nineteenth century. This brings us back to your idea of Indigenous sciences as sciences that (re-)establish deeper connections, and in both of our presentations, that is what they were doing. The ways in which they sailed the oceans, even when they were on the new circuits that had been established by colonialism, involved using Indigenous knowledges to cultivate living, fulfilling, healing connections.

RSZ: Thank you both for this inspiring conversation.