Book and Media Reviews
drama in local and international arenas and help reinforce our appreciation of this body of work as a rich and dynamic component of contemporary world theater.

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“Will you take me for a madman, a compulsive liar, or just a drug addict having hallucinations?” asks Moanam Vaki Heremanu Vaikau, the mute protagonist and narrator of Tahitian novelist Moetai Brotherson’s The Missing King. “I’ve tried to be honest with you. I’ve told you everything, everything that made my life what it has been, my few moments of happiness, and of great distress” (251). Vaki’s question about the reception of what he calls his “treasure,” “the story of my life, that I’ve been putting together since the age of seven” (246), attests to how mysterious and improbably calamitous his life has been. Indeed, when Philippe, a French psychologist, attempts to publish Vaki’s manuscript as a memoir, it is soundly rejected; after recategorizing the exact book as fiction, Philippe receives twenty-four publication offers. In its exploration of the boundaries around history and fiction, Brotherson’s novel thus reads as a metafictional engagement with the process of writing as a never-ending performance of identity in the French Pacific indigenous context.

Brotherson’s novel was first published in French in 2007 as Le roi absent (Papeete: Au Vent des îles), and this 2012 English translation is by Jean Anderson, who brought fellow Tahitian author Chantal Spitz’s Island of Shattered Dreams (2007) to anglophone readers. The language of The Missing King comes across as one of this translation’s most engaging aspects; it is a testament to Anderson’s range and dedication to the cultivation of Tahitian literature that these two novels are vastly different in tone and style. Indeed, with this author and translator, I was reminded of an interview with the father of contemporary Tahitian writers, poet and author Henri Hiro, whose literary provocation centered the place of writing in an age of vital renewal: “For this renewal to continue, Polynesians must write. . . . It doesn’t matter what language they use, whether it’s reo mā‘ohi [Tahitian], French, or English. The important thing is that they write, that they do it! And I think that in a short while we will have Tahitian authors—authors free of insecurities and able to express who we are!” (Varua Tupu: New Writing from French Polynesia [2006, 72, 81]).

The reader will be charmed by Vaki as he stumbles through life with his muteness, which he fervently refuses to see as a disability. Faced with abounding adversities, he responds in earnest with naive methods of inquiry, which often lead to surprising discoveries. For instance, when diagnosed with asthma, Vaki turns to one of his favorite authorities, the Larousse French Dictionary: “I looked up asma, azma, assma, all in vain, and then by accident I came across ‘asthma.’ What
little I understood of the explanation didn’t match up with anything about me. Who was lying, then, my father or the big book?” (6). In overcoming obstacles with genius and resourcefulness, Vaki exposes the stories hidden behind authoritative texts.

It is easy to forget at times that the narrator is mute, but Brotherson makes it apparent at certain moments when the fluidity and verbosity of Vaki’s novelistic discourse are juxtaposed with the complications of his communication with other characters. After a “conversation” with Philippe, Vaki reflects, “We talk for about half an hour, me with my pen and paper, him directly. Sometimes I envy people who talk. But all too often the immediacy, the direct availability of their expression, its spontaneity, makes them say stupid things” (71). Vaki’s position as a Tahitian who can only communicate by writing literalizes the call by activist Hiro—who appears as a character in the novel and gives Vaki a Bible in reo māʻōhi—for Polynesians to use written language to create, preserve, and share their stories.

Though it makes some striking twists, connections, and ambiguous suggestions, Brotherson’s novel keeps the reader searching, questioning, and reexamining hypotheses. The most intriguing example of the work’s open-endedness is the cryptic recurring drug trip that punctuates the entirety of Vaki’s story (and persists even when Philippe takes over the narrative in the later chapters). Vaki frequently—though not usually intentionally—becomes intoxicated by ingesting a psychoactive substance, and each time he is immediately visited by a spectral female ancestor who says, “Without the word, I still have the signs. I am Nukutauna. The fifteenth drum fell silent with me” (24). She then hands him some writing that he proceeds to narrate—ostensibly verbatim. These chemically invoked, written narratives tell of people, places, and events, most of which serve—with a fair bit of detective work on the reader’s part—as an alternative literary, historical, and genealogical account of French Polynesia and its connections with France, Spain, and the Americas. Taken alongside the novel’s main plot, these narratives keep the reader working simultaneously along multiple levels, not unlike the way Alex, Vaki’s prospective publisher, describes reading the Rongorongo tablets from Rapa Nui: “You read it from left to right, so far nothing out of the ordinary. But you also read from the bottom left corner of the tablet. As soon as you get to the edge, you have to turn the tablet and carry on. The direction of the lines alternates. To read it you have to turn it round with every new line” (298).

The profusion of literary, cultural, and historical allusions in the novel inspires the reader to interpret and re-interpret each image. In one visitation, Nukutauna relates a story of a man named Heremanu on a ship called the Acushnet: “He had fled his ship, we welcomed him into our clan. . . . And so, against his will, I loved him until I felt life growing in my belly. . . . I think that Heremanu wishes to write our story and the story of Chase” (147). A knowing reader will decode Heremanu as a transliteration of the name Herman, as in the author Herman Melville, who worked on the whaling ship Acushnet before
deserting in 1842 to live among the people of Taipivai on Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands. Melville’s first novel, *Typee* (1846), fictionalizes his experiences in the Marquesas, and his *Moby Dick* (1851) was partly inspired by Owen Chase’s 1821 account of a shipwreck in the Pacific. These points provocatively suggest that Melville left a child on Nuku Hiva and that Vaki—who is also called Heremanu—is his descendant. The Melville connection deepens when Alex’s assistant Fay—a possible shortening of “Fayaway,” the native female object of desire in *Typee*—assaults Philippe and steals a set of sacred drums. Considering the many and questionable representations of Pacific Islanders in Melville’s oeuvre, as in that of many other European and American writers’ works, Brotherson’s adoption and re-envisioning of Melville and his characters seems only fitting, but Brotherson does so respectfully, acknowledging Melville as a part of his own and Vaki’s literary genealogy.

The reader of *The Missing King* is in for an enjoyable and elaborate journey that reveals a complex network of interrelations comprised by the contemporary Pacific experience. It is a tremendous achievement for both Brotherson and Anderson to have given French and English readers a further way—as Henri and John write on the Bible they give to Vaki—to “read, read, read, and read again, to open that door and set free the full force of the words of your ancestors’ language” (192).

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*Daughters of Fire*, by Tom Peek.  

One of the newest books from Arnie Kotler’s groundbreaking Koa Books is Tom Peek’s debut novel, *Daughters of Fire*. Gracing its cover is the much-celebrated painting by the late Herb Kawainui Kane, *Pele, Goddess of Volcanoes*. A tightly woven work of fiction, Peek’s book is attracting deserved recognition. In 2013 the Independent Book Publishers Association awarded Peek the Benjamin Franklin Silver Medal for Popular Fiction for this work. *Daughters of Fire* voices a trenchant critique of the politics of development during the period following Hawai‘i’s “statehood” and brings the potent effects of discourses such as economics, tourism, science, and technology into direct dialogue with the profoundly spiritual aspects of the volcanic ‘āina (land) of Hawai‘i Island.

The story begins when Gavin McCall, an Australian astronomer, pays a visit to Hawaiian archaeologist Maile Chow in order to learn about volcanoes—the subject of his own research is a volcano named Pele on a moon of Jupiter. The budding romance between the two scientists, native and nonnative, leads them to witness a murder on the active lava flows near Kalapana. Also witness to the murder is a young photographer from Minnesota, Jimmy Andersen, who seeks refuge with another expat Minnesotan, Captain Jack. With the help of the fisherman Aka Kaikala, Maile, and Gavin, Captain Jack