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Alchemies of Distance (review)

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tors' choice of a striking painting by Ralph Regenvanu, director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, to adorn the front cover of the collection? Entitled *Las kakae* (The Last Supper) it depicts twelve red, stylized, split drums, upright and in disarray (vainly protesting?) behind a long table with, at the center, a much larger blue-black drum, a crown of thorns on its head, looking with empty eyes out of the painting. Behind it, across the calm waters of the bay (Port Vila Bay?), and slightly above and to the left of the drum's head, three white crucifixes sit quietly astride a hilltop

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Alchemies of Distance, by Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard. Honolulu: subpress, Tinfish; Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 2001. ISBN 1-930068-10-7; 77 pages, photograph. Paper, US\$12.00.

Born in American Sāmoa, raised on military bases and in colleges in the United States, and now teaching literature at the University of Hawai'i, Caroline Sinavaiana has a name long familiar to readers of Pacific literature, though mainly through individual poems encountered in journals here and there. It is a real pleasure to have her work now available in a compendium prefaced with her "ficto-critical" autobiography.

The work she has been coediting (*Women Writing Oceania: Weaving the Sails of Vaka*) suggests some of her concerns and key images: the mixing of contemporary feminist activism with celebration of traditions, of

domestic weaving with the history of Polynesian voyaging. The search for belonging amid a life of travel, coupled with the colonial problematic of living in a home that is also not home (whether it be one's birthplace returned to after twenty years, or the imperial homeland, neither racially nor culturally sympathetic to its labor force, gathered from the four corners of the globe) provides the governing concern of the collection. Sinavaiana protests against the forces separating and downgrading people, but she is also able to bring together elements of the multiplicity of disparate experiences in remarkably productive ways. Her essay, for example, is one of the few instances of a personal syncretism encompassing Samoan "talk story," Salinger, Kamau Brathwaite, Sufi verse, Bruce Chatwin, and Tibetan Buddhism that doesn't end up sounding coldly contrived or fancifully New Age.

Sinavaiana's combination of personal warmth, political anger, and lyrical intelligence, plus the eclectic range of references, makes for some lively verse engaged with contemporary issues and grounded in Samoan traditions. As with village orators, the writer establishes "a kind of genealogy," linking creation myth to travel via the image of the Tuli bird, and exploring the concept of *vā*—the space between things that produces relationships and lets everything breathe. In poetic practice, this finds its avatar in Charles Olson, while the activist voice comes from the declamatory style of Bob Dylan and Black writing. It discovers its image in the Samoan war goddess, Nafanua, whose voyaging "opens a pathway for crossing the divide of loss" (25) and provides a counter to "the colonial poison of

self-hatred” (24). It is through Nafanua and the symbol of journey that the poet finds connection to her grandmother marooned in Amerika (“granny”), her own various selves (“pilgrim’s progress”), and a future generation of Pacific sisters/daughters (“Sā Nafanuā”). This last poem is a triumph of swinging rhythm, blended symbolism, and feminist celebration, and well deserves its several appearances in anthologies.

In the “malaga / traveling party” section, following “departure,” is a careful sequence from quiet lyrical description of island life (“ianeta’s dance”), to the intrusion of international politics (“war news”), and a prayer for diasporic Black women battling numerous tribulations in Europe (“may your sleep be blessed”). As the verse becomes more rhetorically public, incantation and literary occasion tend to supplant the poet’s private encounter with a point of concern. Thus, in “death at the christmas fair: elegy for a fallen shopper,” the shocked witnessing of a poor Islander’s fatal heart attack outside a Honolulu shopping mall is deflected into an attack on trashy consumerism that seems an imposed poetic gesture of merely sentimental political effect. Equally, the occasional poem “village of hope: by the rivers of babylon” has a certain oratorical flair but remains what it is: a conference opening that plays obviously with a popular Caribbean song. Against these lapses into “poeticity,” we can set something like “medea of the islands,” which is densely literary in style and reference, but because of that, also a compelling lament for and critique of the self-destructive rage of parts of contemporary society in the Pacific. There is

also “on form & content, or: slouching toward texas,” which is an effective Ginsbergian “rant” that demands to be read aloud, achieving intensity through a satiric ringing of the changes on the US national anthem.

As the journeying comes to a closing “reunion,” the voice modulates back to a private quietude and a sequence of haiku reflectively evoking the author’s natural surroundings on O’ahu. The book is a well-devised collection. One might wish for a more exciting cover, but the contents make a worthy addition on the poetry shelf to similar voices such as Teresia Teaiwa’s, and different but not altogether dissimilar ones such as in Albert Wendt’s *Photographs* (1995).

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Kalabele, by Imaikalani Kalabele.
Honolulu: Kalamakū Press, 2002.
ISBN 0970959710; 90 pages, figures,
notes. Paper, US\$9.95.

Utterance always carries the powerful conditions of its speakers and writers. Imaikalani Kalabele’s self-named collection of poetry and art, *Kalabele*, gives utterance the force of an indigent Pacific voice. The poet sings in mythic songs of friendship and good fellowship, chants of resistance, and rebukes in the utterances of contemporary Hawaiians. Kalabele dances in the rhythm of his ancestors by evoking mythical themes. Kalabele reflects the issues of culture, Hawaiian identity, land alienation, American exploitation, and cultural decolonization. This collection has poetry and art speaking simultaneously, imagining a society