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## Re-viewing Reviewing: Thoughts on Pacific Poetry and Hybridity

### **Abstract**

This article began as a straightforward book review. But nothing is straightforward: circuitous and reflexive, twisting and regressive, multiple pathways lead off in myriad directions. Even if there seems to be a main road down the middle, it is often up for repairs, and doesn't always get you where you really want to be. Here is what I originally wrote.

PAUL SHARRAD

## Re-viewing Reviewing: Thoughts on Pacific Poetry and Hybridity

This article began as a straightforward book review. But nothing is straightforward: circuitous and reflexive, twisting and regressive, multiple pathways lead off in myriad directions. Even if there seems to be a main road down the middle, it is often up for repairs, and doesn't always get you where you really want to be. Here is what I originally wrote.

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The Niu Waves Writers' Forum, a collective centred around the University of the South Pacific and its active program of visiting writers, has been a significant force in pushing literary expression in the Pacific off the formal page and into performance and a wider range of voices than previously. Robert Nicole's 2001 collection, *Niu Waves: Contemporary Writing from the Pacific* (Suva: Pacific Writing Forum/Oceania Centre for Arts & Culture) provides a good sampling of the lively mix coming from a new generation of Pacific writers, and some poems by Frances Loya-Vaka'uta stood out in that book as offering promise of new themes and skilful expression. *Of Schizophrenic Voices* is a collection of forty-four of her poems, with line drawings by the author and her husband. These reflect the many identities of today's Pacific Islanders and the poet's own mixed heritage. Teweiariki Teairo is also a member of the Writers' Forum and a Lecturer in Education at the University of the South Pacific. He is an accomplished visual artist as well, and enlivens his collection with a range of his artwork.

One of Koya's *Niu Waves* poems, 'Password Protected', reveals an interesting engagement with the computer age. This is entirely appropriate to a region that has been using satellite technology and other distance education media for some time, and here the poet makes the password into an extended metaphor for the blocks to communication and meaning in our minds. This poem is unfortunately absent from the author's collection, but its legacy is seen there in many poems which feature textual play with all the signs of the word-processing keyboard. I'm not sure whether this relates to Kamau Brathwaite's typeface experiments, but the effect here is an irritating clutter of slashes, asterisks, hyphens, colons and assorted accent marks that seem to have no real purpose. If they are meant as codings for intonation and rhythm in performance their logic is not self-evident, and they make interpreting the whole poem on the page nigh impossible. There would need to be something deeply meaningful in the relation of idea to

form to make the labour of reading worthwhile, and in most cases complications of computerese mask a fairly straightforward love lyric that gains nothing from technical experiment.

Some experiment with 'text messaging' spellings works better than the typographic splatter and might develop into significant pieces. More successful also are the e.e. cummings-like visual dramatisations on the page of falling and rising, though after a time this in itself becomes a cliché. Too often the attempts at technical experiment fail to convince the reader that they add more than superfluous decoration, although occasionally there is a nice match of graphics and meaning, as in 'Diaspora of Bloodlines', where straight and circling lines and slashes between words enact the idea of multiple, split, and moving identities and feelings.

Teweiariki Teairo provides a different innovation in his inclusion of work in the Kiribati language. I am not the person to comment on the effectiveness of these pieces, but it is important to have this kind of bilingual publication as a negotiation of the local and global spaces that Pacific Islanders inhabit. Other than this feature, the experiment is mainly with 'shape poems', since the content and form throughout is familiar to anyone who has browsed amongst Pacific poetry from the seventies on: celebrations of island nature, quizzical looks at school experience, political statements about ecology and development ('Coincidence') in lists of attributes chained together by repeated but varied phrases (as in 'An Ode to Oceania').

The balance between trying too hard and not trying hard enough is always difficult to find, especially for new writers and even more so when it comes to poetry. Pacific writing has at times, and because of its often very localised arena of production, been given 'instant' exposure — quick response to a situation followed by a reading in a writers' group and then compilation into a book for a specialist local publisher without the kind of selection and editing process that would come if works had been circulated more widely to journals and international publishers. Prof. Subramani's endorsement on Koya's back cover begins 'Many of us heard Frances Koya read her poems at the Barn in Suva' and Teairo assiduously notes the occasions on which poems were first read. Such an 'in-house' reception is a useful encouragement to writers, but it does not ultimately help them to establish a critical sense of what works on the page and beyond their immediate world. This may be a common process for poetry anywhere these days given the reluctance of larger publishing houses to take it on, and we could mount a solid argument for letting the world see what Islanders really think and feel and how they write about it, without having external editors shape it all according to what outsiders expect. Nonetheless, coterie production is not often the best way to get objective critical feedback, and such responses are necessary for a writer's long-term development. A few more workshops, more writing, rigorous culling and redrafting would lead to more compelling books of

verse. Otherwise we become mired in ‘personal jottings’. We can all think through issues in our head, write diary notes to ourselves or friends, pour out emotions about immediate family, but if we are to make public poetry of it all, we need to be sure that we have something to offer more than what everyone else can come up with — nuance, profundity, wit, the ability to register some drama of how a situation or idea grabs us in a particular way, formal skill in shaping or originality of image. No one gets a full mix of these criteria on a regular basis, but some mix is required before any reader beyond one’s immediate circle of friends can be expected to take an interest. These books are a sign of talents worth encouraging, and for that reason it would have been a good idea to wait a bit longer and get more feedback about what works on the page and what is best saved for performance, what can be shed in order to concentrate on the interesting bits, and some editorial correction of subject-verb agreements and other typos.

Teaero’s sparse repetition can work to dramatise an idea very effectively (‘Born to be Bombed’). Shaping one’s lines, however, is in itself not enough to give resonance or significance to a work; shape poems certainly add interest to the reading experience, but does centring lines affect the rhythm or the sense of the piece, or is it merely a decorative addition? The poet is notable for his moments of reflection on the creative process (‘Stretching’) and his embedding of contemporary literacy in conventional images of flowers (‘Garland’) and every so often in narratives that take on dramatic force (‘Merry Ancestors’) or short pieces whose sly wit is grounded in word-play:

Principals  
 all  
 principals  
 run schools  
 run in schools  
 run in and out of schools  
 schools make principals run

Koya succeeds in taking the established Pacific poetic form of rhetorical repetition and elaboration (‘In these small villages’) into new areas of experiment with wordplay and stanza arrangement energising the mix of lyric celebration and political questioning. (Occasional coinings need to be inspected to see what they add, though: why — other than for simple sound effect, combine ‘water’ and ‘marine’?). She also comes up with some nice locally appropriate and productive metaphors, as in ‘The spirit of the tree’, when lying inside listening to drumming rain produces a cluster of associations expressed by linking the mind with nailed down corrugated iron roofing. Similarly the standard writing class experiment of cataloguing definitions of some abstraction (‘Disappointment is like’) is given interest by a series of short narratives that take the exercise into social comment and even some surreal imagery. Simple familiar situations are also made into effective humorous material that would work well in readings to

local, especially younger, audiences, as in 'Cockroaches'. The author's other contribution lies in a forthright celebration of sensual and sexual relations in imagery that brings together nature, body, sensation and the word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that is all very well, but having just been reading again about hybridity theory, I came upon Nikos Papastergiadis's description of Yuri Lotman's discussion of translation processes within his notion of a 'semiosphere'. It sent me into a u-turn and some backtracking along the postcolonial trail.

First, a text arrives from the outside; it appears in its original form, in its own language. Its strangeness is intact.

Second, a transformation at both ends begins to occur.... The foreign text is idealised because it offers the local culture the opportunity to break with the past. Here the foreign text is imbued with salvific qualities. However, there also emerges a counter-tendency whereby the foreign text is linked to a submerged element in the receiving culture; the foreign text thus activates a dormant component, and is therefore interpreted as an organic continuation or a rehabilitation of the familiar culture.

Third, there emerges the tendency to deprecate the source of origin from which the text came, and to emphasise that the true potential of the text is realised only if it is integrated into the receiving culture. Reception has not only led to transformation but is a form of transcendence. Before, it was debased and distorted; now it has the grace of truth and universality.

Fourth, after the imported text has become fully assimilated ... the local becomes producer of the new and original texts.

Fifth, the receiver is now a transmitter — or in Lotman's words, it 'issues forth a flood of texts directed to other peripheral areas of the semiosphere'.

(Papastergiadis 271)

It is not difficult to recognise the language of Modernism or of earlier Commonwealth Literature criticism here (postcolonial art reviving moribund European culture or enriching the English language), or to see something of the metropolitan culture industry's processing of Caribbean writing or Salman Rushdie even. What this set of ideas did for me, was to highlight my own reading position as reviewer within a global cosmopolitan literary circuit. If I had not looked for 'salvific' qualities in the two poetry collections, I had perhaps projected a certain disappointment in their lack of them, chagrin at not discovering the next international postcolonial star. The texts I had been reading were not entirely regional 'other' to a metropolitan 'self' — we shared a globalised language, one text clearly engaged with contemporary technology, the other reflected experiences of higher education and tourism in my own country as well as life in the islands. Indeed, the two books occupied their own metropolitan position in relation to their region, coming out of a university-based, urban-based setting. Nonetheless, they were both very local in ways I had overlooked or undervalued, and because of that, I had marginalised them relative to my own standpoint. In fact, because of my position as metropolitan critic, I had indulged in what Jonathan Friedman

calls ‘intellectual porkbarrelling’ (79) by celebrating the ‘subversive’ hybridity of new kinds of writing from small and far-off places while at the same time setting up implicitly a developmental criterion that explicitly I reject when teaching about the Eurocentrism of Arnold’s touchstones and Eliot’s yardstick of non-parochial ‘maturity’ — canonical codes underpinning at least the cultural discriminations of colonialist knowledge/power. So here is the new track I take with my review.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ‘location of culture’ in and around texts such as Koya’s or the recent collection, *Falling Foliage*, from Papua New Guinea poet Melissa Aigila is highlighted by the contrast with John Hutnyk’s critique of World Music — the ethnic fusion styles of Black Britain and African France, for example — as merely another supermarket shelf of exotic differences commodified within global capitalism. The usually small size and often simple style along with the restricted circulation of many Pacific publications indicate the regional limits of the cultural work they mainly do. Apart from books by a few often diasporic writers who make it to the University of Hawaii or Auckland Presses, most Pacific literary texts can only be found by travelling to their places of publication or a couple of specialist shops here and there. If they are the result of syncretic cultural histories that draw upon international movements, they are equally clearly not part of a global industry.

In most island traditions there are codes of formality to be observed in public address and an acceptance of personal displays of emotion. Frequently, this makes for writing in English that to the reader raised on the ‘cool’ voices of transatlantic print culture seems inappropriately pompous or cheaply sentimental. Tialuga Sunia Seloti’s collection of occasional orations (eulogies and elegies in the main) in both Samoan and English show how literary writing can be seen as a part of public ceremonial, in which striving for an artificial ‘poetic’ language is de rigueur, and the open, sanitised display of ‘private’ feelings about family or religious belief is expected. It is this wider set of meanings around the print text that makes the public airing of unorthodox personal opinion in literature so scandalous and so exciting. The tradition of formal address is hinted at in the tones and imagery of Konai Helu Thaman’s much-cited ‘You, the Choice of my Parents’ and gives the edge to its otherwise quiet criticism of the persona’s voice at the end. The public formality of speech is also outrageously flouted in the demotic vulgarity of Sia Figiel’s prose poems as they excoriate the hypocrisies of collective self-delusion in self-satisfied village life.

The Pacific pioneered satellite communications for education and is now fully into the ‘dot.com’ world. (Some islands have even made money out of registering their names as email addresses.) The internet makes the Island diaspora that much more of a global community with ties to home than ever

before, so that you can now sit in a net café in Apia and talk to your cousins in Auckland, LA, Honolulu, London, Berlin or wherever. This is perhaps the message of Frances Koya's experiment, beyond the specific content of the poems, and its bringing together of new technology and creative written expression is yet another step in the endless journey of cultural adaptation in Oceania, equivalent to the 'text message' spelling of the lyrics in Island rap/hip-hop by people like Che Fu and King Kapisi.

\* \* \* \* \*

In terms of hybridity debates, this is an interesting case study, since it enacts the problem outlined by several commentators. If these writers and texts are hybrid, and I occupy another hybrid position (second-world postcolonial in a nation that struggled free from Mother England but imposes a white hegemony on its fourth-world indigenous population and arguably still on parts of the Pacific), then what is the use of hybridity as a liberating tool of analysis? Well, one answer is that it does (eventually) oblige a critic to consider the actual vectors and sites of textual/cultural work and to acknowledge that there are different hybridities differently related to power differentials. These differences leave plenty of room for work to be done, by both writers and critics, and standing in a position of hybridity does not prevent one from entering into a dialogue with another set of hybrid negotiations, though it does demand some inspection of one's own constitutive framework (as Spivak has pointed out).

I still think there is a degree of facility with a medium, a level of aesthetic tact relating to genre and mode of communication that marks off an accomplished piece of writing from an interesting experiment needing more trials to be a demonstrable success. (For example, some of Joe Balaz's performance poems work as well on the page as they do on CD, and Teresia Teaiwa's shape poem 'Foremothers' integrates the visual form of a circular stick-passing game with the flexible continuity of tradition theme.) But gunning the critical motors and zooming off down the ready-made tourist highway of pure formalism is the broad and fast way to destruction when (to misquote one scripture) the narrower and slower pathway through local scenery may be a more reliable option. Debate in the Pacific often rolls around ecological studies and a quest for sustainable development; perhaps we need an ecologically sensitive sustainable critical practice too.

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