There is a certain monotony, perhaps, about these stories. To some extent this is inevitable. The interest and passions of South Sea Island life are neither numerous nor complex, and action is apt to be rapid and direct. A novelist of that modern school that fills its volumes ... by refining upon the shadowy refinements of civilised thought and feeling, would find it hard to ply his trade in the South Seas Island society. His models would always be cutting short in five minutes the hesitations and subtleties that ought to have lasted them through a quarter of a life-time.¹

The Earl of Pembroke’s introduction to Louis Becke’s collection of short stories *By Reef and Palm* (1894) raises important questions about the nature of colonial Pacific fiction and the role of romance in the age of realism. By the late nineteenth century, the novel had established itself as literature’s primary popular medium and took for its focus the lives of average, often metropolitan, British citizens. Yet such novels proved inadequate to express the concerns of a growing Empire, which seemed to need genres to evolve overnight to address an ever-changing set of circumstances and explain them to readers back home. Many colonial writers took to the short story as a medium for expression, a journalistic form that allowed them to create sketches of life rather than epochs of experience. Like the literature of islands, the short story has often struggled for a place in the literary canon that rivals or even approximates that of poetry or the novel. Considered too brief for publication outside of a medium like magazines, short stories are almost always presented and reprinted in anthologies or collections. Like their literary counterparts, many Pacific islands are considered too small to be of global interest by themselves – we tend to speak of the Marshall Islands, not of Majuro or Ebeye. And like the short story, these islands seem to only garner attention when grouped or clustered together, an anthologising of geography. By examining the short story in the context of island
collectivities, we may be able to glean insights into the connections between literary and geographic networks, as well as between the island politic and the larger geo-political concerns of empire.

Australian-born author Louis Becke seems particularly amenable to a discussion of the connections between (colonial) text and (Pacific) context. Becke once enjoyed a popular reputation among nineteenth-century authors and readers, with works appearing in numerous colonial and metropolitan magazines such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *English Illustrated*, *Sketch*, *Illustrated London News*, and *New Review*. Not only did Becke have the support of the 13th Earl of Pembroke (of the same family that was once Shakespeare’s patron), but he also counted among his contacts Rudyard Kipling, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Mark Twain. Yet despite his position among the literary elite of his day, Becke’s work remains largely out of print. Today, Becke’s stories are rarely read or taught in classrooms, appearing only in a few anthologies (usually of ‘South Seas Stories’). So why do his contemporaries in the field of short fiction – Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, and Robert Louis Stevenson – remain a vital part of the English literary canon while Becke has quietly slipped into obscurity?

Part of the answer lies in Becke’s medium and his inclination towards what we now might classify as extremely short stories or sketches. As Anne Bradshaw has calculated, ‘Becke’s short stories are very short – the 14 in *By Reef and Palm* range in length from about 900 words to a maximum of 2,000 words. Conrad’s short stories, by contrast, range from a minimum of 5,700 words (“The Lagoon”) to 47,000 words (“The End of the Tether”). As modernism gained favour, in many ways transitioning the short story from its nineteenth-century relationship with the oral tale in favour of psychological insight and mood (the ‘shadowy refinements’ mentioned by Pembroke in his introduction), Becke’s narratives began to be labelled as ‘magazine-ish’ in their focus on romance over realism. Short fiction had long struggled to find its footing with British readers. The demand for short fiction was largely produced by American periodicals while British magazines continued to focus on the serialised novel. It was not until the very end of the nineteenth century that the short story really began to compete with poetry and the novel for a place in the hearts of British readers. The popularity of the Victorian short story ‘was made possible by a powerful concatenation of circumstances ... a broadening of the educational base, mechanization of printing, and the development of mass-circulation periodicals specializing in fiction’. Arising out of the new interest in newspapers and periodicals, the short story filled a niche genre in providing brief fiction for readers inundated by the rapid pace of the modern world. For British readers especially, the short story lent itself particularly well to depictions of the growing Empire. As the borders of the nation
grew to include an even wider array of countries and peoples, ‘[t]he “native” or exotic found its way into English literature as a new arena for fantasy, replacing the romantic medieval topos of Morris and Rossetti’. Much of Becke’s success came from his ability to capitalise on this growing art form in British, American, and Australian newspapers. Establishing himself as the British authority on the South Seas, Becke initially found a career as a writer for colonial periodicals, ‘publishing stories, sketches, and reviews’ in the Sydney Bulletin and elsewhere, as well as writing “London Notes” for the Sydney Evening News. Using ‘not only his own name, but such pseudonyms as “Ula Tula”, “Te Matua”, “Papalangi”, and “A South Sea Trader”’, he self-consciously emphasised his dual role as both ‘insider’ or spokesperson for the islanders and foreigner living in the islands. As with Kipling, it was Becke’s ability to bring the exotic to the world of the domestic that endeared him to readers.

Despite his immense popularity with late-nineteenth-century readers, Becke remains almost invisible in literary criticism. Of the handful of articles that reference him, many focus on comparing Becke’s works to those of fellow Pacific writer Joseph Conrad, a comparison which largely works to flatter his better-known counterpart by providing an early template for Conrad to improve and perfect in his fiction. The effect of such critical and canonical moves is neatly outlined by Eric Hayot in his work on the Eurocentric self-enclosure of literary canons. When we focus on ‘the vital importance of such notions as originality, novelty, progress – being first, in short – then we are essentially doomed to tell a progressive history of aesthetic innovation in which the contributions of the non-West remain supplemental, or constitute thematic appendixes to form’. While Hayot is primarily referring here to non-western authors, the idea that island narratives are supplementary to the western literary canon is part of a long cultural and material history reflecting the invisibility of islands and their inhabitants. Bringing Becke out of his subsidiary role to Conrad and back into focus requires both a rethinking of our larger critical frameworks and a repositioning of Becke – one which focuses not on the strengths of his individual tales but rather on his collections of stories, and which opens up new ways of looking at colonial literature of the islands.

The subject of the stories in By Reef and Palm is largely interracial relationships: ‘Of the fourteen stories in the volume all but one have a white man and a native wife or lover either centrally or peripherally in the situation.’ While these ‘loves’ help to drive the narratives and position the collection within a social and cultural space that Anne Stoler has referred to as ‘the intimate frontiers of Empire’, the other key theme that underlies each of the stories is the necessity of trade and the brutal consequences of colonial systems of exchange. On the one hand, as Sumangala Bhattacharya notes, the
Acculturation/Transculturation

stories act as colonial fantasies of exotic paradises where men can live lives removed from the responsibilities of the metropolitan centre:

The domestic ideal associated with white women was regarded by many men in the 1890s as trammeling the free-spirited masculinity of the nomadic Australian bush-worker, a male figure commonly mythologized as the epitome of Australian nationalism. In contrast, domestic and sexual relations with island women were free of such cultural baggage and could be imagined as unstable and fluid.13

On the other hand, despite the cultural fantasy that these relationships were beyond colonial influence, Becke’s repeated emphasis on trade, both of goods and of people (specifically women), continually undermines this narrative idealism of ‘free love’.

While Becke’s stories do not develop the psychological depth of Conrad’s, focusing more on events than interiority, these events nonetheless show his deep understanding of the world of the colonial Pacific. Even Becke’s critics seemed impressed by the realism provided by his personal experience. As Chris Tiffin notes, ‘[r]viewers generally agreed that while Stevenson’s portrayals of the South Seas were much richer in both atmosphere and characterisation and therefore more artistic, Becke knew a lot more about actual life there’.14 This emphasis on Becke’s ability to portray ‘actual life’ is echoed in Pembroke’s introduction: ‘Every one who knows the South Seas, and, I believe, many who do not, will feel that they have the unmistakable stamp of truth.’15 If what makes Becke’s stories unique among his contemporaries is their sense of authenticity, it behoves us to interrogate what lent them this authority.

As Pembroke notes, Becke’s stories have strong similarities, which he calls ‘monotony’. Yet it is precisely this retelling of tales that gives Becke’s work a unique place among his contemporaries. While other British South Seas writers, notably Conrad and Stevenson, focus primarily on longer stories that centre on a white trader’s experience on a single island (usually in Polynesia), Becke’s stories roam across islands, repeating a similar tale of love and trade in a myriad of variations. Thus, Becke’s collection is uniquely positioned as a colonial experiment in archipelagic writing, with his collection functioning as a ‘text that deliberately effects a rewriting of island cartographies ... by remapping insular and archipelagographic cartographies, highlighting them as symbols of multiplicity, proliferating spaces that each reader interprets according to their desires’.16 If, as Elaine Stratford has argued, the goal of archipelagic readings is ‘to radically recentre positive, mobile, nomadic geopolitical and cultural orderings between and among island(er)s’ then literary criticism must move away from presenting a single text as representative of colonial Pacific experience, looking instead for
what Jonathon Pugh has termed ‘assemblages, networks, filaments, connective tissues, mobilities, and multiplicities’.17

As an attempt to provide one look into the complex imperial and Indigenous networks that constituted the ‘South Seas’, I offer a reading of each of the stories in By Reef and Palm in relation to their position in the collection. By reading these stories as a group or collective, we get a sense of the larger world of the South Pacific as viewed through a variety of colonial lenses, as a communal conversation rather than a singular perspective. Becke continues to shift the viewpoint from individual islands and islanders to a larger vision of the Pacific as a whole, presenting island literature not as a static tale of a single place but as a networked vision of a collective region – a region defined not by a single story, but by the movement between stories, a space where our interpretations of events and characters are defined by continual circulation, transformation, and exchange.

Of love and exchange: Becke’s island relationships

By Reef and Palm begins with ‘Challis the Doubter’, a colonial fantasy of island marriage. Challis is an Australian who leaves the mainland, tired of his wife’s condemnation of his need for her loyalty. The story skips ahead four years to find Challis reflecting on his former wife while making a new life for himself in the islands: ‘She’s all right as regards money. I’m glad I’ve done that. It’s a big prop to a man’s conscience to feel he hasn’t done anything mean; and she likes money – most women do. Of course I’ll go back – if she writes. If not – well, then, these sinful islands can claim me for their own; that is, Nalia can.’18 Becke sets up Challis as an honorable romantic, a ‘sentimental imperialist’, supporting his first wife even though she is unfaithful.19 Unlike the insincerity of this wife, who ‘really liked Challis in her own small-souled way – principally because his money had given her the social pleasures denied her during her girlhood’, Challis’ island wife Nalia is beautiful, hard-working, and trustworthy (Becke notes that she has had prior lovers, but none since she has married Challis).20 However, here, too, the base reality of exchange, debt, and obligation is merely softened rather than completely removed by affective ties. As Nalia tells Challis with uncompromising honesty, ‘Am I a fool? Are there not Letia, and Miriami, and Elinë, the daughter of old Tiaki, ready to come to this house if I love any but thee? Therefore my love is like the suckers of the fa’e (octopus) in its strength.’21 Upon reflection, Challis realises his good fortune in having an honest wife who sees his material wealth as spousal generosity rather than a necessary qualification, and the narrative ends with the idea that she will bear him a son, a perfect union of colonial desire and island gratitude.
This idealistic view of the coming together of the acculturated ‘sentimen-
tal agent of imperialism’ and the faithful island woman jars with the second
story in the collection, ‘Tis in the Blood’, in which a ‘fat German’ has paid
to have a half-white, half-Samoan girl trained by Sisters to be his educated
wife. 22 Becke’s narrator emphasises both the gendered embodiment of
exchange (in this case, literally an exchange of the female body for money)
and the transactional nature of the relationship, noting that ‘he’s spent over
two thousand dollars on her already’. 23 Another of the white traders doubts
that this education will have been cost effective: ‘Bet a dollar she’s been
round Vagadace way, where there are some fast Samoan women living. ’Tis
in the blood, I tell you.’ 24 The doubts of the German trader’s friends prove
to be justified. Vaega, the young woman, is seduced by the smooth words of
‘a stalwart half-caste of Manhiki’, Allan the boatswain. 25 Unlike the obedi-
ent Nalia, Vaega shows little desire to play by the rules of her sponsored
education, escaping with Allan to a ship where she ‘sang rowdy songs, and
laughed all day, and made fun of the holy Sisters’. 26

While the idea of ‘free love’ was an appealing part of the masculine fan-
tasy of island women, Becke is clear that these actions are not without con-
sequences. After just six months, Allan abandons Vaega, who then ‘drifted
back to Apia, and there, right under the shadow of the Mission Church, she
flaunted her beauty’, a euphemism for prostitution. 27 Trained from birth to
see herself as a commodity, Vaega embraces her role in the island trade,
determined to make the most of her situation and ending the story by stating
matter-of-factly, ‘there’s an American man-of-war coming next week, and
these other girls will see then. I’ll make the papalagi officers shell out.’ 28

Becke repositions the western fantasy of island women’s sexual proclivity
as one of economic survival, with island prostitution represented as just
another bargain among others. While Becke’s title implies that Vaega’s dis-
loyalty is ‘in the blood’, reflecting European stereotypes of the hypersexual
island ‘Venus’, the story’s position next to ‘Challis’ raises questions as to
whether ‘good’ island women are born or made. 29 By placing the two stories
in conversation, Becke asks readers to consider whether the islanders’ love
and loyalty depend on individual temperament or on the realities of island
trade, thereby denaturalising the European association of island women
with promiscuity.

‘The Revenge of Macy O’Shea’ pushes the complications of free love even
further. Unlike Challis and the German, who work as traders in the islands,
Macy O’Shea is a ‘sometime member of the chain-gang of Port Arthur, and
subsequently runaway convict, beachcomber, cutter-off of whaleships, and
Gentleman of Leisure in Eastern Polynesia’. 30 While Becke often made
charming anti-heroes of the social outcasts that populated the small islands,
in this story O’Shea presents the worst face of the white colonial enterprise.
The friction in the story is caused when O’Shea announces he will be marrying the ‘half-caste’ daughter of a trader named Malia, a choice which his current wife, Sera, vehemently protests, more on the basis of her dignity and ‘white blood’ than from sexual jealousy: ‘I would sell myself over and over again to the worst whaler’s crew that ever sailed the Pacific if it would bring me freedom from this cruel, cold-blooded devil!’ However, Sera also knows her options within the island economy are limited to a commodified choice between value, labour, or circulation. Killing her husband means either condemning herself to a life of prostitution or living in servitude on the island: ‘I am a stranger here, and if I ran a knife into his fat throat, these natives would make me work in the taro-fields, unless one wanted me for himself.’

Malia is also a pawn in the game of trade defined and driven by the contours of masculine desire: ‘The transaction was a perfectly legitimate one, and Malia did not allow any inconvenient feeling of modesty to interfere with such a lucrative arrangement as this whereby her father became possessed of a tun of oil and a bag of Chilian [sic] dollars, and she of much finery.’ Readers barely have time to process Malia’s arrival before she is murdered by the vengeful Sera, metonymically becoming the oil and dollars that ‘gasped out its life upon the matted floor’. Becke ends the story with O’Shea beating Sera to death with the ‘serrated tail of the fai – the giant sting-ray of Oceana [sic]’, hinting at the repercussions of flouting island law by killing one of its own. Unlike ‘Challis’ and ‘Tis in the Blood’, which revolve around the emotional consequences of Pacific relationships, ‘The Revenge of Macy O’Shea’ reveals the violence inherent in their transactional nature. The ‘free-spirited’ white man that Bhattacharya identifies as the heart of colonial mythology is revealed to be a cruel and murderous tyrant, unrestrained by law or moral propriety, displacing his lust and sexuality on to the women around him in way that renders the ‘excessive’ emotions of those women as somehow responsible for rousing the violence of masculine desire.

While these three stories set up an overlapping yet multifaceted way of looking at ‘free’ love, Becke makes a seemingly sudden departure with ‘The Rangers of the Tia Kau’, which is the only story in the collection not to feature a romance. Instead, the story centres on a tribal chief, Atupa, who, worried that his deified ancestors are angry at the new ‘foreign god’, sends his people on a journey to rally nearby islands against visiting missionaries and their religion. On the way, the villagers are overtaken by a terrible storm and attacked by a frenzy of sharks who kill all but two of the voyagers. On first reading, the tale seems to have little connection to the stories that come before, yet it too is an examination of trade and love in the Pacific: instead of an earthly exchange, here Becke investigates a heavenly one. As a trader, Becke was familiar with the other influential group of island visitors: Christian missionaries. Starting with the London Missionary Society in 1796, the
British began a campaign of sending missionaries to the islands, deeply concerned about the narratives of cannibalism, promiscuity, and heathenism popularised by explorers like Captain Cook. While proselytising endeavours were viewed with great favour by their supporters in the colonial metropole, native islanders had varying responses to the spread of the Gospel, ranging from distrust, to accommodation, to Indigenous proselyting.36

The representation of the islanders in this story veers between depictions of Indigenous agency and Indigenous gullibility. The final paragraphs of the story are a discussion between one of the survivors and a trader, in which the survivor concludes: ‘Had not Atupa been filled with vain fears, he had killed the man who caused him to lose so many of our people.’37 Unsurprisingly, the trader reacts with shock at the native’s desire to kill a missionary, but the survivor calmly relativises the effects of Christ’s Gospel in the Pacific:

Aye, that would I – in those days when I was po uli uli. But not now, for I am a Christian. Yet had Atupa killed and buried the stranger, we could have lied and said he died of a sickness … And then had I now my son Taˉgipo with me, he who went into the bellies of the sharks at Tia Kau.38

Becke carefully weighs the death of a missionary against the death of a family member in the islands: on the one hand, the converted islander seems to regret his bloody impulses, but on the other, he wishes he could return to his pre-converted state where murdering a follower of the Son of God would save the life of his own son. In this often overlooked tale in the collection, we see Becke question yet another transactional relationship, asking if the promise of a heavenly reward brought by the missionaries is worth the sacrifice – both in the loss of the islanders’ children and their way of life.

In light of the islanders’ ability to sacrifice family for devotion, ‘Pallou’s Taloi’ also reads as an examination of the cost of love. While visiting a fellow island expat, the narrator meets a trader, Pallou, and his wife, Taloi, who immediately surprises the narrator as ‘instead of squatting on a mat in native fashion, she sank into a wide chair, and lying back inquired, with a pleasant smile and in perfect English, whether I was feeling any better. She was very fair, even for a Paumotuan half-caste … I said to Pallou, “Why, any one would take your wife to be an Englishwoman!”’.39 Taloi’s approximation of the white women is a performative display of cross-cultural flexibility that only partly obscures her island blood. In this, as in other ways, Taloi is reminiscent of Vaega, having been sent to school in Sydney where she rebelled against the strict rules (and tore the dress off a student who called her skin ‘tallowy’) before being brought back to the islands to marry her guardian, a French trader.40 On the way, Taloi falls for the ship’s mate Pallou, who ends up murdering the Frenchman to save his lover from her unwanted
Unlike Nalia, who willingly plays a subservient role to Challis, Taloi insists on speaking her own mind when Pallou attempts to silence her: ‘Shut up yourself, you brute! Can’t I talk to any one I like, you turtle-headed fool? Am I not a good wife to you, you great, over-grown savage?’ Yet unlike Macy O’Shea, a brute, Pallou seems to appreciate Taloi’s outspokenness: ‘It was easy to see that this grim half-white loved, for all her bitter tongue, the bright creature who sat in the big chair.’ Charmed by their story, the narrator grants the two a trading station and a place to hide from the French gunships hunting them down. When Taloi dies a few months later, Pallou commits suicide, choosing love over an easy life of trade. Yet, considered in conversation with ‘The Rangers of the Tia Kau’, readers cannot help but wonder if this love is also a transaction – one of earthly reward bought through eventual suffering, an inversion of the missionaries’ promises.

This interrogation of the dangers one undertakes for the love of family continues in ‘A Basket of Bread-Fruit’. A white trader in Samoa is lonely and tells the locals that if someone will find him a wife ‘unseared by the breath of scandal’ he will take her to a nicer village. An old woman offers her granddaughter to the trader in exchange for passage to a western island where she will rejoin her people: ‘The girl shall go with thee. Thou canst marry her, if that be to thy mind, in the fashion of the papalagi, or take her fa’a Samoa. Thus I will keep faith with thee. If the girl be false, her neck is but little and thy fingers strong.’ The trader appreciates the good deal, realising he can get a wife without having to provide presents to her family for their approval in a relatively ‘cost-free exchange’. Here both parties approve a relationship as a form of equal exchange, quality goods for quality service. However, the trader gets more than he originally bargains for, taken in by the very system he had sought to exploit. When he meets the girl purchased with his gifts, he finds her weeping, not as we might expect for being sold to a stranger, but because her brother and cousin have been killed and beheaded. Looking for food to comfort her, he reaches into the grandmother’s container of breadfruit only to discover it contains not fruit, but human heads (those of the girl’s murdered kin). Playing on the trader’s desire for an island wife, the grandmother has bought passage away from her enemies, saving her granddaughter from those who would kill her.

Once again, Becke complicates the simple love story of the Pacific: here the love is between a grandmother and her granddaughter, and it is only through trade that she can secure a possible safe future, away from their enemies. The narrative hints at the darker realities of coercive island trade, such as blackbirding. As David Northrup notes, the South Pacific entered ‘the labour trade in the early 1860s’ through the ‘spread of plantation economies’ that ‘initially involved a large amount of kidnapping and coercive practices’. In her study of the Australian-Pacific indentured labour trade,
Tracey Banivanua Mar argues that following the ‘abolition of slavery, these laborers provided the essential cost-neutral, coercible, and colored labor that was deemed essential to the economic viability of white settlement in the tropical belt of Britain’s Australian colonies’. While ‘A Basket of Bread-Fruit’ is suggestive of the human trafficking that accompanied the Pacific labour trade – with the human heads replacing the commodity of the breadfruit – Becke nonetheless writes it as a story of survival against the odds.

Becke moves seamlessly from island loves to colonial loves in the story of two shipwreck victims, an unlikely setting for Becke’s domestic title ‘Enderby’s Courtship’. Instead of the drawing rooms or dances we might expect from a typical nineteenth-century courtship tale, Becke presents us with two wretched specimens of humanity: ‘The Thing that sat aft – for surely so grotesquely horrible a vision could not be a Man – pointed with hands like the talons of a bird of prey to the purple outline of the island in the west, and his black, blood-baked lips moved, opened and essayed to speak.’ The three victims include a ship’s captain, his wife, and a passenger from Sydney, the titular Enderby. While this is the only story in the collection to contain entirely colonial characters, there is little difference between the status of white women in the islands and the islander women when it comes to trading themselves for a life of security. Mrs Langton marries the captain after her father states that ‘Langton had made and was still making money in the island trade’. This story, like so many of the other stories, points to the interrelation between exchange and exchangeability: the women in Becke’s stories are versions of each other not so much because of their sexual loyalty or otherwise but because they are commodity objects within a more general island traffic of women, exchanged and positioned between men in various forms of sexual and economic subordination.

Enderby is charmed by the woman’s beauty and angry at her husband’s neglect. His rage comes to a head when they finally land on an island and Langton finds a nest of turtle eggs which he proceeds to devour rather than sharing with his weakened wife. In a fit of rage, Enderby smashes him in the head with a piece of coral. It is this brutal act that nonetheless shows Mrs Langton the difference between the two men. She convinces Enderby not to turn himself in for murder, as his act has delivered her from life with a selfish brute (a heroic rewriting of ‘The Revenge of Macy O’Shea’). The two are married by a ship’s captain and live a seemingly idyllic life on an island outpost. In this story, murder is no longer considered an unforgivable sin, but a means of redemption. The western notion of natural law is replaced with a more nuanced understanding of moral action – one in which one human life (and a wretched one at that) may be sacrificed to secure the happiness of others.

Apart from its violence, ‘Enderby’s Courtship’ reads like any of a number of romantic stories, where a wife is saved from a terrible husband by a
gentleman of her acquaintance. It is also in stark contrast to ‘Long Charley’s Good Little Wife’, which presents one of the least romantic relationships in the collection. The story is simply a blunt description of a trader, Long Charley, bartering with an islander, Tibakwa (the Shark), for possession of his daughter. With characteristic honesty, Becke writes: ‘In the South Seas, as in Australia and elsewhere, to get the girl of your heart is generally a mere matter of trade.’50 In opposition to a western European philosophical tradition in which exchange and other forms of instrumentality are the modes of relation that love and friendship transcend, the calculative logic of Pacific cross-cultural relations is depicted as unable to accommodate any form of disinterested exchange:51

Father willing to part, girl frightened – commenced to cry. The astute Charley brought out some new trade. Tirau’s eye here displayed a faint interest. Charley threw her, with the air of a prince, a whole piece of turkey twill, 12 yards – value three dollars, cost about 2s. 3d. Tirau put out a little hand and drew it gingerly toward her. Tibakwa gave us an atrocious wink.52

Considered on its own, the story lacks any sense of moral direction. But appearing, as it does, within an archipelago of such stories, we inevitably compare it to other bargains, other loves. Is Charley’s purchase any less of a travesty than ‘Enderby’s Courtship’, where murder is the vehicle for the fulfillment of love? Is the security that Charley provides any more demeaning than Vaega selling herself to the highest bidder? Becke questions whether western sensitivities should be the ultimate determinant of moral action, especially given the fact that Europeans are frequently those engaged in making the bargains. He also problematises divisions between Indigenous economics of ‘archaic’ gift-exchange and ‘capitalist commodity cultures’ by showing the entanglement of Indigenous gift economies with endogenous systems of exchange.53

Reflecting this entanglement of Indigenous and European forms of exchange, ‘The Methodical Mr. Burr of Majuro’ asks what happens when one of these island trades goes wrong. Unlike other island men, Ned Burr seems uninterested in finding a wife, eventually choosing Le-jennabon, the daughter of the chief, whom he proceeds to woo with gifts despite warnings from the narrator about the frequency and ease of divorces among Marshall Islanders and his claim that ‘your wife that died was a Manhikian – another kind. They don’t breed that sort here in the Marshalls.’ 54 Believing, as do all the men in the collection, that trading for a women’s affections means having sole possession of the woman, Ned becomes suspicious of a young chief from a neighbouring island a few months after the marriage. As Bhattacharya argues, ‘while island women’s sexual freedom is an integral element of the colonial fantasy of the South Seas, Becke’s male protagonists are often uncomfortable with the reality of women exercising sexual agency’.55
Appalled to discover that Le-jennabon has been receiving flower wreaths from the young man, Ned waits for ‘his beauty’ to meet the young man in the woods then shoots him with a rifle. His vengeance (and lesson) not complete, he saws off the man’s head with a knife and has Le-jennabon carry it back to the village as a badge of shame. While the narrator seems unable to fully fathom Ned’s savagery, Ned argues that it is this savagery that has won him the hearts of the people: ‘It’s just about the luckiest thing as could ha’ happened. Ye see, it’s given Le-jennabon a good idea of what may happen to her if she ain’t mighty correct. An’ it’s riz me a lot in the esteem of the people generally as a man who hez business principles.’ As with Macy O’Shea, Ned’s instance on getting what he paid for is seen as a virtue in the Pacific context, even while it appals the moral sensibilities of Becke’s intended readers. This principle is also seen in the following story, ‘A Truly Great Man’, where a whaler turned trader shoots a native to protect his island trade and prove his reputation as a ‘great man’, earning him and his wife a position of respect in the village. Here violence, not peace, is the making of man.

Becke continues his interrogation of the alternative morality of the islands with ‘The Doctor’s Wife’. The subtitle of the story, ‘Consanguinity – From a Polynesian Standpoint’, addresses the main philosophical question of the collection: when two moral positions disagree, whose is correct? Drawing together the collection’s ongoing interest in the universality versus the cultural specificity of moral law, the story concerns a doctor who offends the islanders when they learn he has married his cousin. He defends his choice by noting they are not siblings, but the islanders claim: ‘It is the same; the same is the blood, the same is the bone. Even in our heathen days we pointed the finger at one who looked with the eye of love on the daughter of his father’s brother or sister – for such did we let his blood out upon the sand.’ The doctor, as the narrator explains, has come to the islands to escape the restrictions of society and live a life of freedom. Yet his choice to marry his cousin brings shame upon him. It is only after his wife dies and he takes a native wife that the doctor is finally able to have healthy children. Here Becke implies that the islanders’ morality makes more sense than colonial rules and that their superstition recognises the genetic consequences of incestuous relationships. Once again, Becke finds the social opprobrium of the island superior to western reliance on legal precedents.

The tension between romantic ideas of island loves and their commercial realities continues in the next story, ‘The Fate of the Alida’. A white trader, Talpin, and his wife must sail on the Alida, whose supercargo is a disgusting womaniser (even by South Sea standards) who famously seduced the daughter of a friend only to abandon her in the streets of Honolulu (a tale that reads very much like ‘Tis in the Blood’ but without the woman’s consent). Desperate to leave, Talpin takes passage on the Alida anyway, which ‘turns
turtle’, according to rumour, lost in the islands. Five years later, the narrator finds Talipin’s wife and daughter shipwrecked on a small island. The wife reveals that her husband was killed by the captain of the ship for defending her honour but that she was later able to avenge him. This horrible act marks her love for her husband as well as her tender care of their son, who is born on the islands. Yet even though the wife is willing to commit murder to protect the memory of her husband, she is still practical about her future. The story ends with her marrying the captain who rescues her from the islands. For the women of the islands, romance must be tempered by practicality (a lesson also seen in ‘Tis in the Blood’). The anti-romance of ‘The Fate of the Alida’ seems both to confirm and destabilise the traditional notions of love codified in the imperial romance. While ‘Enderby’s Courtship’ makes murder the prerequisite to a life of happiness, the murder of Talpin is only a prelude to a marriage of convenience.

‘The Chilian Bluejacket’ is the longest story in the collection and in many ways serves to aggregate the complications of the prior stories. Becke reflects on the impact white explorers and traders are having on the islands, setting the story on Easter Island, home of ‘the survivors of a race doomed’. The story concerns the white wife of a sea captain who disguises herself as a boy (a ‘blue-jacket’, or ordinary seaman) in order to discover the whereabouts of her husband, who has, unknown to her, taken a native wife on the island. Temeteri (the native woman) is also unaware of the ‘other woman’ and believes the captain will return for her, as he has formalised the marriage and fathered a son by her. Unconvinced, the native women urge Temeteri to marry a native man who offers her a golden coin. While many of the stories in the collection treat native marriage as a contractual relationship based on trade, here Becke has Temeteri refuse the deal, declining to become ‘coinable’. Up to this point, stories involving men with two lovers have involved a faithful and an unfaithful woman. Yet here Becke presents a scenario where both wives, white and native, have a clear claim on the love of the captain. Both are courageous, both are faithful, and both bear him children. Unlike the previous stories in the collection, Becke does not indicate which woman is more wronged by the captain’s behavior. Both women, white and native, suffer for his love to ‘look upon strange lands’. The end of the story reminds us again of the destruction of the people of Easter Island and connects these personal tragedies with the loss of entire peoples, suggesting that violent intimacies are small-scale echoes of the larger problem of cultural erasure in the Pacific.

This two-woman problem (and its consequences), as well as the tension between island and colonial values, returns again for the final story of the collection. In ‘Brantley of Vahitahi’, the titular character makes a dreadful mistake, accidentally grounding a ship while sailing at night. In penance for
his misdeed, he chooses to live out his life as a trader on the remote island. His only guiding light through the tragedy is the memory of his sister at home, Doris. While in the islands he ‘married a young native girl – that is, taken her to wife in the Paumotuan fashion – and surely Doris, with her old-fashioned notions of right and wrong, would grieve bitterly if she knew it’. Unlike Temeteri, who seems surprised by the captain’s white wife, Luita quickly begins to suspect Brantley of loving a woman back home. Brantley is torn between the love of his sister (and the life he has left behind) and his new peace with Luita. Once again, the ‘sentimental imperialist’ is caught between two honourable obligations, and Becke is equally opaque about which woman has the greater claim.

The conflict comes to a head when Doris, suffering from consumption and near death, pays to find her brother, wishing to see him one last time. Unfortunately, she is taken to the house of Luita, who, upon assuming she is Brantley’s lover, leaves the island with his child. Tragically, both women and the young child die and, unable to bear it, Brantley takes his own life. This ending is in direct contrast with the hopeful opening story. While ‘Challis the Doubter’ sets out the islands as a paradise where men can live free with native women, ‘Brantley of Vahitahi’ wonders if there can ever be peace between the world the European men have left and the new lives they make for themselves on the islands. Are these bold explorers finding new lives or are they harbingers of destruction for themselves and those they love? Seeing the collection as a whole foregrounds the continual tension throughout Becke’s stories between ideas of new regenerative possibilities and late-nineteenth-century fears of cultural degeneration, with each story telling and retelling both the fantasy and its seemingly inevitable realities.

**Navigating a new literary geography**

In a world where ‘free love’ is more accurately viewed as a transaction, Becke’s stories investigate the real costs of such loves. If we take ‘Long Charley’ as a litmus test for the commercial nature of island relationships, a baseline experiment to see if love can really be purchased, then the other stories work to show love as more than a financial transaction. These stories show lovers defending their relationships against moral judgement and sometimes killing their lovers for unfaithfulness. But all seem to argue that ‘free’ love, love without investment or attachment, is nothing more than a colonial fantasy. At the same time, Becke generally denies a sense of closure in individual tales, and he resists allowing a single interpretation or perspective to guide his collection: solutions to a problem that appear workable in one story can lead to disastrous outcomes in another, resulting in an ‘unsettling
experience’ for the reader, who must make judgements either ‘in the absence of a guide’ or ‘in the refusal of that guide to reassure us by taking any kind of lead’.62

As I have noted, the brevity of the tales allows Becke to paint a more comprehensive portrait of the islands as a whole and to draw implicit interconnections between them, rather than focusing on a single station or narrator. Yet it is also Becke’s ability simultaneously to create and undermine paradisiacal discourse, showing the South Seas as a place of both innocence and rapacious colonial greed, that lends his tales the stamp of truth. As Victoria Warren neatly summarises, Becke ‘appreciated how little it was possible for any of the players in that drama to grasp, more than partially, the significance of events which were irreversibly unfolding. In his writing, Becke innovated solutions to an enduring problem – how to narrate the advance of globalization.’63

Becke’s complex, contradictory stories suggest that these islands, and their encroachment by various forms of western globalisation, cannot be narrated by a single colonial experience; they are too vast, too disparate, and too individual for any one story to claim itself as the definitive vision of the region. It is only by adjusting our expectations for narrative closure, by shifting between story and anthology, singular island and archipelago of experience, that we can begin to process Becke’s work. The brevity of the tales, rather than being an aesthetic weak point, therefore allows us as critical readers a chance to aggregate a literary world, to view the tales in conversation both with each other and with the larger colonial perspective of the South Seas. Reading Becke’s stories as a collection helps us get closer to Epeli Hau’ofa’s idea of seeing the Pacific as a ‘sea of islands’, as ‘a holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships’.64

In literature, as in geography, we gain new insights when we refuse to see land masses as independent and unconnected, and rather observe the networks that can only be understood when placed in transoceanic contexts. Short stories, like islands, are interconnected, drawing richness from their variations, their points of comparison, and even their ‘monotony’, for it is in the repetition of the ‘same’ story that we begin to see the complexity of life and the impossibility of replicating the individual experience.

Notes


7 Becke originally wrote stories for the Sydney *Bulletin*, fourteen of which were collected by the British publisher Unwin to be bound into *By Reef and Palm*. After signing with Unwin, Becke placed stories in British and American weekly magazines and/or literary journals (often simultaneously). Unwin distributed collections of previously published stories from the metropolitan magazines/papers to colonial markets (although some of the nonfiction does not follow this pattern), but Becke would also continue to write for multiple outlets, metropolitan and colonial.


11 Chris Tiffin, ‘Louis Becke, the *Bulletin* and *By Reef and Palm*’, *Kunapipi*, 34:2 (2012), 163.


14 Tiffin, ‘Louis Becke, the *Bulletin* and *By Reef and Palm*’, 163.


30 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 44.
32 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 46.
33 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 49.
34 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 50.
42 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 68.
43 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 76.
49 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 89.
52 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 103.
Acculturation/Transculturation

58 Becke, *By Reef and Palm*, p. 163. Here Becke strongly prefigures the ‘fatal impact’ theory proposed by later historians.
60 This emotion plays into many of our contemporary concerns about tourism to remote areas. Like Becke, we are drawn to their exoticism and difference but also fear our presence may cause irrevocable changes.