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ROUNDTABLE

Author's Response: Authorial Metadata and the Evidentiary Line

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Mooring the global archive: a Japanese ship and its migrant histories. By Martin Dusinberre. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 328. ISBN 9781009346535.

I

I am immensely grateful to Jessica A. Fernández de Lara Harada, Hannah Shepherd, and Reyhan Silingar for their generosity in reading and reflecting on *Mooring the global archive*. Their insightful comments, and those of other reviewers and discussants over the last two years, point to one challenge that any author faces, namely the gap between what they think they have written and what is in fact read. They also point to the opposite problem: that writer and reader are well aligned – but in such a way that the former realizes with new and sometimes biting clarity various interpretative or methodological limitations in their work. It is a great privilege to have the chance to address various aspects of this writer/reader gap and of my book's limitations in the following pages, and I thank Fernández de Lara Harada in particular for organizing this written roundtable, as also John-Paul Ghobrial for organizing the original Oxford meeting in 2024.

My sense from reading the three reviews is that they highlight in several ways the problem of lines. Shepherd is interested in the genesis of the book's throughline; Silingar in where to draw the line between imagination and evidence. Meanwhile, I take Fernández de Lara Harada's critique of how I have handled (or not handled) race to come partly from *Mooring the global archive*'s provocative questioning of the line between a settler and a migrant in the settler colonial settings of late nineteenth-century Hawai'i and Australia; and this, in turn, raises more abstract questions about a work which (at times uncomfortably) straddles multiple historiographical lines – Japan, empire, global history, archival practice, to name a few. The extent to which the line itself serves as a useful analytical metaphor is a question to which I will return at the end of my comments.

But first, and as Silingar notes, *Mooring the global archive* aimed primarily to be a methodological intervention. The 'mooring' metaphor was partly a call for what in a

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digital age might be called verification of authorship through an acknowledgement of 'authorial metadata'. At the same time, my metaphor was also an encouragement to historians – particularly historians in training – to disclose the journey of what it means repeatedly to touch base with a source, and to document how those ongoing source-conversations change over time. Such disclosure is of course a matter of degree, but I remain convinced that in the world of AI-generated texts, the author's voice (or authors' voices), with their verifiable modes of storytelling, argumentation, evidentiary analysis, blind spots, and imaginative shortcomings – for what are the humanities without these? – and, yes, even their absurdly winding sentences full of dashes and brackets and rhetorical questions, must be at the core of our methodologies.

In *Mooring the global archive*, I hang these arguments on the story of a Japanese steamship, the *Yamashiro-maru*. The ship moved between Japan, the Hawaiian archipelago, Southeast Asia, and Australia in the 1880s and 1890s, and within East Asia and the Japanese islands during its twilight years in the 1900s. On the one hand, this heuristic choice determined which historiographies I would be in conversation with and which, more problematically, I would pass over: the latter included a literature that I could and perhaps should have addressed in more detail on transpacific Chinese migration, or on the infrastructures of steamships and empires more generally. Equally, on the basis that the *Yamashiro-maru* never crossed to the Americas, I did not make a direct intervention in the scholarship on Asian-American history – with the consequence that I did not address the sites which have generated the greatest literature to date on anti-Asian and anti-Japanese racism. On the other hand, I quickly became more interested in the ship not merely as a connecting (or disconnecting) object, but as a container: that is, as a repository of histories that I feared might otherwise remain silent. This, in turn, led me towards methodological historiographies which for the most part overlook Japan and/or are overlooked by historians of Japan.

Like all *ex post facto* accounts, this brief explanation projects an orderly veneer onto a project which I admit was messy.[1] Even as I addressed a literature on archival silence, for example, I somehow overlooked works which would have been pertinent to my discussion of the violence – physical, emotional, and epistemological – inflicted on migrating women such as Hashimoto Usa, whose journey from Nagasaki to Thursday Island chapter 5 reconstructs.[2] Moreover, my historiographical choices also involved a decent amount of having-your-cake-and-eating-it (although the three reviewers are too polite to call this out). For example, I occasionally strayed into the distant pre-history of the *Yamashiro-maru* in temporal terms, as in my discussion of Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan in the early 1850s; yet I hardly ever strayed three or four decades forwards to the 1920s or 1930s, which would have offered the reader a more rounded temporal view of the relationship between

[1]Martin Dusinberre, *Mooring the global archive: a Japanese ship and its migrant histories* (Cambridge, 2023), p. 37.

[2]In particular, Marisa A. Fuentes, *Dispossessed lives: enslaved women, violence, and the archive* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016); and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, *Empire's mistress: starring Isabel Rosario Cooper* (Durham, NC, 2021).

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Japanese migration and empire in the mode of Eiichiro Azuma, Sidney Xu Lu, or Jun Uchida.[3]

For the most part, these were conscious choices – and I was conscious also of their historiographical consequences. But Shepherd's question about the genesis of the *Yamashiro-maru* as a narrative device made me aware of a throughline that I long denied for its importance, namely to *Mooring the global archive* from my doctoral research and eventual first book, *Hard times in the hometown*.[4] As I began researching the *Yamashiro-maru*, it was obvious to me that my interest in the community dynamics of a ship, from engine room to salon to bridge, came partly from the small town dynamics I had studied in *Hard times* across a two-century period up to the early 2000s; and it seemed like a logical intellectual progression to continue my study of non-elite historical actors by focusing on those who moved away from, rather than those who stayed in, the hometown. But I was unaware of the extent to which my second book would turn into a rejection of the ways I had written about – or written *out* – my research methodologies in *Hard times*. For in a book that was framed by the politics of nuclear power (this in the years before the 2011 Fukushima disaster turned a global spotlight on Japanese host communities), I wrote remarkably little about the daily compromises that impacted my access to 'sources' – be those dilapidated Meiji-era documents or town council minutes or potential oral history interviewees. My constant fieldwork calculations about whether I was dealing with pro- or anti-nuclear campaigners, or *seen* to be dealing with campaigners from either side of a brutal socio-political dispute, rarely made it into my historical analyses, despite my nagging feeling that the analyses themselves were thereby compromised.

The idea of authorial metadata emerged from these nagging feelings. As I turned from writing about a ship towards addressing the *problems* of writing about a ship, and as my focus shifted from the ship's mobile worlds to its archival moorings, I was determined that my future work would not be defined – at least in my memories – by fieldwork 'outtakes'. This may explain why *Mooring the global archive* documents in considerable detail my search for the ego-documents that I assumed were at the heart of all good microhistorical work – thus, as Shepherd astutely observes, unintentionally turning the book itself into a form of ego-document. I had always assumed that my emphasis on authorial metadata might be problematic for some readers in terms of voice and style, but I am intrigued by the critique that metadata itself might shape rather than be subordinate to the text. Here, I see a link to Fernández de Lara Harada's final comments about the dangers of 'academic extraction', which I read as a timely warning for the authorial ego not to overshadow the lives of our historical actors; or, as Virginia Woolf puts it in *A room of one's own*, the danger that the (male) protagonist stands forth and obliterates his (female) subject.[5]

[3]See, for example, Eiichiro Azuma, *In search of our frontier: Japanese America and settler colonialism in the construction of Japan's borderless empire* (Oakland, CA, 2019); Sidney Xu Lu, *The making of Japanese settler colonialism: Malthusianism and trans-Pacific migration, 1868–1961* (Cambridge, 2019); Jun Uchida, *Provincializing empire: Omi merchants in the Japanese transpacific diaspora* (Oakland, CA, 2023).

[4]Martin Dusinberre, *Hard times in the hometown: a history of community survival in modern Japan* (Honolulu, 2012).

[5]Cited in *Mooring*, p. 179.

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II

At the heart of Fernández de Lara Harada's suggestion that Euro-American structures of racism 'remain strangely disconnected from the histories of Japan and the Japanese migrants the book seeks to reconstruct' is, I would propose, the question of whether my interpretative frameworks enrich our understanding of one particular *Yamashiro-maru* migrant to Hawai'i, Fuyuki Sakazō, or rather obliterate the historical complexities of his life. The key analysis comes in a section entitled 'Invaded by the industrious', itself a quotation from the *haole* (Euro-American) newspaper, *Paradise of the Pacific*. In the section, I juxtapose one of *Paradise*'s articles concerning the district of Hāna, eastern Maui, with Fuyuki's career on the Hāna sugar plantation, 1889 to 1897, and his subsequent decades working on the island of Kaua'i. The *Paradise* article, also from 1897, looks forward to a day when Hāna will 'awake out of sleep', such that its 'practically unused' forests and streams will be 'invaded by the industrious' and transformed – as had been other districts in the archipelago – into a scene marked by the 'busy hum of industry'. What does it mean, I ask, for the historian to imagine Fuyuki himself as part of this anticipated colonial invasion? What does it mean to ask if a Japanese migrant was to some degree complicit in the settler colonial transformation of the Hawaiian archipelago and its concomitant dispossession of Native Hawaiian people?

The questions are provocative because they extend the analytical space of colonial complicity from nineteenth-century Euro-American settlers who engaged in the invasion and appropriation of Native Hawaiian lands to include an unambiguously non-elite Japanese migrant – non-elite in terms of his economic background, his need to seek plantation work, his almost complete archival absence in Tokyo, and his marginal archival position in his hometown. Dare we position side-by-side these two groups of actors, namely migrants and settlers, given the structures of racism imposed by the latter on the former across the Pacific world – racism whose apex was arguably the Japanese incarceration camps in the USA, Canada, and Australia during the Second World War? And how might historians approach questions of complicity given the paucity of sources; or, in Silingar's words, how should we 'draw the line between imaginative reconstruction and evidentiary warrant when the archive is thin'?

There are many ways to approach these questions, but in the context of this forum two particular points come to mind. First, to question the complicity of Japanese sugar plantation workers in the settler colonial transformation of Hawai'i is not to equate their lives with the Japanese state, as Fernández de Lara Harada alleges a 'dominant scholarship' does. To the contrary, my concern with Fuyuki, and with other protagonists in *Mooring the global archive* such as the aforementioned Hashimoto Usa, was fired by a sense that in the early 2000s there was hardly any English-language scholarship which adequately addressed non-elite Japanese migrants or their potential colonial collaborations. Even the aforementioned work of Azuma, Lu, and Uchida tended to focus too much on relatively elite players or ideologies of migration for my personal liking. Be that as it may, I think we all had the sense that we were writing *against* a dominant scholarship, one which had overlooked Japanese migration as an integral part of post-1868 state-making for

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many reasons, including academic and institutional siloing.[6] At the time, practically the only scholar who had begun to pose difficult questions about the interface of Japanese colonialism and migration was the late Minoru Hokari, who asked in 2003 about 'the history of *Asian migrants as colonial agents*' – but this within the context of Australia, which was also largely overlooked in histories of Japanese overseas migration.[7] Thus, to discuss Fuyuki within a framework of Euro-American settler colonialism is in no way to essentialize Japanese migrants as representing state interests.

Second, my particular interest in Fuyuki is explained by the fact that he came from Kaminoseki – that is, the hometown I studied in *Hard times*. The lack of equivalency between Fuyuki's life and the Japanese state as a national entity was even more marked at a local level: in his home village of Murotsu, 'the state' was represented by pre-Meiji elite households whose level of prosperity and political clout Fuyuki could only aspire to. And yet, overseas migration was one means by which such an aspiration *might* become something of a reality – through a name carved for posterity on a donation stone, or through the three properties that Fuyuki purchased in the 1910s thanks to his years of toil in Hawai'i. As I worked in the Kaminoseki and then the Hawaiian archives, my sense that the histories of property acquisition in Murotsu could not be separated from plantation work in Maui – such that local Japanese history was at some level inseparable from the colonial transformations of late nineteenth-century Hawai'i in exactly the years when the *haole* settlers were overthrowing the monarchy – led me to engage with a literature on settler colonialism seeking precisely to complicate the binaries of settler and native.[8]

That Fuyuki probably experienced violence in his plantation life – violence that I more generally explore through Hawaiian court records in chapter 2, and through the *holehole bushi* plantation songs in chapter 3, but admittedly do not label as racist when surely it was – does not preclude the possibility that he was in some ways complicit in settler colonial structures. As Hokari notes of Australia, 'Asian migrants were both victims of white colonial racism and deeply involved in the colonisation of the Aboriginal lands.'[9] The greater problem, it seems to me, is that my questioning here and in the book is couched in the language of 'some degree', 'some level', and 'some ways'. In other words, the danger does undoubtedly exist that the evidentiary warrant is insufficient and that, despite my juxtaposition of Murotsu acquisition with Maui dispossession, Fuyuki and his ilk only *unknowingly* became bit-players in US colonialism (Fernández de Lara Harada's adverb).

It is here, however, that Fuyuki's support of his cousin's application for emigration to Hawai'i, evidence of which I discuss in the chapter, seems to me to allow the historian to go beyond a methodology of provocative juxtapositioning and instead

[6]Eiichiro Azuma, '"Pioneers of overseas Japanese development": Japanese American history and the making of expansionist orthodoxy in imperial Japan', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 67 (2008), pp. 1187–226.

[7]Minoru Hokari, 'Globalising Aboriginal reconciliation: Indigenous Australians and Asian (Japanese) migrants', *Cultural Studies Review*, 9 (2003), pp. 84–101, here p. 93 (emphasis in the original). For recent discussions, see Sidney Xu Lu, *Collaborative settler colonialism: Japanese migration to Brazil in the age of empires* (Oakland, CA, 2025).

[8]I cite some of this Hawaiian literature in the book; see also Shino Konishi, 'First Nations scholars, settler colonial studies, and Indigenous history', *Australian Historical Studies*, 50 (2019), pp. 285–304.

[9]Hokari, 'Globalising Aboriginal reconciliation', p. 93.

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suggest that Fuyuki *did* know something of the colonial structures into which he was willing to initiate his cousin. We might go further: perhaps his was a 'hitch-hiked' colonialism, to use a term from Scandinavian historiography;[10] perhaps we might say, to paraphrase Silingar, that he 'latched on to' colonial structures – while acknowledging that Fuyuki was not the driver of the vehicle nor the architect of the structures. The evidence will never be better than circumstantial, and it will remain fragmentary; but if historians are to begin breaking apart conceptual binaries using concrete biographies, then we must acknowledge individual knowing where we think we see it – despite the obvious caveat that the complexities of a life cannot be defined by a single historical moment.

III

What intrigues me about individual migrant histories is that abstract concepts find different expressions according to local contexts, be they notions of the state, colonialism, or racism. It is true that I could have written more about the dynamics of race in the contexts of anti-Japanese campaigns in Hawai'i. It is equally true that Japanese–Hawaiian history looks different if observed through the local lens of anti-Japanese campaigns in mid-twentieth-century North America than through the lens of, say, early Meiji intellectuals in Japan (some of whom assumed that the history of the 'Sandwich Islands' only began with the arrival of Captain Cook), or, indeed, through the local lens of mid-1880s Hawaiian intellectuals (some of whom imagined a brotherhood of the Japanese and Hawaiian races).[11] I am interested in how historians can reconstruct the lives of people whose humanity has been overlooked or actively denied by institutional actors – actors who may well wield power within the abstract logic of an *-ism* but whose individual actions are not necessarily best understood by the historian reverting to that default *-ism*.

Thus, I address anti-Japanese prejudice as expressed in individual encounters in my analysis of Hashimoto Usa's interrogation on Thursday Island in 1897. The northern Australian colonies' coalescence around ideas of Federation and a racially pure 'White Australia' in the 1890s forms the backdrop to the two middle chapters in *Mooring the global archive* that reconstruct the *Yamashiro-maru*'s southern sailings. But I argue that for Hashimoto as for many other overseas female migrants, gender rather than race was the rhetorical device which allowed male bureaucrats in Australia to engage in anti-Japanese campaigns without explicitly offending their Japanese counterparts – who themselves used migrating women to articulate expressions of what the Japanese race should *not* resemble (and thereby revealed their own anti-Chinese prejudices). These varied and at times contradictory articulations of racial certitude became even more clear to me during a post-book archival trip to Australia in July–August 2024, when I visited the Thursday Island cemetery in search of any further trace of Hashimoto Usa. I found none, as perhaps I should have expected given *Mooring the global archive*'s documentation of wild

[10] M. Macallister, 'The Scandinavians hitchhiked their way to the boons of empire', *Aeon*, 31 Jan. 2018, https://aeon.co/ideas/the-hitchhiking-scandinavian-way-to-the-imperial-riches (accessed 22 Nov. 2025).

[11] *Mooring*, pp. 73–6.

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goose chases, but the cemetery's division into Protestant, Roman Catholic, 'Islam', Islander, and 'Shinto' (sic) sections, and further differentiation of 'Islam (Indonesian, Malaysian, Islanders)' from 'Islam (European)', was a reminder of how arbitrary local categorizations of race functioned on the ground in ways that complicate the *-ism.*

On that trip, I also returned to the Queensland State Archives (QSA), where I had originally studied Hashimoto's paperwork in 2013. Since then, the QSA has been transformed as a site of archival encounter. Thanks to a First Nations Strategy team, the visitor now enters a space framed by artist Nathanial Chapman's extraordinary painted mural, which pays tribute to Yagera Country, where the QSA is situated, and by a sculpture on the front lawn featuring huge bronze-cast seed pods, their designs referring to native species found in the region. Entitled *Seeds of knowledge*, 'the artworks create a juxtaposition between the conventional archival system and the traditional wisdom of First Nations communities', according to an interpretative text, which continues: 'By highlighting the differences in knowledge acquisition, preservation, and transmission, we invite visitors to consider alternative ways of perceiving and valuing knowledge.'[12]

It had been my rather belated acknowledgement that such 'alternative ways' must be central to any discussion of global archives that led me to engage in Yolŋu epistemologies and concepts of brackishness in chapter 4. Today, I would hope that my acknowledgement would be faster. Indeed, confronted by the inescapable truth that the elimination of First Nations knowledge was the colonial archive's raison d'être, and that colonial archives have long been considered not just unwelcoming but actively unsafe spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the historian is forced also to rethink the framework of White Australia. That Asian immigrants were the target of this racist state-formation is undeniable; but the anti-Asian framework itself came from a place where First Nations Australians were denied even the basic concepts of autonomous historical time or sovereign space. Provoked by the QSA's installations and other interventions, I would today go further than I did in embedding settler Australia's anti-migrant racism within the history of settler Australia's existential denial of First Nations Australians as people – and I would consider it even more important to ask about the ways Japanese immigrants latched onto those structures of existential denial in their language and behaviour and working practices, even as their own autonomies were circumscribed by White Australia legislation and day-to-day discrimination.

IV

Do these approaches lead to what Shepherd calls 'spaces of over-reach or extension'? Possibly so, but I think that is a risk worth taking. For example, in the cases of violence that *Mooring the global archive* documents – against plantation workers and stowaway passengers, against the natural world, not to speak of the role the *Yamashiro-maru* played in the first Sino-Japanese War – there was one particular episode where I got the tone wrong. It concerned the memories of a white Australian settler at the end of his life, and his recollection of a story that he must have been

[12]I thank Elysha Rei, Senior Engagement Officer at the Queensland State Archives, for further conversations on these points.

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told in his childhood, namely that settlers and police carried out a massacre in the Mossman district of northern Queensland in c. 1885, in which 'they said they shot 112, the whole tribe'.[13] In the book, I was somewhat sceptical of this claim, noting that, if true, this would have constituted one of the biggest ever massacres even in the blood-soaked frontier history of Queensland. Today, partly inspired by artist Archie Moore's powerful *kith and kin*, and his interpretation of a similar settler source, I would start from the assumption that there was *more* murderous violence perpetrated by settlers and the Native Mounted Police than the historical records of the Queensland State Archives will ever reveal.[14] In other words, I now think that in particular colonial sites, the historian should extend the evidentiary line towards an assumption of settler or state violence, rather than drawing the line at the mere expression of scepticism towards sources that claim colonial violence.

And so we return to lines. Part of what I was trying to do by positing a Yolŋu-inspired 'brackishness' both as a space of archival investigations and as an attitude by which to approach global history was to highlight, first, the ontological problem of lines that assume clear-cut distinctions between sea and land, between temporal regimes of past and present, between the human and more-than-human realms, between history and storytelling; and, second, to acknowledge the problematic normativity of a lexicon which cloaks these (alleged) distinctions in an unambiguous, quasi-legal language of warrants, interrogations, and testimony (I have used the latter two myself in this piece). I was interested in what it meant for Yolŋu bark paintings to be admitted as legal evidence in the 2008 Blue Mud Bay case, thereby demonstrating the inadequacy of the word 'painting' for objects that were aesthetically pleasing to the extent that they excited Euro-American art markets in the late twentieth century, but that were additionally maps, petitions, and records of multigenerational knowledge transmission. Thus, my discussion of these Yolŋu bark paintings and of brackishness came in a section entitled 'Delineating', in which I cited Djambawa Marawili's *Baraltja* (1998) for its undermining of the line as an ontological claim. And yet the line, like our quasi-legal vocabulary, retains an epistemological weight from which it is difficult to escape.

I make this final observation not as a critique of Shepherd's, Silingar's, and Fernández de Lara Harada's questions, but as an illustration of the conceptual difficulty that accompanies what it means to think about the spaces and temporalities of 'global' history or a 'global' archive – a trap, as it were. *Mooring the global archive* is as much an invitation to historians together to identify these traps as it is any blueprint for clambering out of them; and I thank these three readers for debating its contributions and contradictions in this spirit.

[13] *Mooring*, p. 157.

[14] *Archie Moore: kith and kin*, ed. Ellie Buttrose and Grace Lucas-Pennington (Leipzig, 2024), pp. 34–5; Jonathan Richards, *The secret war: a true history of Queensland's native police* (St Lucia, Queensland, 2008).

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