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## <Book Review>

**Faizah Zakaria**

**Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers. *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.**

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toward a deeper understanding of social transformation in Zomia.

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### ***The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network***

JULIA MARTÍNEZ and ADRIAN VICKERS

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.

Transnational histories from below are notoriously difficult to access through conventional archives. *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network* rises to this challenge by tracing the economic and social worlds of the waterways framed by the islands of Eastern Indonesia and Northern Australia. Labor—its movement and agency—is at the center of this inquiry. The monograph seeks to track the submerged history of indenture in the pearling industry that lies at the geographical fringes of two colonies, and later, nation-states. The historical experiences of “pearling indents,” as these workers became known, are a means for Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers to discuss issues of race and the “color line” in Australia. Such themes remain pertinent today as Australia grapples with its refugee policy and the attendant questions of who gets to become Australian and why. In a study that spanned the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, the authors of this book clearly demonstrate that this dilemma is not new. The spotlight here is on migrants from Eastern Indonesia who were accepted as temporary casual labor at Australia's frontiers but repeatedly barred from accessing the mainland during this period.

This interest in movement between borders distinguishes this monograph from extant histories of Eastern Indonesia, many of which are focused either on the spice trade from European sources or nationalist, anticolonial figures that are of interest to the history of the Indonesian state.<sup>1)</sup> The first three chapters of *The Pearl Frontier* establish that the pearling zone “joined the areas of

1) See Hägerdal (2015, 75–98) for a historiographical overview of Eastern Indonesia.

Indonesia and Australia that were most remote from their centers of government . . . much that happened on the frontier was at the edges of state control” (p. 11). This argument is made from three perspectives: geographically, environmentally, and socially. Drawing on the work of naturalists such as Alfred Russell Wallace, these chapters demonstrate that this region, whose flora and fauna have been described as a “zoogeographical area constituting a transition zone between Sundaland and the Sahul” (Schepper 2015, 99–152), also had a long history of maritime mobility. The Timorese town of Kupang functioned as a regional hub, and pearling became a major economic activity from the 1860s and 1870s. Chapters 4 to 6 reveal that the development of this industry occurred with minimal state control, thus allowing a different socioeconomic world to take shape. Even as the “White Australia” policy became law in 1901, the pearling industry appeared to exempt itself from the letter of the law by continuing to recruit non-white labor on temporary contracts and evaded official scrutiny as these non-white workers were only stationed ashore for a few months. As a result, the Northern Australian towns of Broome and Darwin became increasingly diverse. Paired with the Eastern Indonesian hubs of Aru and Kupang, Indonesian, Japanese, and aboriginal labor as well as Arab and Chinese capital came into the region. The social world in these towns had its own hierarchy, with pearling masters of European descent at its apex but considerably more fluidity in social status.

Biographies, newspaper accounts, and oral histories of white pearling masters and their non-white labor are the sources that underpin this analysis. Martínez and Vickers read these for the perspectives of both the masters and their indentured labor. What emerges is a nuanced picture of the indenture system in the pearling industry, where the masters adopted various strategies to maintain control over labor, ranging from constant surveillance and discipline to a form of traditional patron-client relations between employer and employed. However, large parts of this history remain stubbornly submerged, especially the relations between the various non-white groups themselves. For example, the book opens with an intriguing anecdote about an Alorese migrant worker named Abdoel Gafoer who came to Broome in the early 1920s and eventually married an indigenous Australian woman, becoming a respected member of the Yaruwu community. His repeated movements across maritime borders over several short-term contracts become a running thread in the book, suggesting deeper interactions between minority groups in the industry. Those deeper interactions are not fleshed out, given how Gafoer’s story serves to string the chapters together with little sustained explanation of how his experience illustrates social mixing among non-whites.

Similarly, the experiences of Japanese labor do not receive adequate attention, although the Japanese constituted the largest proportion of foreign divers in the pearling zone. As a result, the book leaves the reader with more questions than answers about the intersecting encounters between foreign labor and indigenous Australians. Such caution in treating the available sources might be warranted, in view of relatively recent criticism that indigenous historians in Australia

read too much into sparse indigenous sources.<sup>2)</sup> That said, *The Pearl Frontier* seems to skirt direct engagement with historians such as Keith Windschuttle. Although it briefly revives an argument that the latter dismissed, which is that “pearling masters engineered antagonism as a means of labor price control” (p. 106), no new evidence has been presented to justify the revival. What is clear from the monograph is that antagonism as well as cooperation coexisted between the Indonesian, Japanese, and indigenous groups, but the causes, consequences, and relative intensity of these dynamics remain murky. Consequently, the book’s arguments remain somewhat aloof from the mainstream historiography of Australia.

It is, nonetheless, a great achievement to fish a marginal figure such as Gafoer out of the archives. That he even surfaced at all was due to his struggles to obtain Australian citizenship in order to stay with his indigenous wife and daughter, despite his marriage being unrecognized by the Australian government. A pathway to citizenship cracked open with the advent of World War II, which is the subject of Chapter 7. Many indentured workers were evacuated from Thursday Island, Broome, and Darwin to Australian cities in the south. The final two chapters track the decline of labor migration as Indonesia replaced the Dutch East Indies. Existing labor migrants on the Australian side of the border then struggled to gain recognition and citizenship in a country that had benefited from both their labor and, in some cases, their wartime service. Naturalization was made possible only when the White Australia policy was weakened in the 1950s, underscoring the racist bias of such exclusion.

Pearls are centralized in the title of the book, and the authors use them as an insightful lens into the social processes of migration and integration into society. There is, however, surprisingly little about how pearls were formed, their watery habitat, and the methods of extracting pearl shells, especially in the last third of the book. A few dispersed pages over the middle of the book highlight the dangers and risks posed to humans who dive for pearls. The latter themselves remain an ahistorical object in this study. And yet, the pearl underwent considerable transformation as the seas became increasingly polluted over the twentieth century, while the area has become a space for resource contestation (Carino and Monteforte 2009, 48–71). Increasingly, scholars are also acknowledging that a story of labor is often a story of the environment. Antje Missbach (2016, 749–770) recently highlighted that the environment in Eastern Indonesia factored into the decisions of underemployed fishermen to turn to smuggling people into Australia in order to supplement their meager income from overfished waters. Along this vein, *The Pearl Frontier* could have benefited from greater attention to the changing environment in which pearls were extracted. Specifically, the discussion on disputed borders between Australia and newly independent Indonesia in Chapter 8 appears to be incomplete without deeper inquiry into the shift from harvested to cultured pearls after World War II, and its impact on technology as well as labor in the pearling

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2) See, among others, Windschuttle (2002).

industry.

In sum, this lively and ambitious monograph is solidly researched and pushes the envelope on how we might define and study an economic zone by successfully sailing around national boundaries. However, more could have been done to interrogate theoretical paradigms in the writing of transnational as well as indigenous history. A few suggestive analytical frameworks such as cosmopolitanism in indenture are introduced at the beginning of the book but remain regrettably underdeveloped in the content chapters. Consequently, it is a volume that piques further curiosity rather than forges new ground. Still, it is a valuable addition to a growing literature on Eastern Indonesia and revisionist Australian history. It is highly recommended for scholars of migration and those with an interest in Indonesia-Australia relations.

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## *Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate*

TRẦN ĐÌNH TRỤ. Translated by BAC HOAI TRAN and JANA K. LIPMAN

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press in association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2017.

Among the first words to describe Trần Đình Trụ's *Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate* is “resilience,” for his South Vietnamese perspective admirably intimates the many trials that test—without budging—his one goal of reuniting with his family. The reader sympathizes with Trần Đình Trụ very early in his memoir, because despite long days away at sea at the beginning of his career, he always patiently looked toward going home. And yet when Jana Lipman writes in the introduction that this memoir has “survived multiple iterations and reflects more than one moment in time” (p. 4), she highlights the possibility of the memoir, as a written work of memories, to also be resilient in the face of its own tests of time. Indeed, it would not be the first time the