

Teaching Pacific literature

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Question:

What resources and strategies are available to teachers and students of Pacific literature?

Answer:

Resources for teachers

When I began teaching Pacific literature at University in 2005, I soon became aware of two things:

- a) The canonical texts I studied as a student were still being studied.
- b) There was a burgeoning new generation of writers out there not being studied.

A complaint I often hear from teachers of Pacific literature concerns the lack of suitable teaching resources available. The gap between observations (a) and (b) leads to an interesting conundrum: most of the materials that are readily available are now considerably dated; most materials on new works are too new to be well disseminated.

Fortunately, a handful of canonical Pacific authors—among them Albert Wendt (Samoa), Sia Figiel (Samoa) and Epeli Hau'ofa (Tonga)—have reputable archives of critical articles and reviews on their work. This is particularly the case for Albert Wendt, whose career as novelist, short story writer, playwright, poet, and anthologist spans over fifty years. To a lesser extent, the same applies to the novels and poetry of Commonwealth Prize winner Sia Figiel and the satirist Epeli Hau'ofa. A good place to start locating critical material on these authors is the University of Auckland's New Zealand Literature File (www.nzlf.auckland.ac.nz). The New Zealand Book Council (www.bookcouncil.org.nz) also provides important links and article references.

But for Pacific writers published in the last decade, wide-ranging critical scholarship has yet to fully emerge. University catalogue searches that include theses, dissertations and scholarly journal articles will uncover some materials suitable for a specialised academic audience. Articles with a broader audience in mind can be found in Pacific-focused literary journals such as:

- *Mana: A South Pacific Journal of Language and Literature*, the first Pacific literary journal to be published (established in 1976) came out of the mecca for Pacific literary production at the time, the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji.
- *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* is a bi-annual literary journal produced by the South Pacific branch of the Association for Commonwealth Literatures and Language Studies.
- *Dreadlocks: The Literary Journal of the School of Language, Arts and Media*, 'devoted to new creative works and cultural debates in Oceania', is produced by the Fiji-based Pacific Writers' Forum and the University of the South Pacific.

- *The Contemporary Pacific* (University of Hawai'i at Manoa) offers a generic, more scholarly collection of work addressing contemporary Pacific issues over a range of disciplines (www.uhpress.hawaii.edu/journals/cp/issues.html).

For newer material on more recent authors, the internet provides a number of engaging websites for students interested in specific authors or books. For example, Karlo Mila, award-winning Tongan poet, has a regular blog on the New Zealand Book Month site (http://nzbookmonth.co.nz/blogs/karlo_mila/archive/2008/06/04/9929); artist and author Dan Taulapepe McMullan has his own website (<http://www.taulapapa.com>); and the Ministry of Pacific Affairs has recently developed Pacific Star Map, which showcases Pacific artists and writers (<http://www.pacificstarmap.com>).

Three recommended websites for familiarising yourself with Pacific literature in general are:

- Pasifika Poetry Web, co-ordinated by myself and created to address the dearth of readily available material on Pacific writers. It is the only Pacific-focused, audio-visually oriented website to provide filmed author readings and interviews. These interviews are spliced into links for ease of locating discussion surrounding pertinent subjects. The site also reproduces selected poems and provides links to other pertinent resources. I have found it to be an excellent teaching resource for classroom use (having designed it for my own classroom needs!) See www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/pasifika
- Black Mail Press, a poetry e-zine co-ordinated by Samoan poet Doug Poole. Now in its eighth year, and its 26th issue, it showcases poetry from all over the world and has published several Pacific-focused issues (<http://nzpoetsonline.homestead.com>).
- Tinfish Press, founded in 1995 and based in Hawai'i. The press produces a yearly journal to which you can subscribe and publishes chapbooks and books from the Pacific region (<http://www.tinfishpress.com>).

Recommended books and collections of Pacific literature include *Niu Voices* (2006), which contains contemporary short stories and poetry from Aotearoa born and bred Pacific writers; *Whetu Moana* (2003), which features an extensive range of Polynesian poets; and *Mauri Ola*, a collection collated by the same editors and publisher, which is forthcoming in 2010. For readers interested in French Polynesian literature, *Varua Tupu* (2006) is the first collection of its kind with prose and poems translated from Tahitian and French into English.

For critical context, an accessible and comprehensive survey of the field of Pacific literature can be found in *Pacific Islands Writing* by Michelle Keown (2008). Sina Va'ai's monograph *Literary Representations in Western Polynesia* (1990) is also helpful in contextualising South Pacific Literature, as is the critical volume of articles and interviews edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson, *Inside Out* (1999). *SPAN 62* (forthcoming) provides a selective genealogy of articles on Pacific literary criticism from 1976 to date.

Strategies for teachers

I'm a fan of tasks based around pyramid work groups, which encourage active individual and group participation in literary analysis. A typical session on Pacific poetry might look like this and can be adjusted according to available time:

- Students are each handed a copy of a poem to read to themselves.
- We discuss the poem as it appears on the page in the physical terms of spatial layout, line enjambment, line breaks, font etc. Reading its mechanics first helps to demystify

the poem's 'meaning' and alleviate a preconceived exclusivity surrounding the reading of poetry (that is, only higher beings have access to its meaning).

- We read the poem aloud. For poetry, which has strong aesthetic base in orality, this step is essential. A good warm-up exercise is to have students read the poem out loud by themselves all at the same time. Have fun with volume. Try collectively whispering it, then shouting it out loud. The exercise creates a lot of noise and energy in the classroom and works to break down self-consciousness. Then students read the poem to a partner, after which volunteers read out their oral versions to the class. This allows for a range of readings and expressions to be shared so that students are able to hear different versions of the same poem and become aware of how the reader/hearer/speaker is an active participant in making meaning. It might pay to listen beforehand to some of the poems being read on Pasifika Poetry, keeping in mind which ones best lend themselves to such oral experimentation: eg Tusiata Avia's 'My Dog' or Karlo Mila's 'Eating Dark Chocolate While Watching Paul Holmes' Apology' or Selina Tusitala Marsh's chant 'Fast Talking PI'.
- We discuss imagery, metaphor, nuance, tone, theme, contextual issues and thematic developments. Depending on the environment, the students' observations can be shared in pyramids (two students, then four students, etc) or in open class discussion.
- I show an interview with the poet from the Pasifika Poetry website. Questions are geared towards discussing the poet, their life, passions, concerns and commitments, and questions surrounding performance and orality. The interview provides an invaluable resource for helping students to culturally contextualise the poems.
- We listen to the author read/perform the poem.
- We discuss the different readings, perceptions, and receptions of the poem. Introducing the poet *after* students have developed their own connections to the work is important. This exercise can lead to breakthrough insights about poetry, culture and the relationship between personal and political voice.
- The students are given further resources (such as articles) to examine on their own.

As evident in my use of interviews, authorial presence is important to my practice. Because of the contemporaneous nature of the course, where possible I invite authors to read and talk to my students. The Book Council has a list of available authors but many can be directly contacted. Meeting writers allows the mysterious cloud surrounding 'author' to be lifted. I set these up as talanoa (Fonua, 2003) sessions—shared conversations facilitated by questions or issues supplied by students. In preparation for the author's visit, students discuss topics and questions, write them down, select them, and place them in a box. To emphasise shared and collective knowledge, chairs and tables are arranged in a circle. Once the author joins us, I then have students pass the box around and pull out a random question. This interview technique serves two purposes: It introduces an element of 'play' and surprise, and it alleviates the self-consciousness of the asker—they can ask any question, raise any matter, and it won't be directly linked to themselves. The group has collective ownership, which removes the individual burden possibly experienced by asking sensitive questions. Due to the level of group preparedness, the author's visits enable a rich and fruitful exchange. Students are actively involved in the knowledge production taking place.

New Zealand is home to the largest Polynesian population in the world—Pacific Islanders constitute the fastest growing youth population. More teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the need for its taught literature to reflect this growing and dynamic demographic. Subsequently, more need access to Pacific literature teaching resources and strategies. One organisation that addresses these needs, and is currently being co-chaired by Aotearoa, New Zealand, is the South Pacific Association of Language and Literature Studies. Its website has further information on resources and networks further afield (www.spaclals.com).

Resources for teaching Pacific literature

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