

Book and Media Reviews

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Articulating Rapa Nui: Polynesian Cultural Politics in a Latin American Nation-State, by Riet Delsing. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-8248-5168-2; 304 pages, illustrations, maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. Cloth, US\$59.00.

Like Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle*, there are different entrances to the "house" of the indigenous people, language, and culture of Rapa Nui: how one enters will assemble the affective significance of the island differently, creating distinct lines of connections and disconnections among the Rapa Nui people, colonial Chilean social forms, and global processes. Prior to reflecting on the actual content of *Articulating Rapa Nui: Polynesian Cultural Politics in a Latin American Nation-State*, it is important to note the entrance framed by the book's title and its dedication, "to the people of Rapa Nui." Riet Delsing assumes foreign nomenclature that contrasts the island name "Rapa Nui" with the term "Rapanui," which she uses for the indigenous language and people, rather than use "Rapa Nui" for all three as is current in the Rapa Nui newspaper *Te Pura Re'o* and immersion-school curricula to highlight their fundamental interconnections. Thus, technically Delsing's book title (the same title given to her dissertation, and thus not one imposed by the publisher) is officially about articulating the island as a territory within Chile—a Chilean geopolitical frame that erases the necessary presence of Rapa Nui people and language on the island. Names, Plato teaches in the ancient dialogue *The Sophist*, are

terms of enclosure; they give meaning to things by foreclosing alternatives. In light of the indigenous politics explored throughout the book, it is notable that this title and dedication are present and that a number of alternatives are absent. In a context of settler colonialism marked by state violence against the Rapa Nui people in 2010 (which Delsing only faintly outlines in two pages in chapter 7 and in one paragraph in the epilogue) and resistance to increasing Chilean migration to the island rendering Rapa Nui people a minority, one can imagine, for instance, a book titled *Chilean Colonialism in a Polynesian Nation* that would foreground the place of the Rapa Nui people as primary and situate Chilean politics within a contested colonial frame. And rather than a book dedicated to "the people of Rapa Nui," one can imagine one dedicated to "the Rapa Nui people" to underline political solidarity in this time of crisis. A book titled *Articulating Mauna Kea: Polynesian Cultural Politics in the United States* that was dedicated to "the people of Hawai'i" rather than "the Hawaiian people" would enter the politics of Mauna a Wākea in obvious ways; it would foreclose alternative paths of understanding, as does Delsing's entrance to the Rapa Nui people, language, island, and culture.

Articulating Rapa Nui is broadly divided into historical analysis in the first half and ethnography in the second half. While the book does discuss island events from 2002 through 2013, a five-page epilogue that summarizes issues covered during this period highlights the fact that most of the ethnographic research grounding

the text is centered in island experiences in the late 1990s and the first years of the new millennium. Delsing, an anthropologist based in Chile since the 1990s, begins the book with an interesting story of her first arrival on the island in 1996 from her home in Santiago, in which she notes that her claim to knowledge of the island is contested as “culturally ignorant” by a Rapa Nui friend who meets her at the airport. According to the book’s bibliography, this trip led to the publication of a Chilean government report coauthored by Delsing and Chilean researchers and inspired her to conduct doctoral research on Rapa Nui in anthropology.

Following a travelogue-style introduction based on archival “knowledge” of the island inscribed by foreign scholars, an approximately one-page subsection called “the plot” briefly reviews three key theoretical frameworks informing Delsing’s analysis: the notion of cultural politics as formulated by anthropologist of Latin America Charles Hale, the concept of articulation refined by Stuart Hall, and the anthropology of globalization enunciated by Arjun Appadurai. Rather than privileging the indigenous meanings, values, and place of the Rapa Nui people, Delsing emphasizes that her book explores how the island is “inhabited by different actors, each with their own desires” and “different cultural meanings” (10).

In a Foucauldian sense, the research paradigm of articulating indigenous identities and cultural politics in Pacific Islands anthropology certainly has had extensive “pastoral power” under the formulation of James

Clifford—one of Delsing’s doctoral dissertation advisors. While it has been a valuable tool for destabilizing the “invented traditions” readings of Pacific Island cultures, critical genealogical analysis discloses that it also leads scholarship away from the more robust social justice framework that indigenous peoples themselves created as the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Instead of “unbracketed” analysis of indigenous peoples as rights bearers like all peoples, this technology of subjectivity and genre of writing culture avoids use of “peoples” altogether and brackets “indigeneity” within a hermeneutics of suspicion that encourages typological surveillance of the “routes and roots” by which “indigenous” identities emerge worldwide. Following Clifford, Delsing represents how Rapa Nui “indigeneity” has become rooted in Chilean laws and policies and routed through Rapa Nui participation in global forums of indigenous peoples. While she valuably disrupts a toxic reading of Rapa Nui culture as “invented tradition,” she assesses rights for Rapa Nui people only in Chilean state terms. Delsing does not reference UNDRIP (which Chile signed), and though briefly noting in the epilogue that Chile signed International Labour Organization (ILO) 169, she provides no significant critique of Chilean policy in terms of the doctrine.

The three historical chapters included under the rubric “Challenging the Nation-State” comprise the majority of the book content and synchronize with the title’s frame. Like a government survey, they provide an

inventory of the major documents, laws, and policies that the state continues to emphasize in an attempt to articulate the territory of Rapa Nui within Chile. Delsing's assemblage of the state archive and Chilean scholarship of the documents will be a useful reference point for future research, and her participant-observer account of the proceedings of the 2003 state truth commission will be valuable to future scholars. However, it is possible that many if not all Rapa Nui people will be angry to read the author's statement that "the inscription of the island as Chilean public land" is an "important asset" for Rapa Nui people because that prevented the island from being "taken over by foreigners" (53)—oddly forgetting that to Rapa Nui people, Chileans *are* foreigners. And she often apologetically suggests that Chilean policy arose from "good intentions" (59) and that officials merely "misunderstood" Rapa Nui culture and people (178) in a context in which even the truth commission—responding to documented testimonies that Delsing avoids discussing—admitted that Chile turned the island into a "stateless" world (for over sixty years in violation of an 1888 Agreement of Wills) that was scarred by "hunger, imprisonment, and misery" amid severe and regular abuse of fundamental human rights. Anthropologists of documentation and bureaucracy will of course see her analyses as working within this domain of inquiry, although she does not situate these chapters within that academic literature. Some of them would question analytical emphasis in terms of an older representational

paradigm—one that interrogates state archives for their correspondence with an apolitical truth—rather than one that discloses state archives as technologies of biopolitical governmentality and rhetorical truth. Assembling Rapa Nui realities through analysis of the documents of state agreements, laws, and policies conveniently foregrounds the state as an agent of civil social contracts and rhetorically backgrounds the uncivil violent forces that Chile's own truth commission admits "tortured" Rapa Nui subjects.

The final six chapters of the book fall under the rubric "Polynesian Cultural Politics and Global Imaginaries." Consistent with the title frame and emphasized theory, these chapters explore the cultural politics of the Rapa Nui people as articulated in "performances," rather than through sovereign realities, of cultural difference. Delsing references several notable texts in the anthropology of tourism from the 1990s, but she does not situate her analyses within the extensive post-2000 literature of research. Particularly unfortunate is the absence of reference to Beverly Haun's brilliant critical tourism study, *Inventing "Easter Island"* (2008), which could have added theoretical depth. Nevertheless, the chapters provide an inventory of Rapa Nui cultural practices and forms of life that will be useful for future researchers.

An ethnographic high point emerges in chapter 8 with participant-observation analysis of the arrival of the voyaging canoe *Hōkūle'a* in Rapa Nui framed in terms of Epeli Hau'ofa's concept of Oceania as a "sea of islands," including narratives from

Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners like Sam Ka'ai. Many Rapa Nui people, however, might be frustrated that Delsing inventories Rapa Nui culture more often than not in terms that normalize Chilean Spanish rather than Rapa Nui; her representation of the annual festival day honoring the revitalization of the Rapa Nui language as "El Día de la Lingua" rather than "Te Mahana o te Re'o" is especially problematic. More disturbing to many Rapa Nui people may be her uncritical use of the Chilean word "yorgo" to refer to Rapa Nui people in social scenes that, like the word "moke" in Hawai'i when spoken by haole (outsiders), have potentially racially derogatory signification. This insensitivity is amplified by representations of Rapa Nui cultural heritage—like the revered ancestral ceremonies of the "Bird Man" (Tānata Manu) and the Rapa Nui ancestral supreme creator deity (Makemake) officially integrated into Catholic Church services as well as contemporary everyday life and festivals—as "cults."

Amidst the December 2010 Chilean state violence against Rapa Nui people, US Congressman Eni Faleomavaega Jr condemned Chile's actions on the congressional floor, emphasizing both a crisis in the lack of official place for the Rapa Nui nation and life-threatening unsustainable development policies of the Chilean state on the island (a reality documented by international ecological research since the 1990s, including a UNESCO report in 2003). While the congressman as well as UN Special Rapporteur James Anaya and representatives from many international

human rights organizations like Amnesty International have become engaged with Rapa Nui as a human rights crisis since the events of 2010, Delsing ends this book enjoying talking with "the people of Rapa Nui," like global elite tourists on Concorde jets and yachts (223–224); discussing Lemurian New Age space alien tourist discourse in Rapa Nui not as a "cult" but as "literature" (210); enchanted with the presence of Rapa Nui as an international tourist site in *Forbes* and *Travel and Leisure* with over 85,000 tourists in 2012 (65,000 more than UNESCO recommended); and dwelling on the exciting visit of "hundreds of European, North and South American, and Japanese astronomers, astrophysicists, photographers, and amateurs" for the July 2010 solar eclipse (240). There are many valuable historical and cultural inventories and ethnographic stories throughout the book. But to return to the analogy of possible studies of Mauna a Wākea, many Pacific Islands studies scholars may want to question how the placement of the telescope of "Polynesian cultural politics" on Rapa Nui, and the ethnographically surreal sights it captures, displaces more indigenous epistemological and ontological inquiry that is critical to the analysis of the increasingly violent political situation of contemporary Rapa Nui struggles for self-determination.

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