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Book Review: *Sea of Islands: Exploring Objects, Stories, and Memories from Oceania,* by Carol E. Mayer

Abstract
Book review: Carol E. Mayer, Sea of Islands: Exploring Objects, Stories, and Memories from Oceania. *Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing and Museum of Anthropology at UBC, 2025. ISBN: 978-1-77327-155-2, 240 pages, color & b/w illustrations, map, acknowledgments, notes, selected bibliography, index. Hardcover US$50.*

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Sea of Islands: Exploring Objects, Stories, and Memories from Oceania presents itself as a history of the Oceania collections held at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC)—some 3,500 objects. At first glance, it may appear to be a conventional institutional history, or a catalogue documenting the provenance and significance of a major museum's holdings, but it soon becomes clear that Mayer's project goes well beyond a standard provenance-based history of a collection. Written by Carol E. Mayer—a research fellow on the Pacific at the MOA, where she worked for thirty-five years—the book traces the trajectories of the museum's Pacific collections.

The volume follows a relatively classic organization, one that readers familiar with museum catalogues and regional surveys of Oceania will recognize. A foreword (by Ralph Regenvanu, Minister for Climate Change Adaptation, Energy, Environment, Meteorology, Geohazards, and Disaster Management of the Republic of Vanuatu) and a preface (by Susan Rowley, director of the MOA) are followed by a map of Oceania and an introduction to the volume, in which Mayer outlines her methodological positioning. An early chapter is devoted to Frank Burnett, whose donation of approximately 1,500 Pacific objects to the UBC in 1927 formed the nucleus of the MOA's Oceania collections. Two thematic chapters, devoted to navigation and barkcloth (tapa), follow before the book moves geographically through the Pacific—covering Vanuatu, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea,

Australia, the Torres Strait Islands, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Sāmoa, Rapa Nui, and the Marquesas Islands—and concludes with an epilogue.

That Mayer is going beyond conventional collection-history orientation is first signaled by the book's covers. Rather than foregrounding colonial-era imagery, the front cover features *Four Great Whites* (2004) by Solomon Islands artist Ake Lianga. Drawing on a local legend of four great white sharks that guided and protected a founding community, the work evokes ancestral guardianship, movement, continuity, and ceremonial traditions linked to shell money and shark-calling practices. The back cover reproduces *Destiny* (2019) by Wukun Wanambi, a Yolngu painter from the Marrakulu and Dhurili clans of eastern Arnhem Land. A member of the Dhuwa moiety, Wanambi described the work as symbolizing mullet fish journeying between waters, echoing the search for ancestral connections. Together, these contemporary prints frame the volume as oriented toward living relationships, circulation, and continuity rather than static heritage.

In her introduction, Mayer explains that her initial intention was to produce a comprehensive account of the museum's entire Pacific collection, but she soon recognized that such an undertaking was both impractical and conceptually misaligned with her approach. Rather than striving for encyclopedic coverage, she instead chose to focus on the parts of the collection with the strongest relational histories—objects already activated through exhibitions, teaching, research, and long-term collaborations. This decision marks an important methodological shift away from a traditional framework: the book does not attempt to exhaustively document a collection but instead reflects on how collections become meaningful through use, encounter, and relationship. The result is not only the biographies of objects, but also Mayer's own intellectual and relational trajectory over more than three decades of curatorial practice.

The book is explicitly informed by Epeli Hau'ofa's influential concept of Oceania as a "sea of islands," which reframes the Pacific as a vast, interconnected world shaped by Indigenous voyaging, mobility, kinship, and exchange rather than as a constellation of isolated islands.[1] From this perspective, *Sea of Islands* reinterprets the MOA's Oceania collections through narratives co-created with Indigenous scholars, artists, knowledge-holders, and members of source communities and diasporas. Hau'ofa's vision provides not only a geographical metaphor but also an epistemological framework that privileges movement, relation, and continuity over boundedness and fragmentation.

Central to Mayer's methodology is the recontextualization of collections through collaboration. Rather than presenting objects through a single authoritative voice, she foregrounds polyphony. Mayer selected objects in consultation

with source communities, and their descriptions are accompanied by commentaries from community members, as well as curators, artists, and scholars. This approach effectively reactivates objects whose social and cultural connections had been muted by museum storage and classification. Throughout the book, Mayer weaves historical collections with present-day concerns such as revival movements, environmental and political struggles, artistic innovation, and community-based knowledge. Objects are never treated as inert; instead, they emerge as agents that reactivate memory, generate relationships, and open new avenues of research and practice.

Mayer's long-standing relationships with Indigenous artists, curators, knowledge-holders, scholars, and Pacific diaspora communities in Canada shape many of the chapters. These sustained engagements allow the book to move beyond episodic consultation, and toward more deeply embedded forms of collaboration. In doing so, *Sea of Islands* challenges the idea of the museum as an isolated producer of knowledge, and repositions it as a site of encounter, negotiation, and shared responsibility.

This collaborative orientation is particularly evident in the book's thematic chapters. The chapter on navigation challenges long-standing European representations of the Pacific as empty, fragmented, or disconnected, and instead reframes Oceania as a densely networked seascape shaped by sophisticated voyaging knowledge. Canoe models in the MOA collection—often dismissed as souvenirs, curios, or pedagogical miniatures—are presented as teaching tools, historical records, and repositories of ancestral knowledge. Through dialogue with Pacific navigators and scholars, these models become catalysts for contemporary navigation revival movements and symbols of sustainability, resilience, and cultural continuity.

Similarly, the chapter on tapa treats barkcloth as both material object and cultural practice. Mayer traces its origins, regional diversity, and ceremonial significance, as well as the disruptions to these practices caused by colonization and Christianization, which led to its decline or suppression in many regions. In this context, museums emerge as unexpected reservoirs of endangered knowledge, enabling artists and communities to reconnect with techniques, motifs, and meanings that had been partially lost. Of particular interest are women-led revivals of tapa-making, which demonstrate how historical collections can support cultural renewal, identity formation, and artistic innovation.

Mayer also demonstrates how museums can act as intermediaries for dialogue and healing. In the chapter on Vanuatu, she discusses the 2009 Erromango reconciliation ceremony (*klinem fes*) between the descendants of missionary John

Williams and local families. The 1839 killing of Williams and a companion—an event that profoundly affected the evangelical world—had long weighed on the people of Erromango as an unresolved historical burden. Initiated through sustained museum relationships, the reconciliation process culminated in a ceremony at Dillon's Bay, offering a powerful moment of acknowledgment and renewal. This case exemplifies how museum collections and relationships can function as catalysts for future-oriented engagements grounded in memory and responsibility.

While going through the book, I found a few dates that would have benefited from fact-checking, updating, and/or proofreading. For example, the author states that migration into Pacific Oceania from Asia began before 25,000 BCE (19), while recent archaeological research suggests that human occupation dates back considerably further, to approximately 65,000–45,000 years ago.[2] The book also suggests that the settlement of Aotearoa happened around 1300 BCE, when the widely accepted date is approximately 1300 CE ("Common Era," rather than "before the Common Era").

I was also struck by how Mayer does not explicitly employ the terms "decolonize" or "decolonization," which are now widely used in ethnographic museums in response to sustained criticisms of these institutions. The absence of this vocabulary should not, however, be understood as a lack of critical engagement, as *Sea of Islands* addresses decolonization at the level of practice and methodology, positioning itself firmly within these debates and making a substantive contribution to ongoing discussions on the legitimacy of ethnographic collections and the reconfiguration of museum theory and practice.

Ultimately, *Sea of Islands* is less a museum-collection catalogue than a sustained and well-illustrated argument for a museum practice grounded in relationships rather than objects alone. Mayer makes clear that museums are not fundamentally about things, but about the connections that things enable. By foregrounding Indigenous voices and lived relationships, the book demonstrates how collections can bring together the past, present, and future. The voyage traced in *Sea of Islands* does not lead backward into a closed past, but forward—toward renewed relationships, shared responsibilities, and futures still in the making.

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dissertation titled "Le storyboards di Kambot: Arte del Sepik tra tradizione e modernità." She has conducted field research in Papua New Guinea, Morocco, and Italy. She has curated several exhibitions on Kanak and Indigenous Australian art, and she leads the MEG project "Connecting Collections and Source Communities." Since September 2024, she has also been a lecturer at the Laboratory of African Archaeology & Anthropology at the University of Geneva.

Notes

[1] Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. Eric Wadell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa (Suva: The University of the South Pacific, School of Social and Economic Development, 1993), 2–16.
[2] Patrick Roberts et al., "Fossils, Fish and Tropical Forests: Prehistoric Human Adaptations on the Island Frontiers of Oceania," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 377, no. 1849 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0495.