

Is (the possibility of) Unemployment a Crime? A Field Note from Pitcairn Island

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Holly, three year-old Olive, and I have just returned from almost four months away. We left Australia on 2 May 2016, travelled to Auckland, New Zealand by plane, and then to Tauranga, some four hours by bus to the southeast, to meet the quarterly 15-day supply ship run to Pitcairn Island. We were filled with hope when we left New Zealand shores on 6 May 2016, a trip involving much planning and years of anticipation. I could consider the trip aboard the rocky *Claymore II* and arrival on the five-square kilometre patch in the South Pacific the fulfilment of one of my dreams. The reality was that it was a tour of duty for science. And, as we came to realise, this service became a linguistic and emotional *trial by fire*, a minor cliché.

I have become quite fond of clichés; they do a lot of work and often help one accomplish necessary industry. *Pitcairn Island is not for the faint hearted* is a well-worn one. A colleague aptly summarised the miniscule population size, its rich and thick history, and the island's recent social problems: managed intimacy. The colleague and the cliché are right; managing the day-to-day similar natured and incessant intimate dealings with same people, same personalities, same weather, and same topics can be awfully trying. This is especially so when one has a job to do. And my occupation was a sensitive one: working with speakers of the endangered Pitcairn Island language, Pitcairn. Some would speak, several would not. And several is a lot among a population of 40 odd.

You see, on a per capita basis, the Pitcairn Islanders are likely among the most written-about people ever to have lived. This is a scary thought, especially when one arrives in this what-has-become perennial field site to write about these people's language and how it is used in-place and in place names. This is the job-come-career, a post one would hope would continue long after our three-month stint was up; a job one hopes is worthy of not only scientific but also pecuniary attention. It is this tender subject, presented within the possibility and need of employment and the rubric of an evolving yet entangled neoliberal university system, to which I turn my thoughts. I consider my marketability, whether the skills I possess are saleable, and whether the world and more specifically the academy cares

much or little about the linguistic and cultural data I documented and collected on this small pimple of rock. Another cliché: *it's a dirty job, but someone's gotta do it*. Or do they? Is such blue-sky research, sometimes called vanity research, investigation for its own sake with no obvious commercial gain, really viable in the political milieu in which I find myself?

While several scholars have come to work on the language of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers with its Polynesian influence, they were never linguists when they arrived. They took data, studied semblance of linguistic science at home, wrote what they did. The principal writers were Ross and Moverley in the early 1950s and Källgård in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the morsels they published have left linguists, in this case me, hungry and wanting. No choice—I had to go. I was and am the first professional linguist ever to have set foot on the island. I doubt another linguist or ethnographer or similar will go while I am alive. And specifically, I am the only scholar to have initiated anything verging on a linguistic project on this especial language in more than three decades. I collected the data and local knowledge language contact scholars wish for and require, a way of speaking which seems to resist classification using the present apparatus available to linguistic typologists, that is, those scholars who divide up languages into groups according to types such as pidgin, creole, or mixed language. I am carrying the torch of the future of research into the Pitcairn language. I have now been back for more than three weeks. And the crime I have committed either knowingly or inadvertently? If I don't fight for funding, devise another project in the next months, and get back on the hobbyhorse, I face unemployment in a little more than a year, as yet another short-term contract expires.

The inexplicable thing is that I will most probably write my books regardless of what the world offers. There is an obligation to scholarship and the body of knowledge, that abstract realm to which our creative work is meant to be contributing, which transcends cash labels and profit margins. While it may appear criminal that the world which supported me intellectually and paid a large whack to get my family to the remote South Pacific is not offering to house me long term so they get more bang for their buck in terms of output, track record, and other academic athletics and gymnastics, this same world will eventually learn about the Pitcairn language and how the interpersonal is managed through the linguistic. After all, it's my thing. It's what I do. There is the complex frame of spatial reference, the way English interacts with Pitcairn, the history of Pitcairn Island fishing and fishing ground naming, and the changing structures of Pitcairn vowels across time which all await attention. My boss even said to me the other day that I should write and produce a documentary film. Already slated. I have the film footage, the idea, and have a professional music buddy earmarked to do the soundtrack to the proposed concrete-

come-abstract moving visual musing on what I have come to call a *linguistic pilgrimage*. I merely require the time and hence coin to carry out these tasks. Will these products be illegitimate if there is no price tag attached, my haul to an appended list of degrees and qualifications along with present paid service to boot?

The personal effort was immense. I am still feeling it—the comedown—as I write here, disclosing several intricacies of the personal interacting with that small 40ish-peopled world. Pitcairn Island is its own place, self-referential I have heard it described. As Simon Moore, Pitcairn Island Chief Prosecutor during the 2004 court cases, claimed in a 2005 New Zealand One News documentary: ‘It’s a different world this place, it’s Pitcairn Island. It’s not Auckland, it’s not London.’ As the layers of intensity unravel and reveal the learning and schooling which took place in the transferral of knowledge from them to me, I sense the time needed for these matters to percolate and become true.

It is essential for the continuing and long-term project of any querying mind for there to be time-space to write and think, scope and latitude not generally availed to the modern day performance monitored academic. As a member of one of the largest linguistics research bodies intimated to me late last year, let the past writing and publications speak for the reality and possibility of future work, rather than funding allocation being driven by the incessant toil of perpetual project innovation and the creation of newer and newer research dreams (read: project outlines). Those blasted applications take so much time anyway, time better dedicated to writing up results rather than searching for capital. There is really no need to daydream about another project or to rest on my laurels; I have the expertise, the data, and, using the athletics metaphor to describe one’s publishing output, the track record. I just bloody well need four-ish years of unhindered writing time to get the job done with what data I already possess. My point? If I don’t get this time-space based in fiscal remuneration and on the fact that the system has paid for me to become an expert, a crime has taken place.

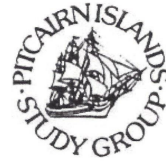
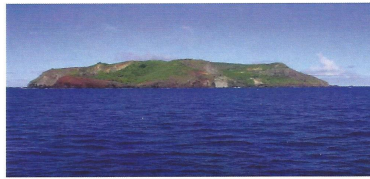
On 22 September 2016 I can say to the world that I am prone to missing that five square kilometre craggy volcanic outcrop. I softly long for the swing of the days, the intensity of the relational, and the physical, intellectual, and emotional strength I felt develop as a human and a researcher among the dealings and across the three months. The environment of Pitcairn Island taught me, people like Nola Warren, the island’s unofficial historian and never-forgetter, versed me in how to speak like them, and I left with a filled vessel. The instruction and tuition took place, I remained teachable, the *trial by fire*, the *not for the faint hearted*, and the *dirty job to be done* had their effect and they live on somehow in my work and in my everyday Australian life.

The task of the sojourn was Herculean—another cliché—and what remains to fulfil the project and tie up loose ends is no less onerous. To accomplish this programme and for maintaining my family’s livelihood during the requisite amount of time, I am in need of waged employment. Let us hope the competitive state of the neoliberal system of which I am a part continues to allow the likes of blue-sky research and researchers to inhabit the marginal regions of economically fixated atmospheres. If not, I cannot help but think my or anyone else’s possible unemployment and risk of exiting the academic world to be a crime. In the meantime, I am occasionally enamoured by a memory of what I termed *dreaming a dream*—the watching of swaying coconut palms accompanied by the azure backdrop of the South Pacific of an evening. I swear I once caught a glimpse of the figure of Mr Fletcher Christian sitting on high in Christian’s Cave, that almost mystical grotto named in his memory.

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Pitcairn Islands Study Group

Our society is devoted to all things pertaining to Pitcairn Island, including the islanders, the HMAV *Bounty* mutiny (the mutineers and their descendants who still live on Pitcairn), and the stamps. Membership is open to who have these interests. Our journal, the *Pitcairn Log*, is published quarterly.

U.S. membership \$20.00 (with print journal) / U.S. & International \$15 (with online journal). International – varies due to currency changes and postage rates – see our website for details.

For current information and a membership form see our website at www.pisg.net