

Grace Mera Molisa

NiVanuatu

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NiVanuatu

- Papua New Guinea
 - 110 different languages/
dialects within 80+ islands
(100 clans) = Vanuatu
- reclaim NiVanuatu
- teacher, poet, community
activist, political leader



background

- grounded in native Ambac ways
 - educated both formally and informally in both rural and urban systems
- region endured French and British colonialism : 73+years Joint Conominium
- teacher - began writing poetry 'by accident' retort to tourism's demands to be more accommodating, she quipped needed more intelligent tourists: "Vatu Invocation"
- 1sts: Ni-Vanuatu woman in education and politics
- positionality: post-colonial, Christian, highly educated, well-travelled, politically adept, daughter of preacher, married to high ranking leader

Independence Movement

- issues are black and white, clear, decisive, poetic self-portraits
- Political party: “New Hebrides National Party” - differentiate selves from Francophone competition, so renames selves “Vanuatu Pati”
 - Vanua‘aku - “Our Land”
 - Vanuatu - “Land Standing Up”
 - movement linked to rural mass movement versus self-interested petty bourgeois dissident urban fringe

growing pains

- Independent nation 3 years old, when writing: birthing pains
- national identity, colonialism, corruption, tourism, freedom of press, still oppressive to women
- 6 years later, Black Stone II reveals realities of indigenizing a “double alienating” doubly foreign government
 - 73+years Joint Conominium - realities > just as disempowered in new system as the old one

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Blackstone

- “poet of the people”
- “Melanesian Way” by deploying indigenous metaphors
- links art with political struggle for independence
- 1983 *Black Stone: Poems* (SUVA: SPCAS Mana Publications)
- 1987 *Colonised People* (Port Vila: Black Stone Publications)
- 1989 *Black Stone II: Poems* (Vanuatu: Black Stone Publications)
- 1997 translated into French
- Black Stone Publications founded and managed by Molisa



publications

- non-fiction: Raet Blogg Pipol: Wea Rod?
- Governance in Vanuatu: In Search of the Nakamal Way
- Woman Ikat Raet Long Human Raet o No? [Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women]
- 2002 Women and Good Governance (published posthumously)
 - conferences were the primary way for women, pacific islanders, poets to share their experiences and strategies
 - 1994 Indigenous Artists Conference

poetry

- possibilities of poetry as communicative tool and political weapon (1993)
- poetry superior to other professions
- poetry heals minds, longer time frame and larger scope than just exposing local truths
- beyond poetry for poetry's sake = "passive poetry"
 - it generates corrective action > the primary role of poetry is serious commitment to social transformation

gender

- restoration and maintenance of balance in cultural and gender relations
- poetics of politics inherent in her poetry
 - poetic strategies to address power imbalances between colonizer/indigenous and between Ni-Vanuatu men/women
- pacific pre-colonial checks & balances (matrilineal clans, separate/autonomous organizations)
 - colonial/civilized Christian societies undermined these ordering bodies, food, economic production
 - “first things first” position men made with independence: then we can deal later with the women problem. History shows they never get to the gender issues
 - 1) colonialism, 2) then custom - inter-tribal, lineage comes to balance, 3) then gender
 - to avoid cries that feminism is foreign, Molisa grounds her work in ancient volcano; equilibrium was precolonial Melanesian concept

black stone

- colour is linked symbolically with the new nation of Vanuatu - reclaiming blackness from Dumont d'Urville 1832 "Black Islands" or "Islands of Black People"
- black skin red blood "Black solidified magma with its underlying layer of red hot lava" (quoted in Marsh 256)
- vatu = rock - related to land and its origins
 - mana wahine, origins in the body of the land
 - "[V]anu mean[s] land, home, state, origin; and 'tu' mean[s] to be, exist, to stand, hope, strength, roots, history, the past, the present, the future, infinity. Put together, Vanuatu means Our Land Forever!" (Vanuatu 26-7, quoted in Marsh 257)
 - asserting a preeminent existence prior to colonization
 - always in transition, finding equilibrium and balance, giving birth to new political identity, maintaining cultural and spiritual integrity
 - volatile nature, birthing pains

Language Justice

- all Molisa poems in English
- “Colonized People” - speaks for those unable to represent themselves, comments on unfulfilled promises aimed at women, both urban and rural
- tri-lingual publications are time-consuming and expensive (Ambae dialect, English). Anglophone bias.
 - challenged establishment under ‘protection’ of English
 - less constrained, writes in Bislama (common pidgin) to grassroots rural

“So I’m really trying to express what the silent bulk of womanhood has not found voice to express before. Really I am talking to our decision makers who are mostly men” (Griffen interviews 76 quotes in March 2015)

words as a “site for struggle”

“Artists, people skilled in expressing the feelings and visions of their people play an essential role in establishing, recording, documenting and preserving the Cultural Identity of their people, their experiences, feelings and situations of their time” (29, quoted in Marsh 247)

“Artists are gifted by the Spirit of their Community to distill and express the essence of their community’s cultural, social, political and economic environment through whatever form of art the Artist employs. The same Spirit of Creativity, the same spirit of the Creator moves Artists (Local 30, quoted in Marsh 247)

Discussion Prompts

- In what ways is Grace Mera Molisa one of the iconic oceanic mana wahine, wahine mana, wahine koa?
- Discuss the role of art/artists. Why do you think so many activists turn to poetry?
- Engage the images/metaphor/materialism of “volcanic”
 - its qualities, in constant transition, (re)birth, ancestral
- Discuss her framing of gender issues through equilibrium or balance of power.
- How does education, diaspora, travel inform these Oceanic poets’ work?