Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania
Alice Te Punga Somerville
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In *Once Were Pacific* Alice Te Punga Somerville introduces an unambiguously Indigenous perspective: the author argues that the "relationship between Indigeneity and migration is so crucial" to Indigenous practices today that it is vital for Pacific, and indeed, Māori identity formation. And just as Māori have to re-define their sense of identity in Duff's *Once Were Warriors* to which the title alludes, *Once Were Pacific* foregrounds the way in which creative work—apart from literature including hip-hop, film, television, visual art and theater—revolves around re-membering Māori migratory moves across, as well as kinship with, the Pacific, rather than asserting an Indigenous minority identity within the New Zealand nation.

Te Punga Somerville cleverly dismantles the predominant focus on a Māori-Pākehā binary by foregrounding Māori-Pacific connections conspicuously tangible at first colonial contact: her analysis is based on nothing less than the canvas of Tupaia's painting prominently placed on the book's cover, introducing a distinctly Indigenous interpretation of the interaction between Māori, Pacific Islander, and White colonizer. The Māori trading with Cook in 1769 evidently were familiar with, and placed higher value on, South Pacific tapa cloth than on anything the Europeans offered, underpinning a Pacific dimension to Māori identity reverberating in oral traditions.

The unitary vision of Oceania along the lines of Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau'ofa constitutes the framework open for debate in this study, a vision that re-centers Māori identification with the Pacific, but at the same time, obnubilates apparent tensions between Māori and Pasifika in Aotearoa, as the author rightly asserts. Instead, Te Punga Somerville supports a "kind of regional identification—Tomoana's 'Hawaiiki nation' perhaps—that emphasizes rather than distracts from Indigeneity" (xxix).

Part I brings to surface the way in which Māori find themselves part of Pacific places, literally as in the person of politician and scholar Te Rangihiroa, symbolically as part of the PCC in Hawai'i, and textually as Māori authors in literary anthologies. Chapter 2 analyzes texts by Māori poets writing in the Pacific diaspora. While renowned author Robert Sullivan is widely published, Vernice Wineera and Evelyn Patuawa-Nathan have largely—deliberately?—slipped the radar of dominant literary discourse until now. This chapter reveals Te Punga Somerville's fine art of threading a Pacific web comprised of distinct Māori identity

discourses in the poems discussed that, at the same time, foreground a strong sense of Pacific connectivity. The author's interpretation of Sullivan's lyrics in particular serve to underpin her argument by re-establishing Māori-Pacific connections against the framework of genealogic waka memories: "Sullivan reflects on Māori as ocean people: voyagers, navigators, travelers, deeply embedded in specific land because of, not despite, previous migrations" (52). Thus, the author offers an inspirational reconfiguration of the notion of diaspora by featuring poets who are at the same time at home—in the Pacific—and away from home, Aotearoa.

The book re-shifts its focus in chapter 3 on the cultural production of Aotearoa as part of the Pacific, but this time *based in* Aotearoa. Here, the author unambiguously recognizes the transcultural social reality, insofar as settler-colonial history, culture and ideology permeate Māori identification that is seemingly disintegrated from Pacific identification. A critical analysis of Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (1987) exposes the way in which horizontal hostility in racist Māori attitudes towards other Pacific Islanders is overcome in the end by recognizing the reality of an "Aotearoa-inclusive Pacific, privileging and mobilizing whakapapa relationships to recognize and subvert the context of colonialism" (74).

Te Punga Somerville's text is most persuasive in her critical literary analyses. For instance, her discussion of Hinewirangi's poetry collection *Kanohi kit e Kanohi* underscores how "connecting with the Pacific brings about new perspectives on Aotearoa" (79), not only unearthing disregarded or marginalized Pacific-ness, but also raising awareness of the ways in which Māori themselves have relegated Pacific Islanders to the fringes, to the place of the 'other' within Aotearoa.

Part II of the book explores the Pacific in Aotearoa, and delivers the promise of the study, how to remember and celebrate Pacific connections without homogenizing distinct Pacific Islander communities nor Māori in Aotearoa. According to Te Punga Somerville, *Pasifika* involves an identity incorporating "migrant, with connection to New Zealand; diasporic; manuhiri, guests" (96), and the framework of Oceania seems insufficient to convey the inherent conflicting relationship that comes to the fore despite shared experiences.

Māori-Pasifika collaboration is at the center of discussion in chapter 4, where the book offers glimpses of Pacific alliances in literature, music, art and politics in the past and present. Te Punga Somerville convincingly explores what Teresia Teaiwa and Sean Mallon (2006) call an 'ambivalent kinship' between Māori and Pasifika in Aotearoa, foregrounding the connections based on epistemology and whakapapa as much as on contemporary cultural affinities, however complex and fraught with political tension, which is due not least to their minority status within a Pākehā-dominated framework.

Once Were Pacific does not shy away from the difficult questions, since the author admits herself that Māori authors writing about Pasifika connections are few and far between, and tend "toward representing

experiences that are solely Māori or Māori-Pākehā rather than Māori-Pasifika" (123). The focus on Pasifika creative production in chapters 6 and 7 proves more rewarding in dealing with these dis/connections, showing how creative illustrations of Māori-Pasifika interaction is also fraught with racist prejudice internalized by the overarching dominant culture: "As long as Māori and Pasifika communities insist that their primary relationship is with the New Zealand nation-state, relationships between these communities will struggle to function beyond the narrow parameters that state provides" (175).

In *Once Were Pacific*, Te Punga Somerville successfully challenges the "nonsense of the idea that Māori literature is merely a subset of New Zealand literature" (85) by analyzing Māori creative work within and against a pan-Pacific context. In contrast to numerous publications foregrounding the settler-colonial experience, this study explicitly re-centers Indigenous epistemologies, making a compelling case for Kaupapa Māori research as defined by Tuhiwai Smith (1999). *Once Were Pacific* certainly does not deny colonial histories or legacies, but rather, re-affirms Pacific connections by identifying shared cultural concepts and genealogies that work as a valuable analytical framework.

The value of this study hinges on the author's ability to avoid the pitfalls of homogenizing Native Pacific peoples and subsequently undermining their specific struggles for asserting distinct identities. In this respect, the discussion of diasporic Māori writers is a particularly good case in point, given their transcultural social realities yet firmly established Māori identification as reflected in their lyrics. According to Wineera, "one does not stop being Maori or Samoan or Haole because one is now living in La'ie." What Wineera asserts as a "vast marae that is the Pacific we call home" (46) serves as a means to re-connect across the Pacific without diminishing a specific Māori identity.

However, the deliberate omission of social realities generated by a history of colonial invasion, a postcolonial settler nation, as well as by contemporary global tendencies paints an incomplete picture for obscuring the background of cultural politics. Opposition to neo/colonial dominance as well as assertions of Indigeneity are deeply embedded in the creative works presented here, yet a discussion of the political context is completely missing, as the author emphasizes herself: "Although my reading focuses on the ethnic dimension of the text, colonialism, racism, and class are inextricably linked" (130).

Ultimately, Te Punga Somerville re-traces the Pacific map along the lines of what Margaret Jolly (2007) calls "the great Ocean of Hau'ofa's vision" (530), of people who "share a deep genealogy of cultural and historical connection" (530), not only sharing tidbits of cultural practices of the past, but a vast canvas of contemporary creative work reinforcing Pacific connections and disconnections in the twenty-first century. The 'Hawaiiki nation' which Te Punga Somerville envisions provides a "governmental, diplomatic, artistic, spiritual and scientific basis for the continued flourishing of the various specific communities contained

within its sweep" (211). Along these lines, *Once Were Pacific* has unearthed old routes in novel ways, calling for larger, more detailed projects by Indigenous Pacific scholars to explore the validity and challenges for conceptualizing a Hawaiiki nation.

Works Cited

Jolly, Margaret. "Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands." *The Contemporary Pacific* 19.2 (2007): 530. Print.