

## Inside(r)-outside(r): Toward a Linguistics and Sociology of Space on Pitcairn Island

Joshua Nash

**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates how the explicit and fixed inside–outside (landward-seaward) absolute spatial axis used to describe offshore space linguistically in the Pitcairn Island language, Pitcairn, can be applied metaphorically to a more implicit and flexible social axis of insider–outsider in Pitcairn Island society. An argument merging the role of the researcher-as-outsider interacting with informant-as-insider and real and perceived social threat is advanced. The piece concludes by reasoning that descriptions of grammaticalised space in the Pitcairn language are stricter and less flexible than the potentially more fluid appreciation of the constitution of the island’s insider–outsider consensus.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural contact; ethnography; fieldwork; South Pacific; spatial orientation

### *From Out to In*

The Pitcairn Islanders live on Pitcairn Island, South Pacific (25° 04'S X 130° 06'W), a British overseas territory. The small five square kilometre island is famous for its contemporary history derived from a notorious yet famous maritime event, the Mutiny on the *Bounty*, which took place in Tahiti in 1789. One of the results of the inhabitation of Pitcairn Island in 1790 by eight British naval officers and 21 Polynesian men and women is a language and a specific way of perceiving the world related to the events of the *Bounty* and linked to land and people. Pitcairn, the Pitcairn Island language, also spelled Pitkern, is a mixed linguistic expression of English and Polynesian derivation, with its idiosyncratic grammatical and myth-driven nature observable through connections to land, time, memory, and nostalgia. The Pitcairn Islanders and their oral traditions and folklore can be considered indigenous to Pitcairn Island.

Using a sociological focus and the emphasis on the effect of personal fieldwork interaction within storied domains of the small island society, this short and exploratory article extends research into Pitcairn Island language, spatial cognition, and place. It is simultaneously relevant to folklore studies of the Pacific and greater Oceania and it fits within a

fringe area of work in contact language studies centred on the linguistics of space and place relations:

While many authors in Oceania who deal with space have focused intently on describing ways, means, and uses of spatial language, cognitive spacing, and mental spatializing in nonmixed languages, there appears a large gap in the study of the spatial language in Oceanic contact languages. (Nash, 2016: 4)

Contact languages like Pitcairn are effective case studies as regards perceived and absolute social and topographical space. They are languages with recent histories, with small speaker numbers, with no obvious social role models who have defined what standards might be across time, and they are and have become necessary tools which populations use (to learn) to speak about new environments. Typologies of absolute/non-relative space and their parallel depiction of social interaction are productive means to explore methods of interactional folklore, namely the how of knowledge generation, information transference, and fieldwork interfacing. Pitcairn, which is poorly described and understood, is extremely endangered and has only around 30 speakers.<sup>1</sup> Despite the immense relevance to language contact linguistics, Pacific language history, and *Bounty* enthusiasts of Pitcairn and its related folklore, myth, and biotic knowledge, the language is in severe danger of dying out without ever being properly documented.

Differing spatial reference systems in Oceanic languages are of interest to linguistics and anthropology for their ability to aid in the classification of languages. Research into such languages presents the study of space, spatial relationships, and locationals as a relevant subsection of this investigation. Facets of the immense task of describing the spatial typology of such languages have been described in Senft (1997) and Bennardo (2002). Other work into the spatial description of islands (François, 2004), Oceanic atolls (Palmer, 2010; Palmer et al., 2016), and Mawyer and Feinberg's (2014) 'Senses of Space: Multiplying Models of Spatial Cognition in Oceania' reveals the complexity with which island populations become habituated linguistically to land-sea boundaries and create intricate cognitive maps of their environment. In connection to these land-sea borders exist parallel complexities of social margining and hints as to how we might gain access to such spatial and cognitive information *in situ*, namely from insiders, locals, and language speakers—those in autochthonous or indigenous position. It is here I explicate a larger sociological thesis applying the insider–outsider axis

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a similar number of Pitcairn speakers in Pitcairn Island diaspora communities in Australia and New Zealand.

within a brief description of the linguistic use of the inside–outside offshore land-sea axis in descriptions of spatial grammar in Pitcairn.

The research question I consider is: How do Pitcairn Island spatial relationships involving an absolute landward–seaward coordinate system—*inside–outside*—represent and embody, at least in part, a description of the sociology and accessibility of such place knowledge within this tiny society? More generally and to a lesser degree, this research considers what spatial orientation systems develop on previously uninhabited, desert islands for which the new forced home was unknown to all comers. More specifically, it furthers investigations into understanding the system of spatial and social reference which developed on Pitcairn Island after 1790 (see Nash, 2016).

\*

\*

#### *Methods: Moving In and Getting Inside*

This work is based on three months of linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork on Pitcairn Island spanning May–August 2016. During this time I amassed the largest collection of Pitcairn Island language recordings in the world and an expansive photographic, ethnographic, archaeological, and cultural landscapes database from which to draw. I conducted more than 50 interviews in Pitcairn and English with 18 mainly elderly members of the community. I archived linguistic, placename, and traditional ecological knowledge relevant to and based within vital shared happenings and customary ways of doing things. The islander-outsider distinction is the principal social demarcator within the society. And with more than one quarter of the miniscule population including the administrator, a New Zealand police officer, and a social worker having no Pitcairn Island blood heritage, as well as the island’s recent history of child sexual abuse trials resulting in several Pitcairn Island men being convicted and some jailed in the mid 2000s, the future of this insider focused and governed micro society remains far from certain. Documenting spatial language and social folklore is integral salvage work associated with a quickly disappearing past.

Because of the nature of late modern Pitcairn Island society, I was required to carry out this documentation-cum-linguistic recovery within a situation where some people were not willing to talk to me because I was an outsider-writer-academic. Even if one is not explicitly or perceivably suspicious or dangerous in their intentions, people will not necessarily participate in research, also in part because of the degree of exhaustion experienced by the Pitcairn Islanders in having been repeatedly researched and reported upon in their perennial field site (see Young, 2016). Like many other low information societies where knowledge that

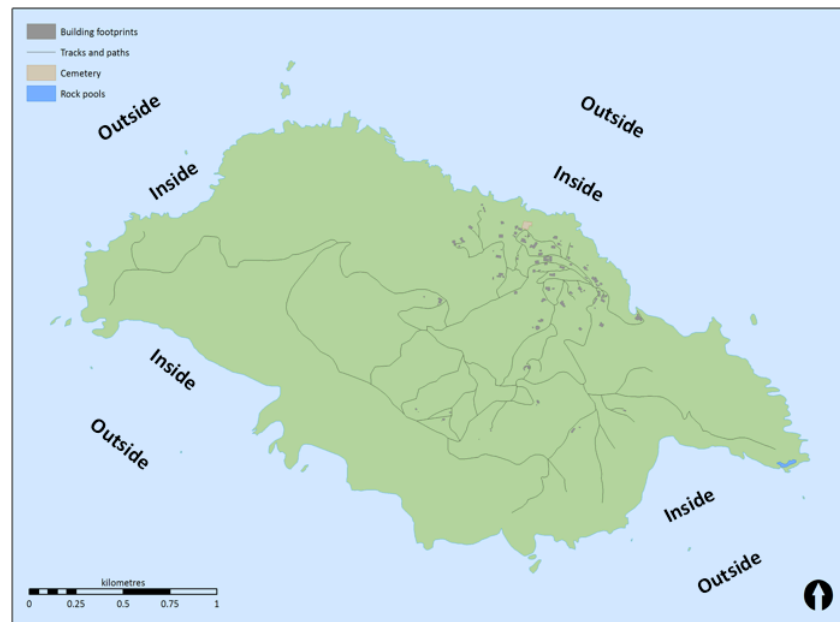
others do not have can be premium, Pitcairn Island presents an example of a people where individuals often take information to the grave rather than impart these intangible, intellectual resources to others, either to insiders or outsiders. The manifestation of these coexistent axes—social space and its palpable reflection in offshore maritime expanse—can be expressed thus: to get inside the inside–outside landward-seaward maritime axis as an outsider, one has to move in socially from outside to inside with the insiders. This means becoming accepted.

\*

\*

*Becoming the Outsider: Getting Onside and Getting (On) Inside*

Figure 1 depicts the inside–outside landward-seaward absolute spatial axis offshore around Pitcairn Island:



*Figure 1. Inside–outside landward-seaward absolute spatial axis offshore around Pitcairn Island (the author, 2016)*

In this offshore depiction, one is always inside or outside relative to something or someone else. If I say ‘I outside Bop Bop’, this means I am on the seaward side of Bop Bop Rock, an offshore islet on the south eastern side of Pitcairn Island. Conversely, if I shout out to you from a boat, ‘I inside you’, this means I am on the landward side of where you are situated. Within relative spatial figurations come absolute distribution agreements on which all in this minute society agree. Where some may dispute the nature of the variable spectra contained within the insider–outsider social rubric, that is, relatively directed social space, none would differ on the grammatical accuracy of the spatial actualisation of the inside–outside posing. In short, descriptions of grammaticalised space in Pitcairn are stricter and less flexible than the more fluid appreciation of the constitution of the insider–outsider consensus. Language is more fixed than culture; the plasticities of social norms are less solidified than rules of language.

Additionally, there are pronounced differences in the accessibility of grammaticalised space in language by outsiders as compared to available opinions of social positioning. What is verbalised and spoken directly is more attributable, documentable, and less open to opinion than precise and direct questioning about who insiders are and what constitutes an outsider in the fieldwork setting. On a small island with fewer than 50 people, of which only approximately 35 were born on Pitcairn Island or of Pitcairn Island parents, accessing the insider is core to accessing the Pitcairn Island ethos of place, place-knowledge, and knowledge management. These insiders, and particularly the older members of this insider group, possess the majority of the linguistic and cultural history knowledge and they mandate either implicitly or explicitly who is admitted to this interior. I posit that if one gets onside with the insiders, then perhaps they will tell you more about the inside–outside axis. While these older insiders exist within this insider–outsider matrix, their presence also plays a part in its perpetuation. Being outside with insiders is integral to managing and living on island just as much as getting by professionally inside while being an outsider in the fieldwork setting is paramount to collecting key data. Or put succinctly: navigating social barriers and these insider–outsider dialectics ironically and potentially can lead to greater moulding within the very same insider–outsider system.

Georg Simmel’s (1921: 322) take on ‘The Stranger’ implicates the spatial oppositions involved when creating unity-disunity divisions of insider and outsider:

He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to

it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.

Simmel's stranger position epitomises the stark insider–outsider axis-as-social delineator. If one is born of Pitcairn Island parents,<sup>2</sup> one is an insider. If one was born of Pitcairn Island parentage, moved away, and came back, one is less of an insider. If one is not born of Pitcairn Island parents, one is an outsider. People born of Pitcairn Island parents in the Australian and New Zealand diaspora are 'Pitcairn Island descendants', but they are still outsiders or at least less inside. Outsiders come from *The Outside World* (see definition below), a proper noun and idiomatic expression in Pitcairn and Pitcairn Island English. The Outside World is all parts of the world which are not Pitcairn Island.

What is significant linguistically is that the Pitcairn word for outsider is *stranger*. As historian of science Adrian Young (2016: 34) tells us when quoting from one of the most detailed glossaries of Pitcairn language (Ross & Moverley, 1964: 259):

Sometimes I will dispense with the terms 'knowledge-maker' and 'scientist' altogether, opting instead for the larger category of 'stranger.' The word is not mine, but rather pulled from the language of the islands [Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island] themselves, and more specifically from the Pitkern language glossary of a 1964 linguistics text: '**stranger** [ˈstreɪndʒə]: non-Pitcairner.' [emphasis in original]

I extend this perspective with my own 2016 field notes gathered during interviews:

*Outsider*: A pointed descriptor used by insiders to designate people not born on Pitcairn Island or born of Pitcairn Island parents who stay either for short or long periods. Insiders tell that outsiders have never been and mostly will never be accepted by the Pitcairn Islanders, that is, those born on the island, those born of Pitcairn Island parents, and those who have mostly stayed on the island their whole life; *The Outside World*: The place from where the outsiders come.

As a result, the individual or group stranger-cum-outsider is socially removed from significant collective space and has their island applicable decision-making abilities and opinions diminished from the greater functioning of the island. The outsider-stranger position is one largely devoid of social power and meaning in relation to that availed to insiders.

---

<sup>2</sup> Most births in the past four decades have taken place in New Zealand where there are better hospital facilities. There have not been any births of Pitcairn Island parents for more than seven years.

As regards those not born on island, there is often a degree of indifference towards the opinions of these island residents. Of course, outsider only exists in terms of its semantic opposite: the insider. This category is less difficult to describe than the varied designations of outsiders. First, because there are so few; second, because most of these insiders have never left the island for any significant period of time and they participate in maintaining this social axis either implicitly or explicitly.

\*

\*

### *Inside(r) or Outside(r)?*

Within the bounds of this small, sheer island landmass there were at least three languages in contact during the initial linguistic and social gelling stage of the first generation: English, Polynesian languages, and the then developing Pitcairn, what has now become a highly endangered contact language and linguistic hybrid. What spawned as a result of contact between European and non-European influences was a language and a detailed placename system now with more than 500 terrestrial names and offshore monikers contained within these small (is)land and sea zones. An intricate way of talking about topographic and hydrographic space developed and flourished in parallel within this emerging language and toponymic landscape and social bounding.<sup>3</sup> What is significant to a study of Pitcairn Island language and sociology and to applying the metaphor of social space to linguistic spatiality is that both these axes serve utilitarian purposes. Because fishing and navigation have been integral to Pitcairn Island culture and livelihood, offshore orientation and position is crucial. The more than 20 fishing ground names and locations I documented are testament to this utilitarian system (Nash, 2017). In addition, managing social space using the distinction of insider–outsider is practical. Some are permitted access from outside inside, most are not nor would they necessarily require insider access.

On the discourse level of daily life on Pitcairn Island, outsiders are allowed to talk about different things to what insiders are permitted to discuss. As a fieldworker I experienced that indirect questioning and appearing as threat-free as possible led to much more congenial interpersonal dealings and the gathering of better linguistic and sociological data (cf. Amoamo, 2011). To illustrate I use an event from

---

<sup>3</sup> Martin Gibbs suggests that when conducting fieldwork on Pitcairn Island in 1998 most people agreed that many of the names had been lost from disuse because of the increase in quad bike transport instead of more traditional ways of moving around the island like walking. He also attributes knowledge attrition of toponyms to the diminishing of a storytelling and oral culture and the dying out of some of the older members of the community (Gibbs, personal communication, 5 July 2016).

31 May 2016, less than two weeks after arriving on the island, where I asked an insider woman in Pitcairn about the contents of a package she was posting to New Zealand. This incident occurred near the post office and the woman and several insiders made it obvious that such questioning from an outsider was inappropriate. I had transgressed cultural mores, but not without the possibility for reintegration by the very same insider, which did occur within a few days. This concurs with the ways and means people on the inside manage people accessing inside information. The nature of insider-insider and insider-outsider interaction is driven by varying degrees of social distancing and the fact that insiders need to get on primarily with other insiders to survive. For insiders, there is not as much at stake regarding getting on with outsiders as with insiders.

After this event and throughout the entire field trip, I experienced that I was in a rare yet somewhat privileged position: I am an outsider who speaks Pitcairn fluently. Language is the most obvious and most used insider-distancing mechanism. I assume this reality would have made my presence and involvement in language and culture matters initially fascinating but simultaneously odd. Because of my knowledge of the language, this may have created some level of expectation about my level of understanding of the expected cultural practices, both those of insiders and outsiders. While my ability to understand and manage the workings of the insider-outsider divide did improve across time, in the post office happening I initiated a process of inadvertent (outsider) transgression, which was met with community (insider) indignation. Once I acknowledged this misdemeanour, what followed with some insiders was a continual and mostly implicit schooling in appropriate insider behaviour aimed at resolving my original wrongdoing. This quickly developed into an island-wide acknowledgement of the personal and working connection I had established with the very woman who identified the insider-led statement of slight cultural misconduct. Once I demonstrated that I was willing to engage in this educative process, namely the accessing of insider knowledge, for example, how the inside-outside spatial axis operates, this elderly woman became my mentor and even patron in making sure I received as much information about language, place, and memory as I required. The process begun by my minor social infringement as an iterative and reflexive process led to an overwhelmingly positive outcome.

These techniques and my reasons for being on Pitcairn Island and engaging with the community exist largely in contrast to those of other writers who have written about the place's social dynamics. The most unloved and most revealing work written about Pitcairn Island is surely Dea Birkett's (1997) *Serpent in Paradise*. This account presents a lucid example of the intimate and intricate nature of human and environment



dealings. Birkett claimed that her stay was associated with Royal British Mail instead of her actual interest in writing about the island. Because Birkett locates herself in outsider position although she was privy to many insider happenings, it is not clear whether she ever intended to make a lasting connection with the islands' inhabitants. As a result, the book has come to be considered a smear campaign launched by Birkett toward the island in the sense that she deceived the islanders with what they claim were her dishonest intentions.

In two other cases of outsiders writing about insiders, Kathy Marks' writings, particularly her 2008 *Trouble in Paradise* about the 2004 trials, which is realistically the second most unloved book about Pitcairn Island, and the 2015 blog of Rhiannon Adam's titled 'From London to Pitcairn'<sup>4</sup> have informed to a greater audience the inner functionings of this society. Marks and Adam provide more measured accounts than Birkett, but the writers and their portrayals exist chiefly external to the insider system. Where Birkett and Adam aspire for varying degrees of connection and insider access, something apparent in these women's writing is a fantasy of paradise and its possible discovery on Pitcairn Island. They document this aspect of their respective experiences as the reality of everyday life on the island begins to erode their bucolic expectation. As a journalist on a shorter and more explicit deployment, Marks presumably never wanted such connection and thus maintains her social distance, while collecting as much insider information as possible. Where Birkett was an observer, Marks a journalist, and Adam a photographer, my outsider role as a documentary linguist and ethnographer with language fluency is entirely different.

In summary, I use the idea of perceived threat or harm as a means to reconcile the inside–outside/insider–outsider spectrum of linguistic and social space. As an outsider within the insider–outsider sphere, being perceived by insiders as harmless or harmful to the system is the higher order category which matters more than whether one is actually an insider or an outsider. It is not a question of the truth or reality of one's potential power to bring harm than whether one is perceived as a threat. If one stays for a long time but is not rendered into the harmful category and remains on the edges of the outside, one still remains simply a tourist or thereabouts in terms of insider–outsider movement.

As a researcher–writer, I was to a degree considered a threat. I was an academic with an agenda to document as much of the language as I could in the period I had available. Not all people in the community appreciated this position. The insider–outsider axis, then, is not as simple as whether one is inside or outside socially, spatially, or linguistically; the axis is further complicated by the insider need to assess *perceived danger* and

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://rhiannonsetsoff.wordpress.com/>, accessed 4 July 2016.

how outsider threats to becoming aware of the inner workings of the social system may affect the longevity of this very system.

However, there is a discrepancy as regards the islanders who want to protect the famed Pitcairn Island story, regarding the insider–outsider axis, and allowing researchers who are trying to record aspects of the language like the inside–outside linguistic spatiality. *Our Pitcairn Story*, the published diary based in events from the late 1940s–early 1950s of Maida Moverley, Albert Moverley, the wife of the island’s first schoolteacher seconded from New Zealand, was published in 2007 by the Moverleys’ daughter. As Diana Moverley (2007: 4) writes at the beginning of her introduction to her parents’ book:

This is a story, which has lain undisturbed for fifty-five years. It has waited patiently, in the form of four handwritten, hard-to-read exercise books, for the time when it could safely emerge into the light of day. It is a story, which could not have been published at the time it was written. It would not have been allowed.... The story tells how, and why, optimism slowly turned to disappointment, disillusionment and finally resignation. Perhaps they [Albert and Maida Moverley] were a little naïve, but no more so than the average at that time.... It wouldn’t have mattered who they were. They were people ‘from outside’ who would have the ability to uncover, report on, and ultimately interfere with certain activities and the way in which certain things were being done. Therefore they had to be discredited and slandered ahead of time, so that hopefully, no one would believe them.

Although Albert Moverley was a non-linguist who conducted a significant amount of linguistic research on the language and whose name is associated with several of the major works about Pitcairn, e.g. Ross and Moverley’s *The Pitcairnese Language* and Anders Källgård’s (1981) thesis ‘Pitcairnese: A Report 30 Years after Moverley’, I found it ironic to learn about the low regard the older island insiders had for the teacher Moverley. In addition to Pitcairn Island’s isolation and costs associated with travelling there, I speculate that Diana Moverley’s perspective is one of the major reasons why so few social scientists have ever worked on the island, a matter Young (2016) deals with when detailing a history of research into Pitcairn Island and its placement as a perpetual field site-cum-natural laboratory: it has a reputation for being a difficult place to work. Pitcairn Island’s remoteness, small number of residents, and the insider suspicion of outsiders have made it a delicate location to engage with the community. Insider–outsider designations, implicit–explicit codes of social conduct, and the requirement of accessing linguistic spatiality like the inside–outside offshore axis for understanding language and place relationships are all suggestive of a demanding research domain.

I must emphasise that this exploration is far from the last word on these matters. While I made the brief claim that the grammaticality of the inside–outside axis in terms of its linguistic inflexibility and accessibility to outsider exists in contrast to the more elastic insider–outsider contradiction, this use of spatial language is but one aspect of a much larger appreciation of the relationship between the linguistic and the social about which I am currently publishing. What I have presented should drive and direct more interest toward not only Pitcairn Island social science research and folklore investigations more generally, but open up discussions about the nature of language, space, and social relationships in (island) contact language environments more specifically.

\* Martin Gibbs provided helpful comments on a previous version. I acknowledge the input of Adrian Young in devising the title of this paper and for valuable input on an earlier draft.

\*

\*

### References

- Amoamo, Maria. 2011. 'Remoteness and Myth Making: Tourism Development on Pitcairn Island'. *Tourism Planning & Development* 8(1): 1-19.
- Bennardo, Giovanni (ed.). 2002. *Representing Space in Oceania: Culture in language and mind*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Birkett, Dea. 1997. *Serpent in Paradise*. New York: Anchor Books.
- François, Alexandre. 2004. 'Reconstructing the geocentric system of Proto Oceanic'. *Oceanic Linguistics* 43(1): 1-32.
- Källgård, Anders. 1981. 'Pitcairnese: A Report 30 Years after Moverley, Concentrating on the Vocabulary'. Masters dissertation, English Department, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
- Marks, Kathy. 2008. *Trouble in Paradise: Uncovering Decades of Sexual Abuse on Britain's Most Remote Island*. London: HarperCollins.
- Mawyer, Alexander & Richard Feinberg. 2014. 'Senses of Space: Multiplying Models of Spatial Cognition in Oceania.' *Ethos* 42(3): 243-252.
- Moverley, Maida. 2007. *Our Pitcairn Story*. I & G Selby, New Zealand: Diane Moverley (digital copy in possession of the author).
- Nash, Joshua. 2017. 'Pitcairn Island, island toponymies, and fishing ground names: Towards the possibility of a peaceful onshore and offshore reconciliation', *Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, 4(1): 98-108.
- Nash, Joshua. 2016, 'Creole spatiality and Pitcairn Island: a comment on Feinberg and Mawyer's Ethos Special Issue Senses of Space', *Ethos* 44(1), 3-8.
- Palmer, Bill, Gaby, Alice, Lum, Jonathon & Jonathan Schlossberg. 2016. 'Topography and frame of reference in the threatened ecological niche of the

- atoll'. Paper presented at Geographic Grounding: Place, direction and landscape in the grammars of the world conference, 30 May 2016, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Palmer, Bill. 2010. 'Route description tasks in Kiribati'. Paper presented at the 8th conference on Oceanic Linguistics. Auckland, New Zealand, 5 January 2010.
- Ross, Alan S.C. & Albert W. Moverley (eds.) 1964. *The Pitcairnese Language with contributions by E. Schubert, H. E. and Alaric Maude, E. H. Flint and A. C. Gimson*. London: André Deutsch.
- Senft, Gunter. (ed.) 1997. Referring to space: Studies in Austronesian and Papuan languages. *Oxford Studies in Anthropological Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Simmel, Georg. 1921. 'The Sociological Significance of the 'Stranger'', in Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (eds.). *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 322-327.
- Young, Adrian. 2016. 'Mutiny's Bounty: Pitcairn Islanders and the making of a natural laboratory on the edge of Britain's Pacific empire'. PhD dissertation, Department of History, Princeton University.

\*

\*

\*