

**HOLLYWOOD'S SOUTH SEAS AND THE PACIFIC WAR: SEARCHING  
FOR DOROTHY LAMOUR, SEAN BRAWLEY AND CHRIS DIXON (2012)**

New York: Palgrave, 280 pp.,  
ISBN 978 0 2301 1656 6 (hbk), US\$90

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During World War II, the failure of the South Pacific's environment and people to conform to American, Australian and New Zealand troops' expectations of a physical and sexual paradise – one that was largely constructed by Hollywood's 'South Seas genre' – prompted much disappointment, frustration and anger. Indeed, widespread dissatisfaction and, in some cases, mental

breakdown even garnered the term 'Dorothy Lamour Syndrome' (49). Sean Brawley and Chris Dixon's extraordinary new book is an important addition to film scholarship on the South Seas cinematic genre, as well as to settler representations of the Pacific, and cultural and military histories of World War II. Comprehensively drawing upon archives in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, which include letters from servicemen and women (many of which were seized by military censors), military diaries, records and educational pamphlets about the Pacific, as well as censorship records from the Production Code Administration (PCA) and Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), this meticulously documented history convincingly insists upon the enormous affective power of the stardom of Dorothy Lamour and the central role she played in perpetuating a long-standing sexual fantasy of the Pacific. Haunted by eighteenth-century representational traditions in literature and fine art, this phantasmatic representation of the Pacific as an idyllic sexual playground was given heightened force by twentieth-century American cinema. Moreover, despite the interruption of the grim realities of the Pacific war, the South Seas genre persists today as strategic reappropriation in tourism and art (178).

Best known for the Road movies she made with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, Lamour first attracted attention in the title role as Ulah, in *The Jungle Princess* (1936), wearing a sarong designed by Edith Head. From then on, Lamour and the sarong were never far apart (despite some stunt sarong-burnings stage-managed by the studios) and, over the course of her career, she would appear in a number of notable South Seas pictures including *The Hurricane* (John Ford, 1937), *Typhoon* (Louis King, 1940), *Aloma of the South Seas* (Alfred Santell, 1941) and *Rainbow Island* (Ralph Murphy, 1944). From as early as silent cinema, and Hollywood films such as *Aloha Oe* (Richard Stanton and Charles Swickard, 1915), it has been possible to observe how, according to critics, the South Seas genre has 'most directly shaped the preconceptions, attitudes, and experiences of American servicemen in the Pacific Theatre during World War II' (6). Importantly, Brawley and Dixon's work provides evidence for the transnational effects of American popular culture, which 'transcended national boundaries and played a key role in shaping white Australians' and Pakeha New Zealanders' Pacific war experiences' (6).

Other insights from primary sources show how the South Seas genre was not seriously regarded by the American press as in any way ethnographically based (27–28), yet the US Navy was a key agent in the perpetuation of the South Seas myth as advantageous to recruitment, even going so far as to plant coconut trees at bases where they did not grow (93), and using castaway narratives as part of its survival instruction manuals (93). By 1944, however, the US military had realized that the contradictions between servicemen's expectations of the Pacific and their environmental and sexual reality were so detrimental to morale that it actively sought to debunk the South Seas myth (97), with the first steps in this educational campaign initiated by Australian academics in the Army Education Services (AAES), and later by the US Special Service Division's *Pocket Guides to...* series in 1943. Brawley and Dixon also call attention to what they call 'the mythic counter narrative' (7–8, 94), which claimed that there was a sexual vacuum in the Pacific: in the words of Rodgers and Hammerstein's famous musical *South Pacific* (1949, Broadway show; 1958, film), 'We ain't got dames!'. This myth was justified by the limited availability of white women as sexual partners, and as New Zealander H. C. Veitch wrote from New Caledonia, servicemen 'go for weeks without seeing

a woman, except a black one and they do not count' (102). Interestingly, in their chapter on James Michener, Brawley and Dixon mark him as 'one of the first students of the Pacific to note that the sexual vacuum was derived from the fact that Melanesian women fell outside European – specifically, white American male – constructions of physical beauty and sexual allure' (164–65). A widely reported serviceman 'joke' – 'that girl's getting whiter every day' – which circulated during the war, acknowledges both the racial ideologies of the period yet also points to different practices (and desires) that contradicted these racist values (79). As military records show, there were sexually transmitted diseases (75–76) and evacuations of servicewomen for pregnancies (111), as well as regulated and unregulated military brothels. Filmmaker Stanhope Andrews, of New Zealand's National Film Unit, expressed delight at two brothels in close proximity to his tent as 'tres convenient' (66).

Particularly interesting chapters also focus on specific case studies of gender and of race, examining women and African American servicemen's expectations and experience of the Pacific. Brawley and Dixon's examination of black-owned newspapers like the Baltimore *Afro-American* and *Chicago Defender* as well as servicemen's letters and diaries suggest, for example, that African-American servicemen shared with white servicemen assumptions about racial superiority and a belief that the Pacific was 'a backward, even primitive, place' (133). Finally, as Brawley and Dixon's rich work demonstrates, despite troop disaffection and the violence of the wartime experience, the South Seas genre survived, and indeed thrived during the war years. Epitomized by James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947), American popular cultural understanding had shifted from the 'South Seas' to a slightly more geographically specific, yet still mythic 'South Pacific'.