
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Cathy A. Small, *Voyages: From Tongan Villages to American Suburbs*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. Pp. xi, 252, tables, figures, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. US\$48.50 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

Review: ERNEST G. OLSON
WELLS COLLEGE

THE TITLE of Cathy Small's book, *Voyages: From Tongan Villages to American Suburbs*, calls to mind heroic images of Pacific Islander seafaring traditions and explorations that stretch back to the first arrival of Lapita peoples in Tonga, Samoa, and elsewhere in Oceania. For those familiar with Tongan culture, Small's reference to the general theme of the triumphant Polynesian voyage evokes well-known narratives of Queen Salote's celebrated trip to England in 1953 to witness the coronation of Elizabeth II and the current Tongan king's journeys around the globe, to name just a couple of examples. Of course, within the last few decades, the epic voyage of the Tongan elite is now a commonplace experience for Tongans of every social position, and this has created a flood of personal stories about migration to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.

Small's book, on "international migration through the eyes and lives of Tongan migrants" (p. 4), chronicles recent substantial migrations of Tongans from every corner and social category and fits nicely into the record, oral and written, of previous voyages. Small's account is a valuable critical addition to the general anthropological literature on diaspora, migration, and cultural change. The book is among the recent wealth of good reading on Tongan culture (Morton 1996; Evans 2002). Her unique and primary contribution is found

in the personal narratives about the migration experience and its transformation of family, household, and community. Small's personal experience, over many years, as an ethnographer and friend of one family in particular, provides the narrative text for the reader's understanding of the personal gains and costs of migration from the Tongan village to places like Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The reader is quickly alerted to what the book is not: a "traditional" ethnography with standard chapters on subsistence, kinship, religion, and social life. There is minimal reference to core aspects of Tongan life such as feasting, church activities, sporting events, kava drinking, and work parties; similarly, there isn't much discussion of the speech making that occurs within the village meeting or *fono*, or of the lively banter around the kava-drinking circle, or of the hilarious joking that occurs in work groups. Nor is it a demographic, quantitative study of migration patterns, though there is a smattering of facts and figures on migration rates, population growth, and remittance percentages throughout the chapters. Likewise, beyond some mention of a couple of personal letters, the book does not include much consideration of historical material, government documents, newspaper accounts, or other similar sources that anthropologists are finding increasingly useful. Instead, the bulk of the book focuses on personal contexts of interaction that reveal the back-and-forth flow of Tongan people and Tongan culture from a local village, 'Olunga (a fictitious name), to California and elsewhere in the United States.

The book, for orderly convenience and in keeping with the theme of the migrant's voyage, is neatly divided into four sections. The first three sections include narratives about the personal connections between the Tongan village and family left behind and the United States, and the fourth section sums up the author's perspective on the future of Tongans, Tongan migration, and the anthropological journey. The first three sections are the heart of the book and allow the reader to gain a sympathetic understanding of the personal challenges of migration for this particular extended family. The first section, "Departures," sticks closest to the more traditional ethnographic format with some reference to brother-sister avoidance, subsistence patterns, and household activities. The second, "Arrivals," focuses on migrant and life-history stories as told by members of one extended family. The third section, "Returns," reveals a rather poignant, sometimes nostalgic return, for both the Tongan migrant and the anthropologist, to the Tongan village of 'Olunga and describes some of the changes that have occurred from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. In all three sections, we have a view of community life in Tonga and overseas, of the various communicative ties from the local to the global, and of the particular movements of one extended family back and forth across the ocean. Small provides a number of key cultural contexts—such as the airport, the bus

stop, the backyard, and the family kitchen—that reveal the complex web of ties and movements of Tongans.

One of these contexts that facilitates the flow of communication, the Tongan post office, is suggested by the cover of the book. Tonga, as is well known to stamp collectors, has long provided some of the world's most colorful postage stamps, and the cover merges a postal stamp image of a tropical "exotic" fish with cookie-cutter identical modern houses found in any U.S. suburb. The image implies that Tongans are putting their cultural "stamp" on American suburbia. Indeed, the story comes to mind of the Tongan immigrant in Los Angeles using free fish heads, tossed aside because of the food preferences of "mainstream" American culture, as a major source of subsistence (pp. 61–62); perhaps the idea is that Tongans are bringing cultural distinctiveness to American suburbs. More pessimistically, the message is perhaps that Tongans are trading a distinctive cultural heritage for American middle-class conformity. On a more literal level, the image suggests letters posted in Tonga being delivered to Tongans living quite different lives in Salt Lake City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

Anyone who has visited Tonga can probably remember a trip to the post office in the capital town of Nuku'alofa. Even the casual tourist can see that the post office is a lively context for Tongans to go about the business of connecting to family and relatives dispersed around the Western hemisphere. Letters to and from family in New Zealand, Australia, or the United States—containing money, photos, and news—can, indeed, become the nexus for conversations rich in personal understandings and feelings about the migration process as it affects local Tongan families and communities. In any case, Small gives some acknowledgment to the way in which letters sent from Tonga with requests and news of the home community are an ethnographer's portal to the flow of written conversations among Tongans.

For example, at the beginning of the book, in the "Departures" section, the inclusion of discourse about a letter containing a marriage proposal reveals the crucial importance of letters before telephones were rather common in Tonga (p. 60). Small, particularly in the first two sections of the book that refer back to the early 1980s, could easily have included more attention to household contexts for the writing and reading of letters and thus expose the various strategies and conflicts of migrating families. At the same time, a strength of the book is Small's focus on specific oral conversations that happen among family members within the context of the private home and within telephone conversations that connect family members across the thousands of miles of ocean. By the end of the time frame covered by the book, phone lines and computer connections have speeded up the communicative process and compete with the post office scene.

The book allows the reader to understand that just as communication has changed, so has transportation. Upon seeing the book's title the reader, if imagining a rather different cover, might have expected an image of a seafaring outrigger canoe or perhaps a more modern boat sailing in or out of the wharf at Nuku'alofa. Any such misconceptions about the means for migrant travel are dispelled when Small reveals the way in which the airport has replaced the sea harbor as a departure and arrival point and has become the central place for the beginning and ending of voyages.

At the conclusion of the "Departures" section, Small cleverly presents the fact that rarely does the Tongan, the anthropologist, or anyone else who has spent some time in Tonga quietly slip in or out of the country. Her description of a chance meeting of an old Tongan friend in the Suva, Fiji, airport is a wonderful moment that accurately depicts the nature of the momentous way in which Tongans bid welcome and farewell to family and friends. At more than one point in the book, Small has captured a sense of the personal drama that unfolds at the airport every time an airplane arrives or departs. Huge suitcases bulging with everything from clothes to food are icons for the flow of people and resources; the Tongan International Airport is the modern gateway for travel to distant parts of the globe.

At a more local level within Tonga, much of the daily movement of people and resources occurs on buses, and here Small is particularly insightful. The joy of the anthropologist sharing a return airline flight with an old Tongan friend, just mentioned above, finds its parallel in the daily intervillage bus travel that considers personal connection and village cohesion to be a primary goal, despite much change. Small's insight that "'Olunga people waited for the 'Olunga bus" (p. 37), despite the fact that other buses were going in the same direction at an earlier time, is a testament to her anthropological savvy as a member of a village and to the strength of the local community. Later in the book Small strategically inserts a third travel experience that reveals the way in which the vitality of such personal ties in the local Tongan village starkly contrasts with the loss of community experienced by many Tongans, especially of the younger generation, who are living overseas. An encounter by Small on a bus in Hawai'i with an American Tongan with little knowledge of Tongan language, culture, and community succinctly illustrates the ultimate fate of some migrant families (p. 178). This is good fieldwork and good anthropology.

One of the great strengths of *Voyages* is its revelations about Tongan family life, in Tonga and overseas. A major point is that home is a central place for the Tongan extended family. Small very carefully provides the full text of key conversations that take place within the family, often between adult women; these discussions that occur in the household context reveal much about Tongan experiences and perspectives. The reader is quickly impressed by the

women of this family and easily drawn into the personal story of their migration. A sense emerges of the color, the vitality, and the flow of the household and of the home, filled with people, material possessions, and, most important, talk. Certainly Small is at her best when she is writing about women and their spheres of activity and influence. Small's fieldwork focus on women's labor, subsistence, and redistribution, among other things, is put to good use as a reserve of ethnographic detail that supports the central theme of the migrant's journey. We learn a great deal about Tongan women as mothers, daughters, and spouses; we learn much about what is happening and being said in the kitchen and sitting room.

However, at the same time, we learn comparatively less about Tongan men in their roles as fathers, sons, and spouses; we know little about talk among men doing horticultural work in the bush. Furthermore, we know little about what either women or men are doing and saying in the context of the political meeting, the church event, or the flow of public talk along the village street. To reiterate a point made earlier, I would like to have seen much more consideration of community life throughout. Certainly the section with the subheading "A Day in the Lives" provides a brief glimpse into daily life (pp. 21–27). Yet there is little description of commonplace activities like the social drinking of kava by the men, the weekly choir practices, political *fono* meetings, afternoon sporting events, school activities, men working in the bush, and so on.

There is some discussion of the changing traditions of the funeral (pp. 175–178), the importance of the feast (pp. 141–143, 148–150), the effects of cash cropping (pp. 145–146), and the power of the churches (p. 148). However, for example, it would have been useful to hear more about the way in which the churches, as the community's most powerful institutions, are the conduits for much of the migration. It would have been helpful to hear more about the role of the kava party in providing a social center, both in overseas communities and Tongan villages. Of course, there is merit to adhering to the main themes of the book but inclusion of discourse from choir practices, *fono* meetings, and sporting events would have added a rich dimension to the migration story.

Additionally, if we knew more about Tongan forms of Christianity, we could better understand Tongan negative attitudes towards Small's religious heritage. The scene of Small, the confessing anthropologist, disclosing her Jewish heritage (pp. 70, 108), is certainly a valuable insight into the way in which Christian values have permeated Tongan culture and can even come in the way of the personal bonds between an anthropologist and her host family. It is a sad thought that some of the prejudice Small has faced in her own culture has transplanted itself into this particular Polynesian culture, which experi-

enced mass conversion to Christianity in the early part of the nineteenth century. However, it seems that we know more about Small's religious identity, and her personal journey toward ethnographic openness about this, than about current Tongan religious values and beliefs.

If we knew more about Tongan courtship, sexual behavior, and contexts for social interaction between unmarried men and women (such as the kava party), the reader could better assess, for example, the scene where Small triumphantly puts the drunken young man who has made rude sexual overtures in his place. The reader is given a view of the ethnographer's personal, "insider" perspective as she states, "He disappears over the fence. I feel a great sense of accomplishment" (p. 118). We are left to infer that her sense of accomplishment comes from learning the "insider" rules of proper decorum and necessary respect, as demanded by the kinship among village women, well enough to send the young man on his way.

Small has clearly mastered how to handle young men who must, even in a drunken state, treat her as a respect-worthy woman keeping company with the mature women of the community. At the same time we know comparatively little about the journey of such young men left to disappear over the fence and off the ethnographic page. The sobering note on the fate of Vili, the young man of the family who hung himself, and other young men who "know that their future prospects were bleak" is just one small piece of evidence of the often tragic experiences of young Tongan males in the local village or overseas (p. 113). To be fair, there is certainly something to be said for ethnographic brevity, and Small is very effective in her skillful presentation of key moments in the ethnographer's encounter in a way that allows room for individual interpretation.

The relevance of the book for both the serious student of the Pacific and the novice traveler is found in the way that *Voyages* brings home the point that there are serious costs to both voyagers and their cultures. For example, Small's discussion of an American vacationer's sexual activity in 'Olunga is a particularly apt illustration of such costs. The unreflective tourist's casual attitude, ending in disaster, is starkly contrasted with the care taken by Small, and her protective host family (p. 105), to avoid such pitfalls. The ease with which Small, the seasoned, knowledgeable anthropologist, slips back into Tongan culture in the Fijian airport, even before stepping back on Tongan soil, and her savvy strategy for sending the drunken young man over the fence is in sharp contrast to the culturally insensitive tourist who has no concern for the integrity of the local culture.

Small has skillfully crafted a gripping narrative about individual Tongan voyages, while being rather generous in describing her own anthropological journey. The strength of *Voyages* is not in any systematic analysis of the many

political and economic forces influencing the flow of Tongans back and forth from Tonga to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. Rather, the book's value is found in the way it provides pivotal moments that speak volumes about the human side to the ties connecting Tonga with the rest of the world. It is Small's inclusion of the intimate, sometimes momentous details about the Tongans themselves that makes the book a good read for the seasoned ethnographer of the Pacific as well as for the beginning student in an introductory anthropology class. The journey is also much about the experience of the anthropologist, and Small, upon her return to 'Olunga, confesses, "However much I tried, I could not help but cringe at the sight of the house as it mingled with my memories of it" (p. 129). The statement is a reminder to all ethnographers and migrants that one can rarely return to the same "place" on the return voyage, and that despite Small's statement in the second paragraph of her book that Tongan migrants and American anthropologists such as herself are "all on the same voyage," the differences are as real as the similarities. The reader can indeed be thankful that the book is less about the concerns of the anthropologist and more about the Tongan voyage.

REFERENCES

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