Picturing the “Other:” Visual Representations of the South Pacific

Half a century ago, two intrepid journalists stepped ashore a Pacific Isle; little did they know they had begun what would be the bulk of their professional careers. He a photographer and she a writer, Jack and Dorothy Fields spent more than 20 years freelancing throughout the South Pacific during a pivotal time of change throughout the region following World War II.

Mo’orea, 12 miles from Tahiti. Jack Fields.

The pair met in a tuberculosis ward while undergoing treatment, and swore to one another that if they got out, they would hit the road to see the world. Former student, close friend and Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Kim Komenich recalls Dorothy telling how she gave Jack their future marching orders: “If we ever get out
of here alive – you will do the pictures, I will do the stories; it’ll be magnificent.”

They did exactly that.

On many of the islands, the Fieldses were but a generation removed from the introduction of modern technologies and all of the cultural changes that came with it. They documented a way of life that is largely gone today. The couple specialized in travel and location stories for publications of the magazine era: National Geographic, Life, Look, Argosy, The Saturday Evening Post, Holiday, and Esquire to name a few.

**The South Pacific**

Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia - these names may evoke images of palms waving in tradewinds over coral beaches, but these great ocean expanses are the domains of the peoples that inhabit the specks of land, the people who had their own ways of living in harmony with wind, sea, and sun.

– Dorothy Fields, “South Pacific,” front sleeve

Also referred to as Oceania (including Australia), the South Pacific (excluding Australia) is a huge and diverse region made up of specks of land in vast expanses of open Pacific Ocean. Most of these island nations were populated a few thousand years ago by indigenous navigators in dugout canoes and vessels. Marco Polo was the first European to see the Pacific Ocean sometime around 1292, but it wasn’t until the 1500s that Western explorers began “discovering” these islands.

The past 125 years saw many parts of the region exist as European colonies, then purchased by Germany, later conquered by Japan in World War I and taken over by the U.S. during World War II. Post war, much of the region was divided into territories or trusts of the United States or Great Britain, and a considerable rebuilding and development followed.
The first generation of jet airliners were developed in the 1950s, and the age of fast travel began. Drawn by the picturesque allure and romance of these islands, visitors and journalists alike started arriving and the tourism industry quickly grew. Today, most parts of the region are sovereign nations again and walk a delicate line of existing in the 21st century while trying to maintain their cultural distinction.

Photographer Amy Toensing recently finished her 14th story for National Geographic, where she has been a regular contributor for more than a decade. Many of these stories have been cultural projects. As she puts it, “I have a particular curiosity about culture and how humans make their way through life.”

During college, Toensing spent time with the SALT Institute for Documentary Field Studies and produced a photo project on migrant Latino and Pilipino broccoli pickers in northern Maine. Toensing began working as a photojournalist in 1994 at The Valley News in New Hampshire and later covered Capitol Hill for the New York Times during the Clinton Administration.

“Capitol Hill, it didn’t really interest me in the same way a family might. Or an individual; just an everyday person.” She wanted to dig deeper into stories and spend more time with her subjects. Through a conscious choice Toensing left the world of politics and returned to the figurative broccoli fields.

Since that transition, Toensing has spent significant time working in Oceania. She has photographed stories involving the resurgence of the Maori culture in New Zealand, democratic currents in the Kingdom of Tonga, a cave dwelling tribe in Papua New Guinea and Aboriginal Australians strongly connected with their ancestral lands and way of life.
Changing Seas, Changing Mindsets

“Even on the atolls, modern technology is replacing old. Where once an outrigger canoe was necessary to communicate between villages, some chiefs now have walkie-talkies, allowing intervillage councils to be held by radio – until the batteries run down.”
– Dorothy Fields, “South Pacific,” p. 105

Jack Fields and Amy Toensin worked in very different eras – publications and technology have drastically changed in the past 50 years, and the South Pacific itself has transformed. Their unique approaches offer insight into how photojournalism has changed in respect to cultural photography.

Though the Fieldses both died within the last few years, significant information remains in the form of interview videos, personal knowledge of photographer Kim Komenich and The Jack and Dorothy Fields Collection of the couple’s lifetime of work housed by the McDougall Center for Photojournalism Studies at the University of Missouri.

In video interviews, Fields talked of his work in terms of “showing” a people group or location to the “public” (American audience). In discussing a photograph of a traditionally dressed mother (grass skirt and topless) shopping in a grocery store on Yap, he said, “I wanted something for the Saturday Evening Post that said progress from a almost Stone Age [people] up to, you
know, a modern society.” Fields spoke of the people and cultures of the South Pacific with the utmost appreciation and respect, but this statement does speak to a mindset behind his work and what publications of his day were looking for.

Toensing describes her mindset as connecting people rather than showing one culture to another. “What I am more concerned with is just connecting humanity. So I am not really thinking about America, I’m more thinking if I show a relationship between a mother and daughter – everybody in the world can connect with that somehow. I’m thinking more globally, how can we all learn that we all are more similar than not.” This reflects the more globalized and online world of today in many ways.

Link to one of Toensing’s Tongan photographs: http://www.amytoensing.com/#!/portfolio/G0000ES2puP0it4Y/I0000.cbFtq

For Toensing, the last decade has almost exclusively been working as a contributor to National Geographic. “You have to be aware of the publication you are working for – you have to make it work for them,” Toensing said, but went on to add that as the photographer in the field, it is important to follow her own insight. When planning a project, she described it as having to “take in what editors say before you go, and then when you get in field kind of get it out of your head because you’ve got to tap into your own instincts.”

**Exercising Authorship, Then and Now**

“And they know the must still depend on their ancient knowledge and skills, for they know they must live with the sea, not against it.”
– Dorothy Fields, “South Pacific,” p. 105
Amy Toensing and Jack and Dorothy Fields also found it personally and professionally important to work with organizations outside of traditional media and publish their own books.

In the early 1970s, the Fieldses began producing books of their work outside of magazine publications. In 1972 they published a co-authored book entitled “South Pacific,” which pulled from materials they had produced over the previous decade. In many ways it was their professional opus. Published in 1973 was another labor of love entitled “Cherry Blossoms: Japan in Springtime” in which the couple followed the blossoming as it moved north across the islands Japan. Fields made it a point to maintain control over his images and enjoyed the authorship publishing books gave him.

“It’s important to do books because it is really important to exercise your authorship of stories you are working on. Otherwise we’re just monkeys with a camera. I think it’s important to constantly be nurturing your instincts and your abilities as a storyteller,” Toensing said.

She has a book soon coming out of her work with Aboriginal Australians, a story she has spent nearly four years pursuing. “That’s become a really huge chapter in my life,” Toensing said. She got hooked into the project because she didn’t see much coverage of Aboriginal Australians connected with their land and traditions. “I find it very interesting because it’s an indigenous culture within a first world country, so the meeting points are very extreme.”

Link to one of Toensing’s Aboriginal Australians photographs: http://www.amytoensing.com/#!/portfolio/G0000IN0KQb3G5Z4/I0000D_QW9n

The Internet has also given photographers like Toensing power as visual storytellers. She talked of her website and social media platforms that give her control over the story she tells. “I think Instagram has been the biggest influence for me, or the biggest oddity, because it is so real-time in its exposure to the big world.”

Last year Toensing used Kickstarter, a crowd-funding platform, to support a project on urban refugee children in Kenya in partnership with RefugePoint, an NGO focused on such issues. While shooting, she uploaded her work to multiple social media platforms and linked viewers to ways they could donate and get involved. “That was a real powerful way to reach people,” Toensing said.

The Fieldses worked without the added outlets of the Internet or the camaraderie social media provides to photojournalists. But in part thanks to publications having an online presence today, their work lives on for people to
experience and learn from. It is easy to imagine the pair would have appreciated the
direct connection of social media.

“That has been one of the more empowering things about the digital world,”
Toensing said. “Just being able to come together online I think is just amazing for
freelancers.”

To see a more of Jack and Dorothy Fieldses’ work, look for the e-book entitled
“Jack and Dorothy Fields: South Pacific and Other Travels” published by the
McDougall Center for Photojournalism Studies through iBooks and elsewhere.