

## Book and Media Reviews

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*Bridging Our Sea of Islands: French Polynesian Literature within an Oceanic Context*, by Kareva Mateata-Allain. Saarbrücken, Germany: Verlag Dr Müller, 2008. ISBN 978-3-8364-8699-6; 228 pages, glossary, references, notes. US\$111.00.

Mā'ohi literature, which this book defines inclusively as the writings of all of the indigenous peoples of French-occupied Polynesia, has been largely absent from discussions of Pacific literature, both because of its systematic suppression within the French colonial educational system and francophone print culture, and because it is not (generally) written in English. Written in French, in reo mā'ohi (the indigenous languages of the region), or in creolized forms of Mā'ohi French (such as “frantien” or “kaina”), the poems, stories, and essays that began to appear locally in Tahiti during the 1980s and 1990s have been inaccessible to English readers, except through rare translations. Consequently, Mā'ohi literature was not represented in the field-building anthologies *Lali: A Pacific Anthology* (1980) and *Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English since 1980* (1995), both edited by Albert Wendt, or in *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Poetry in English*, edited by Wendt, Reina Whaitiri, and Robert Sullivan (2003). The subtitles of the latter two volumes foreground the linguistic barrier within “Polynesia” itself that is one legacy of colonialism, an effect of which has been to isolate Mā'ohi writers.

The publication of *Vārua Tupu: New Writing from French Polynesia* (2006), a special issue of *Mānoa* journal edited by Frank Stewart, Mateata-Allain, and Alexander Dale Mawyer,

was thus an important breakthrough. Its inclusion of English translations of Mā'ohi stories, poems, and interviews from reo mā'ohi and French (several in dual-language formats), self-consciously began a process of re-integrating Mā'ohi writers into the Oceanian writing community (seen as a linked and dispersed network of individuals and institutions whose default lingua franca is now English). Mateata-Allain's passionately argued *Bridging* could be considered as a companion anthology to *Vārua Tupu*, an extension of its ambassadorial invitation to intra-Oceanian dialogue, and a critical supplement that contextualizes and critically elaborates the literary movement to which all of the translated pieces belong. The book intersperses Mateata-Allain's translations of texts by Louise Peltzer, Taaria Walker, Flora Devantine, Titaua Peu, and Rai a Mai (Michou Chaze)—several of which appeared in *Vārua Tupu*—with a series of critical and historical essays, loosely linked as chapters, each of which focuses on problems (social, institutional, and formal/aesthetic) that women Mā'ohi writers engage.

Mateata-Allain's central argument is that a Mā'ohi voice, or a Mā'ohi “self” that might exercise meaningful “self-determination,” must be rediscovered within a wider Oceanian context—a point her book performs by drawing heavily from Pacific writer-scholars for its theoretical frameworks. In chapter 1, “Intellectual Cross-Fertilization in Oceania through the Metaphor of the Va'a,” she asserts that the integrative inward journey, a bridging of contemporary Mā'ohi to their narrative and epistemological legacies, is in some sense contingent on and conterminous with

their outward journeying, or on a bridging of the gap between Mā'ohi writers and the writers of anglophone Oceania. For Mateata-Allain, the va'a (canoe) serves as an apt metaphor for these processes: writings for her are vessels that may metaphorically "re-enact . . . historic exchanges of cultural knowledge" (27). (Significantly, Mā'ohi writers attended the Hawai'i launching of *Vārua Tupu*, and Hawaiian writers, the Tahiti launching). Following Epeli Hau'ofa's arguments in his articles "The Ocean in Us" and "Our Sea of Islands," Mateata-Allain emphasizes the importance of Oceanians recognizing the limitations that colonial partitionings, such as linguistic barriers and national borders, have enforced on them.

Chapters 2 and 3 consider further obstacles to inward/outward Mā'ohi voyaging. "Consequences of Western Education System on *Ma'ohi* Psyche: Decentering the Colonial Epicenter" (chapter 2) considers the psychological and social effects of colonial education, which include a distrust and fear of writing and literature, and which in turn lead Mā'ohi to being structurally undereducated (speaking neither "proper French" nor reo mā'ohi) and underemployed. Mateata-Allain feels that the way to counter these effects is to develop pedagogical approaches that draw on the epistemologies lodged within local narratives and languages, and to do so in ways that collectively awaken political consciousness. Insofar as literature can at once symbolize and function as an agent of these sociopolitical processes, as Mateata-Allain firmly believes, the supply (of texts) must in some sense precede demand. Since French publishers remain hostile to Mā'ohi

expression—and it has been difficult to establish a Mā'ohi print culture (although the multilingual journal *Littérama'ohi*, now in its sixth issue, is an important step in that direction)—Mateata-Allain repeatedly calls for ways to look beyond the francophone context, including making use of the opportunities for exchange available in new media.

At the same time, as Mateata-Allain argues in "Reconciling the Speak-Write Dilemma in *Ma'ohi* Writing" (chapter 3), creating Mā'ohi narratives in written form is itself a formidable challenge, given the ongoing displacement of Mā'ohi writers in their own lands, and the paradox of seeking to perpetuate the oral qualities of their culture within the languages and institutions that have "nearly destroyed Ma'ohi voice" (29). By exploring the ways in which Chantal Spitz, Titaua Peu, Taaria Walker, and Rai a Mai face and work through their own fears and what Spitz calls the "speak-write" dilemma, Mateata-Allain advances a theory of oppositional Mā'ohi poetics, an "oraliture" that "perpetuates the [pre-contact] role of the strong female orator" (105).

If such a poetics bridges the written and the spoken, for Mateata-Allain contemporary Mā'ohi writing is necessarily a cultural métissage (mixture) as well. Chapter 4, "Creators and Transgressors: *Ma'ohi Tabua/Mestizas* Coming to Voice through *Nepalanta*," attempts to align Gloria Anzaldúa's "ideas on borderlands and *sin fronteras* [absence of borders] within a Ma'ohi context" (131). Imaginatively, this is a way of "collapsing French borders that confine Ma'ohi literary and cultural production" (131), and asserting the in-between, transitional

state (neplanta) of writers moving into a new identity, which Anzaldúa considers as a form of birthing the self. These analogies, and the emphasis on fluid identities throughout, privilege the mestiza subject, and position her as the embodiment of cultural bridging and translation. If entry into English is essential to pan-Oceanian literary belonging (translation might be less important to dance, music, or visual culture exchange), it is the mobile figure of the translator of Mā'ohi writing who must at least initially play the facilitating role.

However, Mateata-Allain makes clear at all points that the Mā'ohi literary/social movement is at heart grounded in the struggles of Mā'ohi people for self-determination and stewardship of Mā'ohi lands, and that it moves in alliance with more rooted commitments to language and culture. This point is emphatically made in chapter 5, "Colonial Abom(b)inations and Bombing Nations," which tracks the historical connection between the emergence of Mā'ohi literature and activist struggles, particularly against nuclear testing. For many—as Mateata-Allain shows through readings of works by Chantal Spitz, Rai a Mai, and Titaua Peu—nuclear testing at Moruroa epitomized the French authority's disregard for Mā'ohi wellbeing and worldview, along with the desecration of their environment. In showing how a growing consciousness of this fired the desire for self-representation through literary forms—and in showing how literary movements and metaphors are paralleled and literalized in the political vision of leaders like Oscar Temaru—Mateata-Allain brings her book full circle.

*Bridging* is the first full-length work in English that I know of to devote itself to "fire-starting" (190) the conversation among Mā'ohi writers and anglophone Oceania. The book would have benefited from a better editorial process than the publisher apparently provided (there are a number of repetitive passages and misspellings or misidentifications of places and people), and several of the arguments are admittedly starting points rather than conclusions, but *Bridging* makes some important contributions. In addition to the fine translations of Mā'ohi literature that are included as inter-chapters, the critical essay chapters contain extensive translated selections from Mā'ohi writers. These make clear—as did translated quotations in the concluding chapter of Robert Nicole's *The Word, the Pen, and the Pistol: Literature and Power in Tahiti* (2001)—that the literary-activist voices of French Polynesia, including Mateata-Allain's, have much to say that resonates with and enriches the conversation about Oceanian literary production.

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*House-Girls Remember: Domestic Workers in Vanuatu*, edited by Margaret Rodman, Daniela Kraemer, Lissant Bolton, and Jean Tarisesei. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-8248-3012-0, ix + 163 pages, map, 18 photographs, boxed sections in Bislama, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$47.00.

The experience of domestic workers in Vanuatu and across the Pacific has been little explored to date, and so this