

ence the outside world. As she says to Temanu toward the end of the play, "I know my roots. You come to find roots, that fine, but I . . . I want to find wings too!" (*Virgin*, 52). Then she flies off on that redoubtable, velvet-gloved carrier "Pathetic Air" to rainy Puva, but the fist is there in the stunning stage directions:

the sound of the plane taking off is heard, and becomes louder and louder. A spotlight on the image of the frigate bird on the backdrop. Hina appears in modern dancing costume (wearing the *lavalava* her cousin had given her) and stands in the spotlight. The sound of the aeroplane fades out to be replaced by Polynesian drumming. . . . Hina dances unrestrainedly, using the whole stage. (*Virgin*, 55-56)

I saw the play in Suva and again more recently in Honolulu. The beauty, fragility, and power of human freedom still haunt me in the image of Hina, who in that moment is each of us, become the frigate bird.

Supplementary materials included in the text provide helpful contextual information. Hereniko writes about "Pacific Clowning" and Robert Nicole, of the Literature and Language Department at the University of the South Pacific, writes the best essay I've seen on "Images of Paradise" in the Pacific.

From his academic post at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Vilsoni Hereniko has emerged in the past three years as a leading voice in the writing and promotion of Pacific Island literature and the critical contexts surrounding it. Like his mentor Albert Wendt, he is one of those excep-

tional, profoundly reflective artists who integrates contraries and transmutes anguish as he portrays a human comedy where we are clowned into painful insight even as we discover resilience, laughter, and hope. He wears the different robes of artist and critic and editor and teacher as though they were tailored from the same cloth. In fact his comedic sensibility, his navigator's sense of direction, weave the cloth that underlies the different roles he plays. Hereniko's particularly humane and inclusive vision of the Pacific Islanders' experience informs both his creative work and his scholarship. Whether reading the diverse editorial selections in *Mānoa* or feeling the universal, seriously comic tug of Hina's longing to travel beyond her own shores in *The Last Virgin in Paradise* (subtitled, after all, *A Serious Comedy*), we have the confidence of sailors inspired by one who knows how to navigate by the stars and the waves, one who will bring us home.

SIG J SCHWARZ
California Lutheran University

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Alms For Oblivion, by Fata Sano Malifa. New York: Vantage Press, 1993. ISBN 0-533-104661, xi + 258 pages. US\$17.95.

When Pasikale Piso'o sees "two horny horses making fierce love" one day in a kuava field he experiences a spontaneous orgasm and has his mind "properly . . . rearranged." Subsequently, his unbridled passion has women fighting over him. (The reader's ear is certainly grabbed when

one woman, making good on a traditional threat, scissors off a rival's ear.) But while many women "love" him, no one in the village likes him, and he does "not care about anyone either." His pursuit of gratification without responsibility to anything, outside himself, that is, puts him badly at odds with human regulatory systems, including the general "laws" governing interpersonal relations, traditional Samoan law, the *fa'a Samoa*, and Christian law, here inseparable from the impositions of colonial institutions. Not that being at odds with systems, or being married and a father, reins Pasikale's sexual galloping. He romps with the pastor's wife, which results in the pastor's suicide. Only tuberculosis slows Pasikale. Then his long-suffering-turned-vindictive wife tries to terminate him by roping him to his bed.

The description of Pasikale's punishment that follows suggests the visceral power Fata Sano Malifa often achieves:

[T]he *semit* rope had cut welts into his arms and legs. As he kept on tossing up and down to be free, the ropes cut deeper into his body. Now his wounds had become infected and very painful. Yesterday afternoon, when Pasikale realised that he had to free himself somehow soon or die, the big black flies came. The flies landed on his wounds, laying their small white eggs there. Early this morning, the eggs had hatched into maggots, and they were now terrorising his body.

Finally, Pasikale breaks free, and with his last energy storms a church service to curse his village for preaching Christian love for one's enemies while ignoring his maggot-driven screams.

The cross-hatching of Christian and Samoan traditions working through such scenes ground the book culturally. According to one Samoan creation myth, as Albert Wendt recounted it in *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (a work Malifa's work recalls at several points), "The gods . . . covered the world's nakedness with creepers. After centuries of light and darkness the creepers rotted and turned into maggots. Out of these maggots emerged Man, who, on his death and the falling of dark, turned into maggots again." In one sense, Pasikale's return to maggots gives birth to young Nikoloa M, the protagonist of *Alms*. Pasikale's attractive lasciviousness, "tongue-whipping" of the village, and "unconforming ways" make an abiding impression on Niko. His faith is shaken, and he feels a giddy potential for rebellion.

At a deeper level, Niko internalizes the sense that one is inevitably bound to the bed of one's own making, and often even stretched on a rack one does not quite deserve. For a book that celebrates self-reliance and disparages blind orthodoxy, this outlook has curiously bleak religious overtones. A Calvinistic morbidity getting the better of poetic nihilism. There seems to be a universal and merciless psychic credit system at work, whereby—however successful—one pays mentally if not physically for hurting others. No injury—psychic or physical, committed or suffered—ever gets set quite right. In the long run the flesh corrodes from within: cancer consumes Niko's grandfather; his mother watches the world from behind the muteness of stroke-induced paralysis, dreaming of love in

the next world. For Niko, a man with a constitutionally philosophical bent, life presents itself as a paradox: If one tires of freedom one is ridden to the waiting rot; personal ambition should not be sacrificed for others or for custom. But in the individualistic mode—slaving for the money that reputedly frees one—“success” tends to involve a steeling of oneself that comes at the expense of others, and often sacrifices their potentially healing love.

Niko’s odyssey illustrates this point about the futility of achievement without a parallel socially generous, emotional development; the impulse to resist the notion that problems of self are irreducibly nested within specific historical contexts sets the book up as a dialogue on the relations among “self,” *aiga*, village, nation, and world community. Niko spends years abroad, including a sobering look from New York at the America emblemized by the “gloomy splendor” of the Statue of Liberty. He returns changed, at first nauseated and angered by a sense of village life as a stifling sham and the church as a “fear-inducing” capitalist scam. This creates a sense of exile at home, an a-partness or being beside his culture while moving through its levels, which in turn forces his gaze inward on the mechanisms of self-torture that will not let him either conform or escape. Yet Niko always cares about his nation; he always at some gut level believes in the old things (*aitu*, ancestral spirits) that he intellectually dismisses as the thoughts of “superstitious pagan swine,” whether he acknowledges it or not. In this sense there is some truth to Homi Bhabha’s suggestion that, “blasphemy

is the migrant’s shame at returning home.”

Niko coasts through a footloose phase of drunken bohemian days at the Barefoot Bar in Apia, indulging in unanchored barroom speculation. He makes a brief, intense attempt at being a writer. Finally, he decides to make his mark by clearing and planting wild land. Traditionally, Samoan *aiga* used only as much of the land as they needed to subsist. So, as in Wendt’s *Banyan Tree*, Niko’s decision (like Tauloipepe’s) to “develop” the land violates the old culture’s respect for the land as a living and spiritually sustaining force. The venture wins him financial success and power, but it costs him a relation to the land that would be emotionally sustaining, and, ultimately, costs him a genuine relation to his children and his future.

The larger points about respecting land, generosity, integrity, and the necessity for critical introspection, ring as true for nations as for individuals. While Niko is no allegory for Samoa, the unfolding portrait of his life involves a forceful staging of national polemics, including vexed questions about the relations between tradition and “modernity” and about the terms for Samoa’s “success” in the system of global capitalism and culture. However much a man of his time and place, Niko stakes the claim to imagine his own life and create himself as an individual; simultaneously, *Alms*, as a resolutely Samoa-centered novel, urges the nation to imagine its way free of prior representations, and suggests the pitfalls of corrupted vision in which postcolonial bureaucrats mimic “departed” colonists. Niko’s entry into

the political arena exposes how those who “credited themselves with the achievement of independence from colonial rule . . . now . . . just took what they wanted.”

Alms is itself a significant Samoan literary contribution, a repudiation of the viewpoint expressed by Niko’s father (and centuries of colonialism): “Listen, Son, our people were not born to write books; we were not even born to think. We were born to work the land and fish the sea.” While acknowledging that many problems in post-independence Samoa have a colonial genesis, or result from modeling systems on those of the “departed” colonists, Malifa does not dwell on past misrepresentation or exploitation. Rather, *Alms* insists on the urgency of removing a cancerous corruption from contemporary Samoan politics. In this, Malifa insists on a version of the artist as gadfly of the state, employing idio-

syncratic forms to critique the society out of which he writes. The book’s plot and style are driving, but flexible enough to cut to interior monologue or fantastic imaginative flight. Malifa’s sometimes wild lyricism is exemplified by a fishing trip gone surreal, where an enormous swordfish wrestles Niko’s boat, bill snagged in the prow, leaving an afterimage of a “tall fish enveloped in a ball of flame electrically sparked.” Such images momentarily threaten to leap the book right out of the local and situated. But the narrative voice never asserts artistic distance from the communities described, and the leaping fish becomes a fit emblem for the book’s depiction of elemental struggles, in which the things obsessive dreamers chase often wind up chasing the dreamers.

PAUL LYONS

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa