

list is much longer and more inclusive) who “perpetuate the language and its message of resistance through literature,” she then notes that their literature “both criticizes and heals the inferiority complexes and self-loathing that was created by cultural elites.” One way to read *Sista Tongue* is as a reply to the recent critiques of the Pidgin literary scene by writers such as Candace Fujikane, Rodney Morales, Dennis Kawaharada, and others. These critics have complained that some of the major works of the Pidgin literary scene, especially those associated with the mainly Asian-American Bamboo Ridge Press, have been more complicit than resistant. They have pointed out that much of this literature is nostalgic and not attentive to more important issues, such as the continuing occupation of Hawai‘i by the United States. I do not think this critique could be applied in any way to *Sista Tongue*. (Kanae’s work with ‘*Oiwi* also demonstrates an attentiveness on her part to how literature is an important arena for political education and resisting colonialism.) But if there is one limitation to this otherwise excellent book, it is her insistent celebration of the resistance of Pidgin without mentioning the complications, such as the debates about race in Yamanaka’s work, which factionalized Hawai‘i’s writing communities in the 1990s. For readers who are already aware of the history of Pidgin in Hawai‘i up until the 1980s, this might feel like a missed opportunity to hear Kanae’s take on a more recent chapter of the story of Pidgin in Hawai‘i.

But overall, the multigenre and multilinguistic form lets Kanae’s book do a lot of interesting work that it

couldn’t do in a more traditional format. *Sista Tongue* is personal and political. It is colloquial and critical. With its multiple layers of analysis, it is one of the most interesting and self-aware books to come out of Hawai‘i’s literary scene in recent years. Even the design of the book by Kristin Kaleinani Gonzales is exceptional and deserves a review from someone who knows more about graphic design than I do. Locally, the book has been so important that the new student orientation program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa ordered a thousand copies of it for entering freshmen to introduce them to local issues. *Sista Tongue* provides an unusually interesting overview of Hawai‘i’s language politics and will be an ideal primer for undergraduate classrooms, both in Hawai‘i and on the continent, for many years to come.

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Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying, by Sudesh Mishra. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2002. ISBN 1-877276-18-9, 78 pages. US\$29.95.

The close-up photograph on the cover of a drop of oil spreading out into rainbow layers on a tarmac road like spilled blood—at once a sublime, beautiful, but grounded image—indicates the timeliness (and what might once have been described as the timelessness) of this skillfully constructed collection. In the preface, Sudesh Mishra describes his intention to produce a collection of diasporic poetry

that makes connections based on “an underground logic of colours, tropes, sounds, textures, moods and secrets” (3). The poetry’s sensual evocations are not only underground (and this should be read in political, personal, cultural, literary, and postcolonial ways) but also topographical, sky bound, sea/soned, and earth(l)y. By inviting the reader to “join me in conjuring the spectral structure that haunts the poems” (3), the poet has demonstrated an openness to multiple interpretations, to what Voloshinov described as the multivalency of signs, and an awareness of the disjunctiveness of modern life and historical memory, especially as lived in the terms of early twenty-first-century diasporic consciousness.

Pitched uneasily between political exile, girmit (the period of indentured labor) history, contemporaneous life, fantasy, the voyaging of postcolonial literati and poetic melancholy, the poems are sharply observant, ironic, and expansive. They develop earlier themes such as lali (play [of language], performance); a concern with ends and beginnings; and the strange, painful implication of monstrous injustices mixed in with the everyday banalities of life. The satirical edge can still cut with surgical swiftness—from the cool fury directed at those who conduct unsympathetic Australian dole interviews: “The cretinous queries / Tailored for cretins, the inspection / Of terminal cvs / And to top it all, the icy power interviews / With fat schmucks who take cues / From some fuhrer in a velvet gulag” (45) in “Unemployment Blues,” to the dissing of politicians whose greed is responsible for all manner of long-term damage in

“A Wishing Well in Suva.” If the expressed wish is that a tsunami should come and sweep all such corruption away, it needs to be read in a spirit of millennial and utopian hope, of weariness born of excessive love for both home country and the world, despite ongoing inequities and atrocities.

Mishra’s development as a poet shows in the restrained, formal, technical brilliance of the poems, which, together with the postcolonial connections, and the postmodern and diasporic logic of the themes, holds the apparently disparate contents together. There are lines that may feel overwritten or striving, but they are deliberate, and are balanced alongside those that show mastery of the art of understatement—such as these lines from “Mrs Mukherjee”: “And Yeats / Two years before Gas and Gallipoli, / Startling an entire carriage, / Ruining with tears the print of *Gitanjali*” (36). These poems do not easily give up on the fantasy of an epicurean world, but are too rooted in writerly realities and the hardships of living girmit memory to become “A literary trophy to spike on the picket fence / Of some bragging Bohemia” (37)—the fate of one photograph of Tagore—just one of the many doubles in the “history of meshed lives” identified by the implied speaker in “Mrs Mukherjee.”

Looking for a way to articulate the complexity of responses called up by this new collection, I read a 1992 article by Vijay Mishra called “The Girmit Ideology Revisited” (in *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, edited by Emmanuel S Nelson, New York: Greenwood Press) in which I found a line that

spoke to some of the incoherencies of my own response. Discussing the groundbreaking effects of Sudesh Mishra's poetry in terms of its "post-modern polyphony," Vijay Mishra described the way "[Sudesh] Mishra mediates the Girit ideology with poems that do not open up their secrets easily to the uninitiated." It was precisely this cultural intricacy of the poems—which can evoke the distinctly local in the vernacular of Fiji Hindi, as well as international exchange in their self-consciously wide-ranging linguistic reference—that I had wanted to describe, along with my own anxiety about reviewing a collection to which, despite a most enthusiastic personal response, an immediate understanding of many of the issues and references, and not a little preparatory work, I still felt, to a considerable extent, uninitiated. And it made me recall that this is how it should feel to encounter the heady pleasures and the challenge to existing structures of poetry from writing that strikes out in unfamiliar, new, and yet in some ways imaginatively predictable formations. Some passages can inspire a rush of recognition, for example, in the poems on the landing of Kingsley-Smith in Albert Park, Suva, or the obviousness of rhymes like those in "Still Life in Gaza" in which the speaker longs for the flavor of hummus instead of Hamas and "A Gaza of Ghazals" (16). The title piece, with its modernist referentiality, celebrates the economy and effusiveness of language in a flowing, meditative prose poem, moving the shifting subjectivity of the implied speakers across history, through sea and sky, through a description of coming to

love the vanua (land) of Fiji in Fijian language terms with Fijian people, and into the imagined future of Fijian Indian diaspora.

It is testament to Sudesh Mishra's status as a poet that such accomplished critics as Vijay Mishra, Subramani, and John O'Carroll have interpreted his work for the less initiated readers like myself. Others will bring their knowledge of Hindi, its poetic traditions, and Indian diasporic history and literatures more closely to bear on their reading of the poems than I can. Such readings, and whatever Sudesh Mishra's next collection is already busy cooking up—for the poem "No. 12" tells us "all exiles end up in the kitchen, / where among the gregarious spices, / Among the intimate, tribal crockery, / They misplace the sign 'home' / And are, for that reason, richly there" (66)—are the material of exchange, the fruits of much labor, to be offered, celebrated, and received with respect. As the description of the invisible Ariel-like work of poets in the opening poem "Envoi" describes it, beyond the imagination of existing texts, to dream of a different, more peaceful world, it must be hoped that time will send many more poems: "sighting a reef of nameless flowers / It lands on all that namelessness, / Sipping at alphabets, making honey" (5).

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