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**ESSAYS**

Flora Aurima Devatine

## **Identity**

Translated by Jean Anderson

### **Identity**

**Cultural?**

**As a woman?**

**As a Human?**

Separate issues?

**No!**

The same struggle?

**No!**

**The same debate!**

And it is neither

Self-absorption

Nor selfishness

Nor egotism

It is

Sheer survival

About simply Being

**Yourself**

Setting out from your Self

Returning to your Self

Setting out again from your Self

A self that speaks and tells its name!

### **What is your Name?**

Going back to the very basis of identity!

Before I was born my sister Sophie suggested

**"Floriette"!**

But as he registered my birth, my father preferred

**"Flora"!**

Only to call me

**"Forora"!**

And write to me as

**"Frola"!**

Not to mention the nickname

**"Mama Ru'au"!**

Bestowed by one of my sisters.

At school, once when I was eight, the teacher wrote down

**"Laura"!**

and

**"Urima"!**

Like all my brothers and sisters.

But at exam time, starting with the Primary School Leaving Certificate, this was "corrected" to my legal name:

**"A-urima"!**

Which didn't interrupt my schooling,  
Or prevent the school supervisor from calling out to me  
in the high school corridors

by the name of:

**"Urima"!**

Family name, first name in France at 18 years of age becoming

**"Flora" "Au-rima"!**

Which –  
once recovered from my shock at the recognition of the first part of my Being –  
As

**"Flora"**

– even if it was just half

I accepted! – Or at least I thought I had –  
Heart and soul,  
And for all time to come!

Accepting this other person, to the core, from the linguistic difference  
Despite the muddling of individual sounds, of language identities:

**"A-U", "A-OU"**

And

**"AU", "O"!**

In all honesty, any constraints and irritations  
Did not long endure,

Because life offered new experiences  
Especially the chance to forge a new identity, in full sight and yet unknown to all!

To choose a life!  
The choice of my life!

"Eiaha e hi'o i muri"  
"With no turning back!"  
"With no regrets over my choice!"

This was the self-imposed rule,  
The "tapu" decided deep in my heart  
Before I left the fenua and my family!

I was in France,  
It was a consciously chosen  
Act of survival!

But whether it resulted from ignorance, or lack of awareness of the mana of "tapu"  
Between change, evolution and transformation  
26 years later I happened to discover

In the history of the first Tahitian students in Montpellier  
Although I arrived a year before the first wave of Tahitians to study, and a few years  
after two cousins, Maeva and Mireille,

There I was, an enigma,  
Two mysterious initials,

**"U. F."!**

Or

**"F. U."!**

Oh that hidden identity, staining  
With its unknown the batallion of Tahitian Students!

A symbolic inscription?  
Revealing signs!

A recent spelling!

Questions and more questions!

Just as in 1969 to everyone's surprise it was discovered  
That under the Protectorate and according to the law,

Our family name was spelled in various ways:

**"Urima".**  
**"OUrima".**  
**"AUrima".**

Our paternal grandfather in particular bore the name

**"Aurima"!**

While his own father was listed sometimes as

**"Urima"!**

And sometimes as

**"Ourima"!**

Just as his brothers and sisters were registered

Some under the name

**"Urima"!**

And others as

**"Ourima"!**

And who knows why, as a supreme marker of difference,  
One of the sisters bore her mother's name:

**"Dowling"!**

My father, like his father before him, was known as:

**"Aurima"!**

Whereas his brothers and sisters, like his uncles and aunts, were named:

**"Urima"!**

Or

**"Ourima"!**

Down to my generation where of all my siblings I am the only one to be called

**"Aurima"!**

The others are all called

**"Urima"!**

A name that my father unwillingly adopted when he found out, not long before he died,  
Following a request lodged in his name at the start of the 1980s!

But who will explain how it hurt, from time to time, and how irritating and annoying it was  
when someone reminded the child, now adult, in all good faith, that:

"It's not

**"A-u-rima"**

It's

**"U-rima"!**

Who will say how embarrassing it was for the little girl to hear people call her

**"Fro-la"!**

Or

**"Forora"!**

When she was familiar with the normal, or usual pronunciation

**"Flo-ra"!**

Nor was this the end of recreations of her name, adding to the confusion.

The vicar at Tautira, in his letters, wrote to

**"Floras"!**

My little nephew, learning to write, put

**"Auntie Flor"!**

It was touching, but also problematic,  
Because the child, in his innocence, had revealed the incompleteness of my identity!

And people kept confusing me with

**"Dora"!**

And now today at Pamata'i someone called me

**"Nora"!**

Just as at other times and in other places I have been:

**"Lénora"!**

**Who am I, then?  
Who am I, in the end?  
Who am I?  
Who am I, in the end?**

What impact does all this have on the building of a personality, the forming of a mind,

So many uncertainties, hesitations, whims,  
So many different, impersonal, anonymous identities,

So many errors in the identity of a person?

Errors in legal status added to ignorance and the loss  
of aspects of your origins, your history, your meaning!  
Black holes and a series of denials in the skies of my life?

Luckily there is one phonetic constant in the spelling,

**"Ora"!**

But which "**Ora**"?

"**Ōrā**" the banyan tree?

The sacred Tree?  
The palaver Tree?

The tree that can only grow with a support?

That can only exist by suffocating the Other one,  
Leaving a hole in its heart?

There's something of that, in my life!  
But I can cut, and I will cut.  
I will let go of that reality and that belief.

I create

"**O-Ra**"!

Linked to life!  
Linked to the sun!

I am Sun,  
I am Life!

Sun and Life!  
I am and I shine!

Self Myself

Heads or Tails  
It's all the Same!

Myself

In flesh and blood  
Evolving

Into Being!  
Into a Person!

**So then, identity?**

**Cultural?**  
**As a woman?**  
**As a Human?**



Same question?

**Yes!**

Same answer?

**Yes!**

**The same source!**

**Yourself**

Returning to yourself  
A so-called self, speaking of self!

To find your place relative to the centre of the square, in the middle of the circle,  
Relative to the four winds or the cardinal points,  
Relative to the Sun, to the great glacial chills of the cold!

Because it is true that:

**"... To speak.**

Speak!  
You must speak!"

To speak,

More than communicating,  
Is to become aware

Of yourself  
Of your existence!

To speak,

Is to exist!

"I speak, therefore I exist!"

Because it is true:

That fullness is created in the void,  
That in detachment you attach yourself best!

What is needed sometimes is so much imagination, so many mental acrobatics and  
contortions, all in the mind,  
And self-persuasion,

So many strategies to develop,

To recreate yourself, to rebuild yourself.  
Body and soul!

Often at arm's length  
After lengthy argument!

Fortunately, there's a seed of love and wisdom deep within our being, that can be made to grow and change into a tree of life!

There's one morning more tranquil than the rest, on the surface of our days, that we can allow to shine, and protect from the wrinkling wind that might deprive it of Life!

Life is what it is,  
Flowing through time, over troubles and storms!  
Just let it run, a thousand watery leagues all around,

Like the loveliest songs, those of the expiring breath that falls into stillness and rejoins its source in the harmony of being, in that moment when Life at last becomes Love and Peace!

Like the loveliest colours, those of day's end in sunset departing to wed with the dawn by the light of the green ray or in a flaming of the universe!

The only testament, if such exist, to leave for coming generations,  
The greatest commandment, in fact!

And so, on the road to Hiti where the wind blows through the trees and shifts the clouds,

My gaze is filled by rising clouds tracing through the sky, with a wave of a magic wand, the upward path!

Oh the twilight glory traced across the sky, with strokes of a magic brush, the rising clouds that set the departure of unmoving travellers,  
Focused on the meaning of the winds that push and unravel them!

Invitation to the voyage on the wings of an infinity that my soul in transports swiftly seizes!

I speak in clichés to God the Creator for these marvels revealed at the end of a road, in passing a flame-tree,  
And I stop to write!

But the poem has already flown on the wing-fins of Ma'o Purotu or the flying fish!

Piqued, and needing light, I drink in the last rays of the sun to brighten my night!

Rather like the way this morning I picked from the mango tree in the garden the bright glowing fruit, juicy and generous,  
Fire in the morning and at sunset!

Inhaling and delighting in the nectar in them,  
Their concentrated sunshine,  
As a prelude to the new day!

And in this life-sized painting as its colours fade to twilight pastel,  
Suddenly a child bends and scratches, legs teased by mosquitoes!

A grain of sand that halts the movement, but adds an unexpected and charming touch that brings the whole to life,

A space suspended in the warm sunset air,  
Peacefulness of the evening, in the twilight hour,

Like the time when vibrant dragonflies in the trembling air drew  
Elegant arabesques,

Perfect picture, never completed, of consummate abstraction!

And while our exhausted bodies rested, savouring these moments of respite,  
Our minds wandered and followed our thoughts swooping in spirals and ellipses,

Curving lines left in suspension for a fleeting moment in their fascinating play,  
These creatures of a single evening,  
On Hinapai's veranda in Papara,

For the lonely child who from years of solitude kept her taste for silence.

The legacy of times past when instead of opening up she shut herself away with her fears, her sorrows and her held-back anger,

Dreaming that she might one day be a 'purau' flower drifting on the water,  
A white 'ītāta'e' perched at the top of the breadfruit tree,

Diving into the stream to splash in a fountain of droplets,  
Or to lose herself in the circles  
And swirls of her oar!

And on some evenings, she liked to believe she could hear the music of the stars,  
Or perhaps the sound of ion or magnetic waves turning through the universe!

But some evenings she did hear music coming from the sky from the constellations,  
Crystal sounds brass sounds from the seraphim beneath the Southern Cross  
That made her look up and smile at the stars!

And her thoughts?

Sparks leaping into the air, but unable to blaze up into flames!  
Disappointing for anyone watching,  
Dreadful for the one who launches them!

But why should we not pay attention to those little sparks, leaping into the air, but  
unable to blaze up into flames?

Because just like every thinking being, as she walks forward,  
Her thoughts advance,

Sometimes hesitant, stumbling,  
Sometimes gushing, bursting forth!

'Parents!  
Don't leave your children in a corner of your life!'

\_\_\_\_\_ (F. D. 1996) \_\_\_\_\_

### **Silence**

Silence is the hiding place  
Of those who are running from themselves.

But there are some silences  
More fatal than heavy gunfire,  
More devastating  
Than natural disasters,  
More deadly  
Than nuclear explosions.

Silence is the raft  
Of those who are drifting away.

### **Writing?**

It's wrong to write!

It douses the spark,  
Stops life in its tracks,  
Closes down open spaces!

### **Writing to testify?**

Words imprison thought,  
Restrict your vision,

And they frighten you, besides!

Proper boomerangs  
Speeding from the heart,  
Then right in the heart they strike you,  
Permanently mutilating the speaker.

And 'I' is sclerotised,  
Necrotised in the first person,  
When really it's 'you', 'all of you',  
It's 'you' and 'we' and 'they'

It's all of every one of us.

What you need, to write,  
In that last impulse  
Of preservation,

Is likely courage,  
But also boldness,  
Along with a good dash of naivety.

**You write... !**

You write with your body  
You write with your void

You write with your fears  
You write with your wounds  
With your hatred your cowardice  
Your ignorance your failures

You write with your abrasions  
You write with your scabs  
Your necrosis your scars  
Your purulent pustules

You write with your... with your...

Enough! Enough!  
That's quite enough of that!

**You must write**

Write  
With flair!

Flares of laughter  
Flares of humour

Flashes of the lustre  
Of fine pearls

Of the moon of water  
Of rain of opals

Of rainbows  
And explosions

Of light  
Of sunshine  
Of fire

And with times!

Times of gratitude  
Times of plenitude

Times of peace  
Times of love

Times of ecstasy  
Times of grace

And with your life?

To write with your life  
You must  
Find your melody,

Your symphony!

**And I do write**

Singing as I write

I realise  
It flows better this way!

But just as I become aware of this  
It doesn't flow so easily!

And so I stir the clear waters  
That I imagine flowing at my feet

Then suddenly the water stills,  
No longer flows at my feet!

It doesn't matter, I've had my fill  
Of singing and chanting,

A little tune that also disappeared  
From beneath my feet,

Mingling with the clear water,

**But enchanting our culture,**

Which, just as the spring

Bubbles away in secret,  
In the crucible of the soul,  
The entrails of the earth,



And suddenly bursts forth,

Reaching for the sky,  
Reaching for the sea,

Rolling, shaping,  
Polishing and carving,

Raising up into 'marae',  
Into 'paepae' and 'ōfa'i tihi',

The stones of its bed...

### **And instilling writing!**

#### **Nature**

Nature draws my gaze, which lingers on the 'maire' or 'āmo'a' leaves,  
And moves on with the 'aine' or 'mao'ae' breezes

Nature draws my gaze, which tries to go beyond the wind, beyond the waves, to reach  
beyond the horizon,

Where the colours of the sky meld into the blue of the ocean.

But in the time it takes to realise,  
The time to close  
And open your eyes

The time to smile

One thousandth  
Of a second

Of the rising of a spring  
Of the sparking of a fire  
Of the tiny flame of life,

To spread and beam it forth  
To plant without delay,

To melt into it, be refreshed in it,  
Nourished and enlightened!

**Languages, Orality, *Littéramā'ohi*:  
Ramées de littérature(s) polynésienne(s)\***

This essay consists of three parts which interconnect, interplay, intercommunicate, and interact in dialogue with one another.

**I. French Polynesia: which language(s)?**

In French Polynesia, a "Pays d'Outre-mer" (POM)<sup>+</sup> consisting of some 3700 km<sup>2</sup> of land above sea level (half the surface area of Corsica); these islands are scattered over an economic zone of 5,000,000 km<sup>2</sup> of water in the South Pacific,

A hundred or so islands making up 4 archipelagoes,

The Society Islands group is subdivided into the Windward Islands (Tahiti, Moorea, Maiao) and the Leeward Islands (Raiatea, Huahine, Bora-Bora, Maupiti),

The Marquesas Islands group is subdivided into the Northern and Southern Islands,

Then there are the Tuamotus (made up of over 80 atolls) and the Gambiers,

The Austral Islands (Rurutu, Raivavae, Tubuai, Rimatara) and Rapa,

We are thousands of kilometres from everywhere else, and approximately:

- 4,500 km from Honolulu (Hawai'i),
- 7,900 km from Vancouver (Canada),
- 6,400 km from Los Angeles (USA),
- 8,300 km from Panama (Central America),
- 8,000 km from Santiago (Chile, South America),
- 4,000 km from Auckland (New Zealand),
- 6,100 km from Sydney (Australia),
- 4,800 km from Noumea (New Caledonia),
- 9,500 km from Tokyo (Japan),

Our islands are spread over a surface area more or less equal to the whole of Europe, and just like Europe, they make up a geographical zone that is rich in many languages,

With a population of more or less mixed origins of over 220,000 inhabitants of Polynesian (83%), European (12%) and Chinese (5%) origin,

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\* Title of the literary review founded in 2002. The first word is a portmanteau creation combining "literature" and "mā'ohi", the indigenous name for the Tahitian people and their language. The subtitle refers to the branching leafiness of Polynesian literature(s). NOTE that in the following text the terms Polynesia and Polynesian refer to French Polynesia.

<sup>+</sup> A POM (French Polynesia) is considered under French law to be a part of France although it is not geographically attached to metropolitan (European) France.

Speaking French (the official language since 1880) and Polynesian languages or reo mā'ohi, with more or less marked differences between them, including Tahitian (the vehicular language), Marquesan (with Northern and Southern, Ua Pou, variants), Pa'umotu, (with a dozen main dialects), Mangarevan, the language of the Austral Islands which includes Rurutu, Rimatara, Ra'ivavae and Rapa,  
And Chinese (Hakka).

But where the principal economic activities of French Polynesia are concerned (tourism, pearl farming, fishing),

And because our principal trading partners are France, the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand,

The languages of trade communication with the exterior are chiefly English and French, followed by Spanish, Japanese and in the near future Chinese (Mandarin).<sup>1</sup>

European languages, particularly English and French are going to have a double impact, both in competing with Polynesian vehicular languages, and in allowing the different island groups to communicate through the medium of a shared language, French,

But the widespread and exclusive teaching of this language, in accordance with the unsparing logic of a policy of assimilation and integration into French culture, will have as its consequence for a period of time the eclipse of these vernacular languages.

What is more, this poorly adapted teaching will not allow a large number of Polynesians to attain mastery of French.

In recent times, we have seen a resurgence of the Tahitian language, thanks to its use on radio and above all as a result of its teaching and practice in churches,

And Tahitian, in its turn, will become a link-language between the archipelagoes,

And these, following the lead of Tahitian and in opposition to it, will in their turn lay claim to their autonomy and to recognition of their linguistic identity.

This explains why, following the setting up of the Tahitian Academy (Fare Vāna'a) in 1972, and the widespread teaching of Tahitian,<sup>2</sup>

The Academy of the Marquesan Language was created in 1999,

Followed by the Cultural Association Te Reo Paumotu and the Cultural Association Reo Mangareva in 2000.

This sums up in brief the question of languages in French Polynesia.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002, when a Polynesian government delegation of around 100 people, including the President, the President of the Polynesian Assembly and a number of Ministers, went on a trade development mission to Beijing, their projects included an order for fishing boats from Chinese shipyards.

<sup>2</sup> After the application of the so-called Deixonne Law (25<sup>th</sup> of January 1951) to the zone of influence of the Tahitian language following the decree of the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1981, published on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1981 in the *JORF (Journal Officiel de la République Française)*, Tahitian became an official subject in university entrance examinations (*baccalauréat*) and entry tests for the civil service.

## II. Polynesian Languages and Literatures<sup>3</sup>

A quick look at the cultural and linguistic evolution of Polynesian society over recent years takes us back to:

- 1968, the year we came home from France where questions of Polynesian identity, of culture more generally and of literature in particular were not even asked,

- then 1972, with the creation of the cultural institution Académie Tahitienne, and in 1974 the appointment of members charged with normalising and preserving the Tahitian language, and with translating new technical terms into Tahitian,

The said members were required first of all to draw up their statutes and have them adopted by the Territorial Assembly, before beginning their duties,

And in 1976, launching the first literary competition, across the whole Territory, for writing in Tahitian.

This movement would go on to benefit from the change of attitudes that accompanied the recognition at a global level of minority peoples, their languages and their cultures,

This movement would foster the emergence of a Polynesian literature written in a whole mosaic of languages:

- in reo mā'ohi, that is to say in the Polynesian language of each of the archipelagoes, being Pa'umotu, Marquesan, Rapa, Mangarevan, Tahitian,

- in European languages, notably French,

Thus revealing one of the original aspects of Polynesian literature, that it shows the way in terms of cultural and social tolerance prevalent in French Polynesia, aware of what real open-mindedness can bring in the literary domain, in terms of a flourishing intellectual and human enrichment of its society and its cultural heritage.

The literary competition for the Prix de l'Académie Tahitienne (the Tahitian Academy Prize), which was awarded 13 times between 1976 and 1990, and replaced 10 years later by the Prix du Président (President's Prize) in 2000, and to which was added in 2001 the Prix du Président pour la Jeunesse (President's Prize for Children's and Young Adult Literature), led to the submission of:

**A total of 60 works by 36 authors!**

**36 authors and 60 manuscripts over a period of 14 years, from 1976 to 1990,**

Now that's really something!

However, only four of them would succeed in being published, with varying degrees of recognition, but thanks to translation:

- one of these authors, Taaria Walker, also known as Pare, was awarded a Special Prize at the Ouessant Book Fair in 1999, for the translated version of one of her books, entered in the literary competition of the Tahitian Academy Prize (in 1984 or 1986)

- the second author is Louise Peltzer, a former Minister of Culture and Tertiary Education, responsible for the promotion of Polynesian languages, for her novel *Lettre à Poutaveri* (Bougainville).

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<sup>3</sup> What follows is partly drawn from a number of articles: Flora Devatine, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Full references are located at the end of this chapter.

With regard to the number of manuscripts submitted for the President's Prize launched in 2000 and continued until November 2003, the total over these four years reached,

And again the progression is obvious,  
**Altogether, 29 works by 26 authors!**  
Including five young writers under 25!

From this survey it is clear that literature is on the rise in French Polynesia,  
That it is not written solely in French,  
But is also written in Tahitian language,  
Followed although at a remove by writing in Pa'umotu, and recently in Rapa and Marquesan.

To date, there is no one writing in Mangarevan, although this must surely change soon, given the dynamism of the Mangarevan Cultural Association and its policy of renewal and anchoring society in its culture and its language.

But (apart from the few publications) the majority of these writings exist only in manuscript form, known only to members of the judging committee!

And so, alongside the traditional oral literature of storytellers, orators, poets, writers of traditional or lyric songs, preachers and politicians who continue to exercise their creative talents in oral form,

Little by little a written literature in reo mā'ohi is being developed, a resurgence and an undeniable renewal on another level of orality, attesting to Polynesians' adoption of writing.

Of course Polynesian literature in reo mā'ohi, developing alongside its Francophone texts, is as yet focused on daily life and on the oldest aspects of culture, while also punctuating its narratives with reflections of the passage of time, the changes affecting modes of existence, of thinking, of life for Polynesians today,

Probably initially concerned with leaving its mark and its life lessons for future generations,

A desire to pass something on accompanied by a commitment to modernity through writing – a bridge that can be found in the writings of people with an oral culture approaching the shores of literature, in French Polynesia at least – (and which) begins with transcribing, inscribing actual historical events, to do with families, ancestors, society, life, before entering into the world of fiction, of narrative, of the imaginary.

The progress of Polynesian literature, from the Polynesian point of view, takes these developments and specific transitions into account, in such a way that we understand its progression on the basis of what has been written and published from last century up until now:

- Teuira HENRY, granddaughter of an English missionary, who left a monumental body of work about Polynesian society, with its mythical tales, its songs, poems, genealogies and traditions, about its locations, the physical environment, animal and plant life, about its sports, its gods, its beliefs, places of worship, wars, crops, and fishing practices.

Texts written in English and later translated into French.

- Marau Taaroa SALMON, the last queen of Tahiti through her marriage to King POMARE V (the last king of Tahiti and its dependencies), daughter of an Englishman and a noblewoman. She wrote her Memoirs in English, translated into French by her daughter Princess Takau POMARE-VEDEL,

- Marau's mother Ariitaimai, high chieftain of Papara (one of the former major districts of the island of Tahiti), who dictated her memoirs in Tahitian to an American, Henry ADAMS, or actually to two of her children, her daughter Marau and her son Tati, who collected them in Tahitian then translated them into English, which were in turn, many years later, translated into French,

- Marau's brother Tati SALMON who conducted a lengthy correspondence in English with Henry ADAMS; fortunately this has been preserved, and provides us with insights into life in Tahiti at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to its having been translated into French,

- Her son Ernest SALMON who also left written works.

Which makes this family an exceptional example of three generations of writers!

Other "Tahitians" – the term then used to designate the ensemble of peoples of French Polynesia – had published poems in Papeete's Bulletin des Études Océaniques (BSEO, "Bulletin of Oceanian Studies", 1917).

- Member of the Académie, Mai-Arii CLARK-CADOUSTEAU focused on the historical aspects of society, as well as the Tahitian language, publishing a grammar, a dictionary, a textbook for learners, and other books about genealogies and Tahitian first names.

Then gradually collections of poetry and short stories began to appear,  
And finally life stories, transcriptions of texts from various sources and novels.

Coming back to literature in reo mā'ohi, and despite the sometimes obvious cobbling together of the pieces of its puta tifaifai pu or puta 'ahu hu'ahu'a tāpū, or patchwork books –

It has a place alongside Polynesian literature in French.

It deserves this place all the more because it is evidence of a thinking that is rooted in its mythical and historical past, because it is witness to its time of métissage, of interculturality,

or of 'transculturality', to borrow Boniface Mongo-Mboussa's term,<sup>4</sup>

That is to say the reality in a country where today's Polynesian literature is rooted in a culture inflected by both French and Mā'ohi-speaking nuances.

In the end, Polynesians do write,

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<sup>4</sup> Boniface Mongo-Mboussa is the author of several books, including *Désir d'Afrique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). This term was used during his presentation at the seminar "L'Écriture des identités" [Writing Identities], at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (Paris) in October 2002.

They enjoy writing, they are writing more and more, and in both their languages!

But it is important that those who write in reo mā'ohi not be locked away any longer, contained within their world, their society.

They must now break out of their shells, just like Ta'aroa, the old god who created Tahitians,

In order to have access to a wider vision and understanding of the planet as they see it from where they stand, from their world today.

In order to triumph and to demonstrate their authenticity, their brilliance,  
Their rightful place on the Polynesian, or even the Oceanian and/or national literary scene,

Authors writing in reo mā'ohi will have to rise above the level of the everyday, will have to awaken critical thinking, deepen reflection, practise endless questioning,

And they will in addition need to make use of French, English, Spanish, Chinese of course, as languages of exchange, a necessary transfer point between different cultures and literary works.

So then is literature in French Polynesia to be bilingual? Multilingual?

It would seem in fact that written Polynesian literature initially takes shape on two fronts, in Polynesian languages and in European languages, more particularly in Tahitian and in French,

Which means this bilingual, trilingual or multilingual literature of French Polynesia, seeking only to develop, to be heard in its range of different voices, is in the position of having to look to, and reach out through, translation,

The translation of Tahitian texts into French, into English, and – why not – into Spanish and Chinese.

Translation is an unavoidable requirement for the future of Polynesian literature, whether it be in French or in Polynesian languages,

Because it is translation that opens out into the external world and makes works known,

Take the example of the book written in English by Célestine Hitiura VAITE, a young Tahitian woman living in Australia, published three years ago, translated into French and released in November 2002.<sup>#</sup>

Just as books by French authors should be translated into local, Polynesian languages, the way it happens in other countries,

- Such as China, where French writers have been translated into Chinese for over a century, as poet and translator Shu CAI has pointed out,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>#</sup> Célestine Hitiura Vaite, *Breadfruit* (Sydney: Random House, 2000); *L'Arbre à pain*, trans. Henri Theureau (Papeete: Au Vent des îles, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Shu Cai, during his presentation at the seminar "L'Écriture des identités" [Writing Identities], at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (Paris) in October 2002.

Just as was the practice in French Polynesia over a hundred years ago, when the newspapers published texts about Socrates or La Fontaine's Fables in both languages, French and Tahitian,<sup>6</sup>

Just as works written in English ought to be translated into French and/or Tahitian,

So as to allow French Polynesians access to, among other things, the literature of the English-speaking countries of the Pacific.

We note one striking example of the necessity of translation in the case of the Peruvian writer, Mario Vargas LLOSA, who in January 2002 was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Université de Polynésie française (UPF, University of French Polynesia): he could never have been the world-famous and widely appreciated author that he is, nor have received his doctorate from the UPF, if his works had not been translated into several languages, including English and French.

In summary, there is already a body of work by Polynesian writers, in French and in Tahitian languages, but because these manuscripts are unpublished they are inaccessible to readers.

Perhaps there is a specialist publisher of books in Tahitian to be set up, or a space to be created within existing publishing houses for works in Tahitian,

There is plenty of work for literary translators to do.

Clearly there is a need for a Chair in translation at the Université de Polynésie française, for a group of high quality translators trained in the translation of literature, made up of teachers of languages, reo mā'ohi, French, English, Japanese...

This suggestion has been put forward and the idea has not been rejected.

There are some encouraging signs,

The publication in French Polynesia by the Association Hitimano 'Ura and the Ministry of Culture and Tertiary Education, responsible for the promotion of Polynesian languages, of Patrick Araia AMARU's *Te Oho no te tau'auhunera'a*, which won the first prize in the Concours littéraire Prix du Président in 2000,

As well as the publication by the Association Aha Tau of the Prix Littéraire du Président winners of 2001 and 2002,

Etetiera Tchong Tai (2001) with *'Aita te Atua i tāu'a mai i tō'u 'ino, 'Ua fa'aora mai rā 'oia i tā'u vahine*, and in 2002, Te'ura Camélia Marakai with *Aue... te oeo o te 'ā'au...*,

These publications mark an important development in the awareness of literature written in Polynesian languages.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the papers *Bulletin officiel des Établissements français de l'Océanie* (1847-1860), *Messenger de Tahiti* (1852), *Journal officiel des Établissements français de l'Océanie orientale* (1852, 1860-1883), *Te Vea no Tahiti* (1850-1859).



To sum up, Polynesian literature in French and in reo mā'ohi is faced with a shared problem, one which is less a question of writers and writing (although these aspects are also problematic!) than it is an economic problem, of publishers and translators,

And of standing committees of readers responsible for reading, correcting, analysing and critiquing the manuscripts.

There is much still to be done, but at present there exist in French Polynesia works in Tahitian and in French, proof that there is a consciousness already expressing itself, a Polynesian imaginary transitioning into written forms,

There exists a hatchery of writers that we need to talk about, that we need to make known,

And there is definitely a literature in existence in French Polynesia.

It exists,

It exists just as it is,

And it exists the way Polynesian writers have imagined it, and maintain that it exists, today,

Which is to say, it is different, varied, Polynesian, multilingual.

It must not get stuck in mid-stream because it remains or by remaining a manuscript literature.

We believe that Polynesian literature as it presently exists in the multitude of its languages needs the assistance of publication and translation, in order to become accessible to those who do not speak Tahitian nor any other Polynesian language.

But this is not something writers can do for themselves,

Nor can it be achieved by those who are passionate, passionate about publishing, passionate about translating.

And just as there exist within writing, poetic and literary, and also within artistic, musical and choreographic creations,

Areas, even worlds that interconnect and in which the only way to move forward is with faith, passion and love,

This is why there exists

*Littéramā'ohi,  
Ramées de Littérature Polynésienne  
Te Hotu Mā'ohi!*

To which we shall return following our discussion of Orality.

### **III. Orality**

And what of Orality, traditional poetry, the origin of my unsteady identity, floating in the face of the anxious void and the uncertain in-between of my unwholeness, of my woundedness, from where I speak to you?

### **Orality?**

A foundational platform, a support, a framework, a construction, a point of departure in the pursuit and navigation of our thinking.

Gestures, reactions, attitudes, ways of being, walking, speaking, thinking, eating, sleeping, dressing, living, working or doing nothing, fishing, growing crops, preparing, sharpening our tools.

Or of dying of hunger, of disease, of melancholy, or of living in hope, in faith or in boredom and ignorance,

Actions and gestures to the beat of Pehe, rhythmic poems and chanted songs of life, secret and tender, of emotions felt in the soul, in the mind, in the suffering, joyful, grieving heart,

Words spoken by the people of yesteryear, of time immemorial, alongside those spoken by the people of today, of now,

Image-filled, sonorous expressions of the people of all time,... often recovered in multiple versions, revised, corrected and recreated, adapted to the circumstances and interests of the moment,

Found in what is open to be seen, to be heard, to be sensed and felt in the soul, found in what is drawn, painted, pencilled, sculpted, tattooed,

Found in the enthusiasm of celebrations, of festivals, from the Heiva to the war-cries of heroes with their names, their attributes and their lands, in family stories and myths.

The language of Orality from its origins in the development of human social thought, living, dynamic, moving, singing, dancing, story-telling, nourishing, fishing, growing thought,

Artistic,

Oratorical,

– And with ambitions of writing! –

Found in what is danced, sung, made into plays, set to music, rhythmized, to be toere-ed, pahu-ed, rowed, surfed, run, firewalked, enthroned on the marae, thrown by javelins, verbalised, shouted, written,

Commentaries, preachings, exhortations,

Found also in what is murmured, stammered, unspoken.

Because Orality also has its opposite, and that is silence, enclosure, muteness, with stories from oral literature and tradition that are partially handed on,

But whose traces, preserved in a few memories, reappear at a particular point in time, transformed, updated then reinjected into Orality, authorising creativity, taking into itself what lives on its outer reaches, what berths on its shores,

Digging out and leaving there new trails, new marks, today's reference points, to be left for future generations,

Because Orality, which people normally imagine as anchored to facts, is not.

Of course, it is built on tradition, but it seeks out and absorbs the new, it promotes creativity, adapts itself to modernity.

And so Orality, reliant on its two taproots (characteristic for a number of fruit trees, such as the papaya, of great productivity), tradition and modernity,

And in fact hybridised to varying degrees, just like the pluralistic population which ceaselessly welcomes and gathers in on its shores whatever beaches itself there, whatever arrives, adopting, ingesting, getting along or getting by with it,

Orality nourishes the spirit of innovation it finds there and takes inspiration from it in language, gesture, and form, and although for the moment this leads more to an overlaying of models and ways of doing things than to a real interweaving of the mentalities, the thought patterns of the different cultures,

Orality draws from this, creativity and fertility.

And the fact remains that Orality does not stand apart from change, but rather it is the foundational force, the energy, the dynamics of the daily life of members of traditional society.

Because Orality, owing to its openness to the production and reproduction of the spoken word, of sounds and images, is a pathway towards the exterior, a source of renewal, of enrichment, while at the same time these voices are confronted with intrusion, diversity, difference, foreignness,

And therein lies its fragility,

Because Orality, in its very openness and sensitivity, is exposed at its cultural, social, and human boundaries to changes in the timeframes and styles of modernity, and for that very reason, is confronted by its major stumbling block and comes unravelled.

It is true that Orality, when it is ill-informed and poorly prepared, unprotected against the onslaught of random elements from elsewhere, from the unknown, is not immune to skidding out of control, to unfortunate or clumsy usages, some of them even in bad taste, as can be seen in some instances of lyric or choreographic expression, or in some of the crafts.

Orality is, in any case, through its practitioners, linked especially closely with language, with what language tells, says, thinks, expresses, sings, weeps, poeticises, harangues,

These are areas where Orality has an obligation to promote understanding and where everyone has an obligation to learn, by relating to and resonating with his or her sensitivities,

In a word, to accept, to reconcile.

That means, and this is of prime importance, to write the language, to speak the language that allows them access to their imaginations and which is the only means of revealing our humanity to each and every one of us,

– Who are all solitary, although we don't live in total isolation

– And who all, using the rediscovered repossessed spoken word, express our particular ways of being in the world, or being with others.

But Orality, since its historic encounter with modern, western societies in the time of the circumnavigating explorers and scientists, followed by the arrival of the Book of the Scriptures and the establishment of modern schools in the era of English missionaries followed by both protestants and catholics from France, at the time of the Establishments and the Colonial Administration in the Pacific,

– Events which triggered the move towards writing in traditional Polynesian society –

Orality, apparently rendered mute because it had been transcribed into its mythical tales, may have given the impression it was headed for a dead end.

Fortunately, the impetus given to education and demonstrated by the opening of the first senior high school class, followed by the graduation of the first group of Polynesian students from a high school within the Territory, 44 years ago,

the opening up of traditional Polynesian society to the modern world outside with the inauguration of Tahiti-Fa'a'a International Airport, 45 years ago,

Along with the recognition and teaching of Polynesian languages and cultures, 20 years ago,

– Key markers over time of important stages in the evolution of Orality and of Polynesian thought –

These factors will allow our thoughts too to travel elsewhere, and in this way to have the opportunity of drinking from other springs, of forging other tools for ourselves, of thinking, imagining, expressing and recreating ourselves in other ways through these multiple changes, before offering ourselves to our present society as part of a continuum and with our newly-acquired progress.

Foundation and runway for the take-off and flight of Polynesian Literature, which now, strengthened by Orality in a mingling of ancient and modern voices, is ready to break through, to take the stage, and to mark out its own pathway.

### **Orality**

Oral literature, Nana'oture, Nene'iture, Oral writing,  
**Flourishes and Polynesian Literature!**

### **Traditional Poetry**

Orality, traditional poetry, which expresses itself on the spot, lending itself to the felt, concretised and condensed illustration of itself through the pariparifenua, 'praise of the land'. A traditional poetic genre considered to be of the noblest order by Polynesians, because in and apart from its particular form and its references to the ari'i, chiefs, warriors, to the ordinary people and to locals made famous by their glorious deeds, it names, it sings, it memorises the names of lands, what lives there, grows there,

The names of parts of lagoons, or coral outcrops, of reefs, of passes, of the fish that live there, and of fishing methods,

In a few verses, extracts from poems of last century handed down orally, that we give here in a gist version, following a brief explanation, and then in their original form.

### **Extracts**

First extract from a pariparifenua

a) Brief explanation:

'Te'ohu ('Pile of naked earth') is the name of the valley  
 Fa'are'are'a ('Yellow Valley') is the pass, out at sea.  
 Vaeha'a te to'a ('Separation of Corals') is the reef,  
 A resistant reef, Hau'a ('Smell') followed by the little reef of Mamaia i te i'a pīrau roa  
 ('with the fish that stink a long time'),

Because, when the sea draws back  
 The lobsters die,  
 The fish perish,  
 The air becomes unbreathable!

And then there are also, in the sea, crevasses as well as an outcrop of smooth flat  
 coral,

Ra'iroa ('Big Sky'), around which the mullet fish cluster,  
 And then not far out from Hau'a, there's a rock sticking out of the reef,  
 That's Turipahure ('Knee Scraper')  
 Because you have to hurry when you pass it owing to the swell of the waves,  
 And for these reasons, you might stumble!

b) Gist translation version:

'O dear pass of Fa'are'are'a  
 From whence red feathers reach forth  
 Large quantities of fish  
 To eat with 'fē'i' of the 'tāea' species  
 That birds seek out.'

'At Ra'iroa the sea rises and thunders  
 I leap up in turn ready to leave  
 Young Te'uraheimata is magnificent  
 As she slides over the waves  
 The breeze from the valley blows  
 In her hair and stirs the tips  
 But the dog Pamano is very fierce  
 He's a ferocious guard dog!

(He keeps anyone from approaching Te'uraheimata, the beautiful surfer girl!)

c) The original texts:

1)  
 'Auē te ava o Fa'are'are'a iti  
 E māhu te 'ura i n'ia ra  
 E 'ina'i te mā'a nā 'oe  
 Ia rūreva tāea'

2)  
 'Fa'atara 'ui te miti i Ra'iroa

Ta'iti'a ri'i au e haere  
**Te'uraheimata**  
 E purotu he'e noa  
 Nā te mata'i ri'i no te fa'a ē  
 I tāhiri i to hi'u rōuru  
 E 'ūrī 'ino mau te 'ūrī a **Pāmano**  
 E'ūrī taehae mau ā ...'

Second extract from pariparifenua

a) Literal translation

Mountain on high Mou'a Tamaiti  
 Land below Pōreho  
 Headland 'Ōutumanomano  
 Welcome (enthroning) of Teri'irere  
 Fa'aruafa'a the wind  
 Fa'aruafa'a the wind  
 Over Teaute  
 Makes Tō'o'ara'i  
 Has received droplets of fine rain  
 Made a number of little bows the rainbow

b) Late 19th-, early 20th-century Tahitian text:

'Mou'a tei ni'a o Mou'a Tamaiti  
 Tahua tei raro o Pōreho  
 'Ōutu tei tai 'Ōutumanomano  
 I te fa'ari'ira'a ia Teri'irere  
 Fa'aruafa'a te mata'i  
 Fa'aruafa'a te mata'i ē  
 Nā ni'a maira i Teaute  
 Tāhiri maira i Tō'o'ara'i  
 'Ua tōpatahia i te ua ri'i au  
 'Ua fa'aofaofa te ānuanua.'

These lines of traditional poetry, still effective today, demonstrate their link to the poetics the art of emphasis the rhetoric the mythic the active the fictive the imaginary of Polynesians of times past!

#### IV. The Reality of the Polynesian Writer

##### The Reality?

The reality is that up till now there has not been an awareness of a Polynesian identity in the sense of a way of thinking unique to the Polynesians of French Polynesia, because of the diverse elements and their many manifestations and languages.

The reality is that there are few writers, in the sense that there are not enough expressions of thought by creators available to the public, to the broader public as well as to Polynesians themselves, to make it possible to perceive, to observe and to define the dominant approaches and tendencies emerging from the Polynesian way of thinking, from the Polynesian consciousness, or defining it.

The reality is that there are a great many cultured people and intellectuals, the best-known of whom were formerly students in France, and increasingly in the United States, In Hawai'i, Fiji, New Zealand and Australia,

And recently, in French Polynesia,

- Among whom the least recognised, although they are also the most visible, the most active locally, in the widest reaches of society, are those running our churches, our pastors.

And the song writers, composing traditional or lyric songs, popular, modern songs, songs that deal increasingly with cultural protests, cultural or religious affirmations, songs increasingly inspired by the Bible, lamentations, prayers, supplications, complaints, appealing to all the gods, both ancestral and christian,

And in keeping with the various traditional Polynesian poetic genres,

These intellectuals having been trained, that is to say through their schooling, their upbringing, in the ways of thinking, ways of living, being, behaving,

In a variety of ways, secular or religious, sometimes without perfect clarity as to guidelines, definitions, meanings, differences, nuances, boundaries!

– And that includes us! –

And the said intellectuals, who are acting on the basis of their own experiences, their own lives, their own education, are sometimes for obvious reasons disconnected from the bases of Polynesian society,

Even though this society benefits from the new technologies, to a greater or lesser degree (they are certainly available!)

Yet remaining attached to the land,

Even when it's just a little plot of earth or a chunk of coral in these islands of French Polynesia,

The land that nourishes them and pushes them toward the expression of a way of thinking that may be multifaceted but shares a common source, springing from the same sand silt or clay basalt crumbling, scattering into the same sea around the bays of its brightly-coloured shoreline.

A way of thinking deeply-rooted in its base and reaching out, spreading into its surroundings.

The reality is that the Polynesian writer comes from a multi-ethnic, multicultural world, constructed in stages, in confusion, in imperfection and in haste,

Sometimes, in the absence of any structure,

And following various models:

- a traditional Polynesian model,
- an anglophone Pacific, anglo-Polynesian model,

- a Polynesian model, be it franco-Polynesian, americano-Polynesian, sino-Polynesian,
- a franco-Chinese, French, Chinese model...

Add to that a religious influence, with its range of structures, educational systems, and religious models.

The reality is that it's complicated, but always dynamic, effervescent, constantly being redefined.

In reality, it is time to accept and to state the reality in Polynesian territory, for Polynesians and non-Polynesians alike, it reaches across the seas, made up of multiple islands and archipelagoes,

Polynesian, occidento-Polynesian, sino-Polynesian.

The reality is that Polynesian writers, who are multi-ethnic, multicultural, are multi-expressionistic and multi-formal in their creativity.

And their writing, unique in its Polynesian-ness, and collective and multi-formal in its function as group memory, is necessarily centred on collision and confusion, on the paradoxes and contradictions of worlds, of words.

The reality is that Polynesian writers, like all writers everywhere, are individuals, unique members of a shared and plural social reality,

Just as literature is unique, in its forms and its languages and its subjects.

### **What form for writing?**

Today, it is

Writing that is freely punctuated

Writing where the breath must be heard

Writing rivers meeting the ocean, in waves, ebb and flow

Writing that is repetitive spiralling forward

Writing in long directed threads, one long driving line

Writing that is sometimes upright, sometimes leaning forward or backward, with fullness and connections, ellipses, spaces, roundabouts and stops, dashes, missing boundaries,

Writing that is laboured but increasingly decisive, determined, competitive, high performance, pole-vaulting, rope-climbing, canoe-racing,

Writing that is a canoe paddling on,

Writing that is heiva, tariparau drum transporting words,

Writing that is 'ōte'a shooting arrows hip-thrusting.

### **What language for writing?**

Write

In one of the languages any one of the languages you know, whether Polynesian, Chinese, European,

In the language of your inspiration, in the language that expresses your inspiration, in the language of the place where your thinking is expressed,



In the language of the physical domain, of the everyday, poetic, artistic, religious, philosophical, literary, critical, journalistic, scientific domain, wherever your thinking, your reflections take shape and are expressed,

In the language of your heart, your body, your thinking, your soul,

In the language of the creative moment that comes to your mind when you write,

In the language most appropriate to your mind's creation,

In the language of wood of water of the sea of basalt of coral of fire of earth of springs of surging up,

Of gushing forth of your resurgence of your stream vahavai 'ānāvai of your mouth a river of your mouth existence of a hollowing river,

In the language of your movement, the language of your rhythm,

Your tonality, your sonority, minority or majority,

In the language of your quality, the language of flavour, of your taste of your touch of your hearing of your understanding of your belly.

And a certain number of events would be followed by the appearance in May 2002 of the first Polynesian literary journal

*Littéramā'ohi*  
**Ramées de Littérature Polynésienne**  
Te Hotu Mā'ohi!

## V. The *Littéramā'ohi* Journal

One of its main aims is to give to the writers who founded it as well as to all authors known or unknown, artists, thinkers or ordinary people, young and less young, proponents of orality or modernity, a space, a place to meet, to exchange, to express themselves,

Within a framework of respect for the identity, difference, dignity and humanity of each and every person.

Which brings us to the presence in the first issue of *Littéramā'ohi*, of authors and artists from other cultural fields and with only a distant connection to Polynesian culture,

Which might give rise to the idea that there is some confusion.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

Because Polynesian literature cannot be approached separately from its human, social, cultural and historical foundations.

The existence and the recognition of literary expression in Polynesia must be aware of and take into account every aspect of life in Polynesian society, as it is conceived organised and lived by Polynesians today.

This means that, in view of these deliberate advances into the field of writing and literature, it is essential to revisit the facts and practices, the places and ways of expression of Polynesian creative thinking, – not only at the many religious gatherings, but also during the cultural events that are unique to contemporary Polynesian society, which is both traditional and modern in its manifestations –

We must revisit what has been until now the domain of orality but which can only be grasped if its participants on both sides express themselves in a language all partners understand, with focused and open minds, acknowledged and acknowledging, docile and confident in their roles,

We must create whatever will promote openness, allow for a welcome into the Polynesian mental **fare**,<sup>7</sup> and facilitate exchange.

If we stick with the western and academic 21<sup>st</sup>-century definition of literature, it is clear that we'll be counting the number of Polynesian writers on the fingers of two hands,

But Polynesian literature cannot be seen the same way as literature from elsewhere, and that is also what makes it different, today at least.

In fact at this point in time we need to recognise there is a Polynesian consciousness which has always existed and which is only now expressing itself after a long journey through the desert, previously held back by prejudice and by its long-standing categorisation as an unpolished, superficial, childish way of thinking,

All of which stifled its expression even though it was conscious of being judged that way based on ignorance or unawareness of the existence (of a visibly affected humanity) of a Polynesian consciousness and reflection that were constantly being developed or strengthened, here as anywhere else,

An internalised movement that escaped the notice of those who don't see below the surface and the appearance of things and of people.

It is a Polynesian way of thinking that has never been cut off from its source, even when Polynesians themselves believed, imagined that their origins, their roots had been withdrawn, forgotten, crushed in the **po**.

A way of thinking that exists and resists in the face of everything, sometimes dilute and sleepy, sometimes sharp and alert, confident that its time will come.

But it is also a way of thinking that exists in a fragmented and scattered way in life, in the varied manifestations of the Polynesian people, in the language of the everyday.

What is specific to written literature, what is specific to writers through all time and everywhere, is also to give voice to these broken, exploded, scattered, fragmented states of mind,

States of mind that bear the almost palpable mark of enormous holes within minds and bodies,

That invisible mark hidden away kept secret, of a feeling of intermittent confusion a feeling of non-existence, of lack of identity, of separateness, of disjuncture, of disharmony, of frustration, of non-being,

All of this, ungraspable until now, because a fragmented and scattered way of thinking is only expressed within the group, within the family, in closed sessions, in the solitude and the violence of your being and your body.

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<sup>7</sup> Fare: traditional Tahitian house.

That is why in order to approach it and to understand it, it is necessary to seek it out, to read it in all the places where it shows itself in the Polynesian social and cultural events labelled traditional and modern in all the expressions of its spoken and enacted expression, its songs, its dances, its tattoos, its sculptures, its 'orero, its rages, its violences.

These latter, in particular, being in need of places where they might outdo themselves and transform into paintings, writings, engravings, photographs, plays, songs, dances, music, rhythms, subtle sonorities and resonances, alternately strong, jerky, or gentler, calmed, reassured...

It is a matter of reuniting the fragments of the expression of this consciousness, something that has to be done by anyone who seeks to understand, to see an overall picture, before tackling the specific field of Literature proper, in the modern, western sense of the term.

But a literature that will certainly reveal itself as having a particular characteristic, the mark of the men and women of French Polynesia.

Fragments that are peho, vao, tiny interior valleys that are hard to access but worth seeking out, because they hold the nourishment that will sustain Polynesian culture.

And this is an essential step.

It is true that Polynesian literature until now has really just been a matter of playing with the pen or the fetu'e pencil!

It is also true that Polynesian writing begins with the first pages written on the beach, at school, with the writing of letters, the writing of songs, the writing of Bible commentaries, the writing of family stories, the writing of epic narratives, the writing of puta tupuna, of genealogies, of medicinal recipes and especially,

The writing of one's name!

- Of names that were in the past titles, titles to land, social honours, titles based on various forms of initiation, that are today mere first names!

It is also true that there were a few works published by Polynesians at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

And that the first flagship publications of what we are beginning to call Polynesian literature saw the light of day only at the end of the 1970s, and did not result in any particular interest in these attempts by Polynesian authors,

Other than a few texts in a collection of 'Lectures polynésiennes', some mentions in doctoral theses and an introduction in a journal dealing with francophone literatures,

Some articles on Polynesian literature, and the quite recent publication of an anthology of Polynesian literary texts,

But generally speaking these mentions are a kind of amalgam of writers travelling through Polynesia who wrote about the place and authors of Polynesian origin: it is perhaps worth specifying that the former were French writers reliant on exoticism in presenting their myths,

their view of the world, of the Other as they saw him or her, which Polynesians recognised they had the right to do, while at the same time often feeling trapped by this vision.

It is also true that the organisation of literary competitions since the establishment of the Tahitian Academy, relaunched four years ago by the President's Prize competition, the organisation of poetry competitions in schools, of the 'Vive l'écrit' competitions also in schools (for the last twenty years), the short story competition for young and old – organised by a daily newspaper, *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti* –, of classes and competitions in 'orero (speech competitions) by cultural groups, by schools, by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education (in particular since four years ago on the occasion of Reo mā'ohi Day) in Place To'ata, in the Maison de la Culture (originally called Maison des Jeunes Maison de la Culture, MJMC), also known as the Office Territorial d'action culturelle [OTAC], then Office polynésien d'action culturelle [OPAC]), or at the Music, Song and Dance Conservatory,

It is also true that the publication of stories collected by the Department of Oral Traditions,

That these are all events that encourage and promote the development of written Polynesian literature.

Finally, the focus of the 7<sup>th</sup> Salon du Livre Outre-Mer for the first time ever on Pacific literature (Paris, 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> of October 2000) then the Polynesian Poetry evening at the Théâtre Molière in Paris (in March 2001), following closely the Salon du livre de Ouessant,

And the increasing signs in French and foreign universities of interest in Polynesian literature, these are also indications at the highest level, here at home as well as in Metropolitan France and internationally, of a behavioural change, of evolving attitudes.

And so it was at the crossroads of these events, in response to this great increase in interest that the review Littéramā'ohi was created, to meet the demand for recognition from the men and women who had already accepted for too long that they could only express themselves through dance, songs and art,

And who more and more are taking the risk of writing, telling their own stories, and having their work published.

A demand for recognition of their existence and their identity as writers, as Polynesian creatives in the reality of their today, of men and women with multiple roots, diverse, crossed, mingled, intermingled, tangled, anchored, planted and rooted in Polynesian soil,

And who have something to say and to hand on.

And this is an anchoring, a planting and an evolution in which they wish to be more openly, more deliberately involved,

Along with, at this point, their feelings about their existence or non-existence, their differing experiences of identity or non-identity, of violence, of turmoil.

But also their moments of enlightenment, of transcendence, of joyfulness and pleasure, of things said, shared, survived, renewed, strengthened, attuned.

These are the reasons why those who have something to say, the artists, the creatives, have their place in the journal Littéramā'ohi, founded by seven Polynesian writers in May 2002 in Pape'ete,

– On the occasion of the first Salon du Livre set up by the Association des éditeurs de Polynésie française, with its days given over to discussion of painting, of orality, of literature –

Writers and artists who, often alone, are crossing the desert,  
Admittedly for their own reasons, at first, but also for the social group they belong to.

And this is something along the same lines as what we spoke of back in 1977, comparing the generations of that time with the tāra'ehara, with the pua'a tapene, those who offer themselves as sacrifices, and who are sacrificed, so that the Polynesian Consciousness, Te Manava Ihotupu, might be born and reborn, maintain itself, evolve, be fertile.

And this is how Polynesians can join forces with other travellers, companions on the creative journey into the imaginary,  
Into the creation of esthetic works of the mind,

From which can be measured and reinforced the pa'ari, the Polynesian pa'ari ro'a, that characteristic of the maturity and the intrinsic quality of wood,

That is to say (translating), its 'solidity', 'wisdom, knowledge and understanding', that come from their hearts, from their inner selves, from their roots, from all their roots whatever their origins,

From all their origins,

Those things that, once they have become 'ta'ata pa'ari', 'adults', they would be able to express in their writings, – for the moment, they do it in oral texts which, from this point on, should be systematically transcribed, inscribed, written down –

And this should also be done with the Bible commentaries that show the pathways taken by the thinking, the reflections that flourish in their development, their analysis, their exploration.

If every Polynesian who has commented on verses from the Bible could be read, people would be made aware, beyond the primary focus on the Scriptures, of the richness of the reflection and expression of those who were trained in oratory, and who became, in their day, masters of the art,

And there would be a great many Polynesian writers, Tahitian, Pa'umotu, Marquesan, Mangarevan, Rapa...

### **Enough discussion!**

And there are so many opportunities, for Polynesians of today and tomorrow, to build everything, to reinvent, self-invent, recreate, self-create,

In the literary domain... perhaps even without regard for formal rules,  
To preserve everyone's individual spirit, expression, format, in Tahitian, in French, in any and every other language,

There is plenty, to carve, dig, navigate, tattoo, engrave, print... to read, to write!!!

'rahu', 'tā',

'tatā',

'fatu',

'na'o', 'nē'i',

'tutu',

'heri', 'heru', 'pao'

'pāpa'i',

'tāpū', 'tāumi', 'tāpa'o'!

There are many fragments of unknown works, swallowed up in the unsaid, waiting to be chosen!

That is, to be said, to be written, to be transcribed,  
So as to number them, archive them, pass them on,

Which is why this call was made, a few years ago:

'... Row, tīfīraina, for new adventures, new discoveries, ... new and fabulous voyages!

E te mau fatupehe e,

'A rohi rā!

E te mau tāparau e,

'A fatu rā!

Take up your pens,  
And follow your inspiration!'

Translation:

'O composers,  
Get to work  
Be alert!

Weave!  
Create!  
Compose!

O writers,

Weave!  
Create!  
Compose!

Write!  
Inherit!'

... And it will be our future generations who will appreciate what is produced today!  
Polynesian 'literary' critics not having been born yet!

Today, we ('we' being 'we Polynesians') are ourselves either too involved or just a little smug about ourselves, about our newly-acquired knowledge, to accept every possible form of expression! And the challenges!

To bring these reflections to a final close, musically, rhythmically,  
A few personal lines to tambourine, to toere:

'Ārevareva o Mau'a iti ē  
Te tu'utu'uve'a ē  
I te 'āfa'ira'a mai ia 'Oro ē  
E te maro tea ē  
Piri maira to Hava'i ē  
E te 'Ātiāpi'i ē

'Ātiāpi'i, 'Ātiporea,  
Ati a 'Oro marotea ē

'Ātiāpi'i, 'Ātiporea,  
Ati a 'Oro marotea ē.

'Ātiāpi'i, 'Ātiporea,  
'Āti a 'Oro marotea ē.

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## Rarahu and the Marriage of Loti

Translated by Kareva Mateata-Allain

Propelled by the wind, spawn bubbles, algae wisps, and sea foam twirl and twist over the roll of the waves in their scramble for the shore. Only the border reef harshly sucks them into its crevices and they are gobbled up by the lapping waves. These crevices are spaces where our spirits—huddled mice ear shells<sup>8</sup> and gnawed yellowed leaves--destroy and balance themselves within the torpors and daydreams that impel the waves toward a soul twirled by sea spray.

On the shore, broken shells, scrunched and dull, drift towards infinity under the murmur of the palms.

As far as I can go back in memory to retrieve impressions that I felt about reading *The Marriage of Loti*, I can only gather confused thoughts and denial as well as my refusal to enter into this account of a “true” love story—at least that is what we believed—that would herald modern times as “civilized,” and “enlightened.” Concomitantly, I felt hopeless.

I refused to become interested in fiction created by an imagination I deem delirious by a writer inflicted with exoticism, whose text echoes a hodgepodge of distance, mistrust, sadness, and bitterness. This text reflects a vague knowledge or perception of the fragility, fickleness, and insecurity of bonds formed between people, in particular, between those who come from afar who weave themselves with islanders.

In fact, my refusal to accept the account of *The Marriage of Loti* stems from my discomfort at seeing 19th century Tahitian society represented as a free-for-all for voyagers passing through who exploited the myth of the island and used Tahiti’s reputation to recount their travels.

In essence, what really put me ill at ease, was the battle between the wooden 'umete against the stone 'umete—earth pot against iron pot—that represented the shock of cultures where all is known and set in place in advance.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, you have a local society that is “primitive” and “incomprehensible” juxtaposed against Loti’s character that is “civilized” who arrives in Tahiti to base his superiority while proclaiming it in a manner that is forever obvious, thanks to the perpetuation of the written word. Consequently, the “primitivism” of one and the “superiority” of the other have been inscribed black on white.

Accordingly, French Polynesian society, in particular Tahiti, was poorly regarded during the 19th century and very badly off.<sup>10</sup> As far as Loti’s work in question, it has an eternal, universal theme: that of a forsaken woman who lets herself go and ends up dying of a broken heart.

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<sup>8</sup> *Myosotella myosotis* (Mouse ear Osatella): [http://www.gastropods.com/0/Shell\\_5580.html](http://www.gastropods.com/0/Shell_5580.html)

<sup>9</sup> 'umete carved oblong-shaped receptacle.

<sup>10</sup> Author uses play on words here that gets lost in translation. The original sentence refers to Tahitian society as being “mal lotie,” which Devatine employs as an allusion to Pierre Loti as well as meaning “badly off.”



The theme of the forsaken woman is common in Polynesian oraliture: Ti'aitau from Rai'atea (Rarahu is from Bora-Bora and she returned home to die), learned that her husband, whom she thought was out fishing, was having an affair. In anguish, she climbed onto Mount Temahani and threw herself from the heights of a cliff.

Ti'aitau, vahine pāro'o  
 E aha te mea i pohe ai e  
 E ta'i ri'i tane i pohe ai e (traditional)

Ti'aitau, famous woman  
 How did she die?  
 She died from grieving the love of her life

Further, despite Loti's talent as a writer, [his use of] "sadness" coupled with his "tightened heart" appear to me to be too faint and too light compared to the suffering of this girl who will never forget him until she dies.

Unfortunately, we will never know Rarahu's perspective. And if it existed, it would be without a doubt, just another fabrication since female and male perspectives differ. In addition, once told, even more so about two cultures just as different from one as the other—as least appearing so—it would be highly probable that the facts would not only diverge; but in all likelihood, we wouldn't be able to even link the two accounts.

Within her spirit, Rarahu felt married to Loti. She was in a Tahitian marriage, which as per the values of the society of the times, was very real to her. It also attached her for life, just like European marriages. Moreover, she must have thought Loti to be different from the others. But their trip to Moorea reveals the wall between them; a wall that from then on, she wore under her eyes. Hence, it was a young girl who left for Moorea, but a woman who came back. She is a woman who understood about the Other, then started to roam.

And when Loti wrote that she was a "savage," it was because he did not identify with her. In reality, it is he who did not understand and who did not realize he was a prisoner of his own culture, incapable of opening himself up to the Other.

Loti rejects Rarahu and her way to think, to be, to carry herself. He constantly repeats that she is different, showing at the same time that he did not accept this difference, certainly in conjunction with the universalism typical of his era.

But for Rarahu, the differences between them rest not in each one's humanity, but rather as an element of form—behaviors, manners, gestures, and ways of being—even when these differences are sustained by her foundation, or essence of self. For her, difference must be understood and can only become diminished through acknowledging all of its forms. Or rather, difference remains a point of passage required for all relationships; even when differences are not a major issue.

Considering only manners, like customs, “te peu” is a respectful attitude toward the Other without criticizing one’s depths, or the essence of one’s humanity.<sup>11</sup>

It is so that Rarahu understands and defines the two cultures; even better than Loti. For him there is only one culture: his own.

Therefore, Loti analyzes and judges Rarahu’s “form” i.e. behaviors and her way of thinking and acting in order to continually draw the same conclusions over the basis of what he believes to be the profound nature of Rarahu (“mysterious,” “complex,” “bizarre”).

My rejection of *The Marriage of Loti* increased with the composition of the song “Rarahu ia Loti” by Yves ROCHE in 1958:

*Ua mihi Rarahu ia Loti e  
 Mai te mahana reva atu ai  
 A hoi mai e parahi taua e  
 Te nounou nei au ia oe  
 A hoi mai i Tahiti  
 Aita to'u e maitai raa  
 Aue tau tane iti here  
 Roto noa vau te faaoromai  
 Mihi noa Rarahu ia Loti e  
 Ta'u tiaturi hoe roa  
 Te nounou nei hoi au ia oe  
 Roto noa vau te faaoromai*

French Translation:

*Rarahu a regretté son cher Loti  
 Le jour où il est parti  
 "Reviens, afin que nous restions ensemble,  
 J'ai tant besoin de toi.  
 Reviens à Tahiti,  
 Je ne suis plus rien sans toi.  
 Oh mon amour  
 Je t'attendrai toujours."  
 Rarahu languit tellement sans Loti  
 "Je n'ai plus qu'un espoir,  
 Celui de te voir revenir,  
 Je souffre de tant d'impatience."*

English Translation :

*Rarahu yearned so much for her dear Loti  
 The day he left  
 "Come back so that we can be together,*

---

<sup>11</sup> a custom, habit, manner, fashion, ordinance, or institution.

*I need you so much.  
Come back to Tahiti,  
I am nothing without you.  
Oh, my love  
I will always wait for you.”  
Rarahu pined so deeply for Loti:  
“I only have one hope.  
and that is for you to come back.  
I am suffering from so much impatience.”<sup>12</sup>*

This song was inspired from Rarahu’s love letters that appear in the book. They present but a handful of samples of traditional Polynesian love letters. Some have traveled across centuries, such as the love letters from Aifenua vahine or from Taimai vahine de Taapuna, revealed by the sailor Gilbert Cuzent’s pharmacist.<sup>13</sup>

Letters that, to put it simply, are tender. They express love in all of its sensibilities and the poetry of the Polynesian soul. These letters do not support the flippancy of the Tahitian woman. In fact, wherever we are, whether in space or time, woman is always a thinking, sensitive being.

It is regrettable that literature, even now, has transported a false image of the Tahitian woman. Her authenticity has been sacrificed by folklore.

This situation is a result of French Polynesians not writing their own stories, for spoken words fly away whereas foreign writing persists.

Today, after my rejection of this novel and after taking a step back, and in the backward surge following the rediscovery of the great sensibilities and immense emotions of Pierre Loti; it is our turn to discover how so many of the words and images about the Other are now so clear to us.

What’s more, and in our “naïveté,” sentiments, images, and impressions about our own lives hover over the text now and then. Sometimes they land right above it, establishing a sense of peace and confidence.

Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, more than a century later we tend to live the same reverie, the same contemplative spirit, the same difficulty expressing feelings, the same fragility in life, the same discrepancies, the same trenches, the same sadness and the same muted drama that relentlessly advances in silence. Is this a projection? self-identification ?

Thus, when I refused to read *The Marriage of Loti*, it was because I had a presentiment about what he would say about our “weird silences.” But in fact, I refused my melancholy. I refused to relive in me this sadness, this silent suffering. I wanted no more of it. But even so, something was there, very present, that nothing could erase, whether it be melancholy, languor, or nostalgia...

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<sup>12</sup> Copyright 1958 By Yves Roche-Tahiti; Copyright 1962-65 By Criterion Music Corp. Hollywood. English version my translation).

<sup>13</sup> « Chronique à Malice » by Michèle de CHARZEAUX, Feb 13 2000.

*Nostalgia for my land,  
Nostalgia for my ancestors,  
Nostalgia for the past,  
For my home, my loved ones, my friends...*

*Nostalgia, nostalgia, when you hold me*

*I live and feed myself from you  
I run from you, and I cling to you !*

*Nostalgia,  
I will never free myself from you !*

This is a nostalgia I am unfamiliar with, yet that cries within me.

*Nostalgia,*

*What is it with you that you stick to my skin ?  
Who are you to chase me ?*

*Nostalgia, nostalgia, will you teach me about myself ?*

This nostalgia is a deep pit of suffering that oozes out of me and trickles to the hum of ancient ways. It is a melancholy that quenches itself there and intensely opens its heart onto the reefs in a “pēpēpē” of the songs from my soul.<sup>14</sup>

Nostalgia is in me; rhythms that transport suffering across time.

*Nostalgia, nostalgia*

*Your name is sickness  
Indefinable*

*Your name is pain  
Eternal*

It stems from those silences that hold in all the noise, like the intense heat of the day when breathing is agony. It comes from those spaces when the stifling air is so thick and disabling that you don't know anything anymore, you can't move anymore. Everything halts and the void becomes impenetrable.

*Nostalgia*

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<sup>14</sup> Sharp voice, that in *tārava* singing, weaves musical themes above the main choir. *Tārava* is a style of traditional Tahitian music sung a cappella in a highly rhythmic style by polyphonic choirs. The word *tārava* means *to be spread out, to be gathered*. This form of singing is common in French Polynesia and is distinguished by a unique drop in pitch at the end of the phrases; which is a characteristic formed by several different voices. It is also accompanied by steady grunting of staccato nonsensical syllables by the men.

*Your name is mine*

Nostalgia hails from landscapes of forgotten times and places that restore birdsongs to memory.

*Nostalgia, nostalgia*

*Memories are coming back  
Amidst the listlessness that sighs*

*Emotions are rising again to  
the chant of melancholies*

Similar to the swaying of palms that fan, refresh, and lighten the spirit, nostalgia is a poem chanted from another time; a romantic past from another life.

*Nostalgia, your name evades me*

Like agitated branches vying with each other for balance. And like flowers at the end of branches that ask for nothing else, nostalgia is my medusa, my inspiration.

*Nostalgia,  
Your name is gentle, beautiful!*

*Your name is the source of creation,  
Your name is a poem  
I will never discard you, nostalgia.*

Ever since Rarahu or The Marriage of Loti, we have needed this time, and several generations, to take it all in, to re-sense it all, to accept it all.  
To encounter the Other is to encounter oneself.

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