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REVIEW ESSAY

Brandy Nālani McDougall. *ʻĀina Hānau/Birth Land.* University of Arizona Press, 2023. 160 pp. ISBN: 9780816548354.

https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/aina-hanau-birth-land

Noʻu Revilla. *Ask the Brindled.* Milkweed Editions, 2022. 104 pp. ISBN: 9781639550005.

https://milkweed.org/book/ask-the-brindled

ʻI ka ʻōlelo ke ola, i ka ʻōlelo ka make', says the Hawaiian ʻōlelo noʻeau/proverb. ʻIn words is the power of life, in words is the power of death' (hoʻomanawanui 675).

Brandy Nālani McDougall and Noʻu Revilla are part of a generation of Kanaka ʻŌiwi/Native Hawaiian writers using poetry as a decolonial practice of refusal and relation. Their work traces the everyday violences of settler occupation and colonialism in Hawaiʻi, from land and water dispossession, to gendered constraints on embodied life and intimacy, to military and capitalist ecocide. McDougall's and Revilla's works also tend to storied relationships between people, places, and environmental elements. Through poetry, they engage with Hawaiian forms of knowledge such as moʻolelo

(hi/stories), mele (songs/poems), and oli (chants), while also playfully, rigorously experimenting with poetic techniques to share multiple perspectives and sensations, and to nourish what Kānaka ʻŌiwi call ea. Often translated as life, breath, and sovereignty, Noelani Goodyear Kaʻōpua describes ea as "an active state of being" grounded in "relationships forged through the process of remembering and caring for wahi pana, storied places" (3-4).

McDougall and Revilla are poets and educators from the island of Maui, and both currently live on Oʻahu and work at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa (McDougall teaches Indigenous studies and Revilla teaches creative writing). *ʻĀina Hānau/Birth Land* is McDougall's second full-length poetry collection, following *The Salt Wind/Ka Makani Paʻakai* (Kuleana ʻŌiwi Press, 2008), and the critical monograph *Finding Meaning: Kaona and Contemporary Hawaiian Literature* (University of Arizona Press, 2016). McDougall is also the Hawaiʻi State Poet Laureate 2023-25. *Ask the Brindled* is Revilla's debut book of poetry, and a winner of the US National Poetry Series. The book follows Revilla's previous chapbook-length collections, *Permission to Make Digging Sounds* (included in the *Effigies III* anthology, Salt Publishing, 2019), and *Say Throne* (Tinfish Press, 2011).

In this review, I read *ʻĀina Hānau* and *Ask the Brindled* in dialogue through Hawaiian geographical approaches that attend to interconnected social and ecological processes running from mountain to sea. Situated perspectives grounded in places, genealogies, and social and environmental relationships are also central to Hawaiian knowledge systems. My readings are shaped by my perspective as a white, non-Kanaka reader based in the UK, where I have been reading Hawaiian poetry and scholarship for around seven years, and writing about relationships between Kanaka ʻŌiwi poetry and decolonial practices of caring for lands and waters. Readers with more embedded and embodied relationships to Hawaiʻi may find many more resonances in and between McDougall's and Revilla's work.

i. mauna

ʻĀina Hānau and *Ask the Brindled* meet at the piko, the centre, the summit. Revilla's opening poem is "Maunakea," the tallest mountain in the Hawaiʻi archipelago and a sacred place "where the sky is so thin, / thinnest of all skins come to stitch / a new story"

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(4). In Hawaiian geographies, Mauna Kea's summit is described as wao akua, the realm of gods and elements. *ʻĀina Hānau* opens with an illustration by Allison Leialoha Milham titled "Wao Akua," which overlays maps of the Hawaiian islands and their waterways with textured drawings and handwritten words to a chant, "Nā ʻAumakua," which signals entry into ceremony or sacred space (Malo 31). As McDougall's poem "ʻĀina Mauna" shows, the mountain is a place of many moʻolelo (hi/stories) of gods, clouds, plants. It is "piko / between honua and lani, / between wai and kai, / between pō and ao" (8), between earth and sky, fresh- and saltwater, night and day. It is the "kumu" or source of "air and water, of thick / forests crowned with winds and mist" in intricate, interconnected cycles. These cyclical relationships also echo the islands' deep geological and oceanic histories:

> These
> islands are
> and will always be
> the nuʻu of submerged
> mauna rising from,
> and rooted in,
> moana, in
> lipo

As the stanza's form emphasises, Hawaiʻi's volcanic islands emerge in dynamic balance, the nuʻu (summit) in the thin skies of Revilla's poem arising from underwater eruptions in the moana (ocean) and lipo (darkness). ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi (the Hawaiian language) has five vowels and eight consonants, enabling visual and sonic patterning that can be mobilised for poetic play, as here with "mauna" and "moana." As McDougall writes later in the poem, "Mauna" is "not to be mistaken with Māuna," the lengthening of the vowel with the kahakō (the diacritical mark over the "a") altering the word to mean "waste." For several decades, Kānaka ʻŌiwi have been protecting Mauna Kea from the ongoing construction of astronomical telescopes, most recently the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). As settler ally Candace Fujikane writes, the institutions behind the telescopes have consistently tried to represent Mauna Kea and the wao akua as wasteland to justify building the telescopes (94).

Revilla's poem "Maunakea" begins, "Inside me: two seeds. / One planted in my throat, / a dark highway / fingered by akua moonlight. / The other seed raised / in a fist of

bright veins" (3). "Inside me" echoes the line "[i]nside me the dead" in Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt's well-known poem tracing Indigenous, missionary, and colonial inheritances shaping Pacific life and identity. Revilla's imagery brings together erotics, rage, and relation in approaching the mauna. Practices of sustaining a protection movement – "[t]rucks still carry medicine, / folding tables & hot food, / water water / water water" – appear alongside questions that are unanswerable via colonial logics: "Who will taste without swallowing / my grove of lehua?" (3). Drawing on Hawaiian aesthetics, *Asked the Brindled* is abundant with double-and-more meanings and Kanaka ʻŌiwi queer intimacies with gods, rains, and shapeshifting lizard women known as moʻo, while also refusing assumed colonial access to these knowledges, intimacies, and their myriad meanings.

ii. ʻāina

''O wai kou kupunahine? / ʻO ka ʻāina nō. ʻO ka ʻāina nō" (3). Who is your grandmother? The land, indeed. The land indeed. This refrain in Revilla's poem "Maunakea" is carried from literatures of Kanaka ʻŌiwi resistance to US annexation published in Hawaiian-language newspapers in the 1890s (Nāwahīokalaniʻōpuʻu 4) into the present. *ʻĀina Hānau* and *Ask the Brindled* engage expansively and complexly with ancestry, care, and relation to ʻāina, land, or "that which feeds." In the poem "Real (G)estate," McDougall juxtaposes settler housing laws, land policies, and food systems with the constrained conditions of raising children as a Kanaka ʻŌiwi mother in a context where Hawaiian women's lives and bodies have been subject to dispossession and imposed heteropatriarchy. The poem is set out in two columns with numbered sections, as shown in the following excerpt:

1.
as in not imagined,
fraudulent
or illusory

as in property
consisting of land
and/or buildings

as in carrying
a life
in your womb
as in feeding
that life
from your
body

as in feeding

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as in assets,
an extensive area
of land and money
owned by a person
especially at death

as in possession
of land by virtue
of a legal document

a life from
ʻāina after
she/he/they
have left
your body

as in deeds
are written
to record and prove
the ownership
of ʻāina (22)

Here, colonial notions of land as "property" and "possession" are contrasted with Kanaka ʻŌiwi conceptions of ʻāina, that which feeds. In the logics of real (g)estate, these reciprocal relations of nourishment with ʻāina are translated into "deeds […] written / to record and prove / the ownership / of ʻāina," inserted into settler forms of property and subject to dispossession. The poem traces interlocking policies that make "feeding / a life from / ʻāina" impossible, from blood quantum laws that exclude many Kānaka ʻŌiwi from accessing housing and land ownership in the places their ancestors have cared for over generations, to laws of "adverse possession" that allow developers who have stolen land to claim it legally. An economy centred around tourism and militarism inflates rents for those for whom the islands are ʻāina hānau (birthplace). McDougall's speaker recounts repeatedly noticing her daughters' ʻiewe (placentas) in the freezer amongst the imported food she has to feed them with instead of ʻāina. The poem connects food politics to reproductive politics and the practice of kanu, planting or burying the ʻiewe in the earth to form a lasting relationship between a child and ʻāina. In "Real (G)estate," the speaker is "hoping we have / ʻāina someday" (28) to make this process possible. Kanu recurs across *ʻĀina Hānau*, connecting the planting of ʻiewe to kalo (taro), a staple food considered to be the sibling of Kānaka ʻŌiwi, and to iwi, the bones of kūpuna (ancestors) also planted in the ʻāina.

In an echo of "Real (G)estate," the collection's stunning extended final poem, "ʻĀina Hānau," dedicated to McDougall's daughters, also uses columns as a visual structure of juxtaposition and connection. In this poem, McDougall interweaves Hawaiian terms

for housebuilding, birthing, and birth care with critiques of colonial medical models of reproductive health. The poem opens out "many versions" (106) of birthing and caring as decolonial possibility, unfolding with intimate knowledges of island genealogies and processes, "seeds / of cold cloud mist" transforming through "drips and birds," that "flick and clatter" (110-11) in their movement towards the ocean across multiple scales of relation in the islands' "smallness" and "immensity" (138).

Ask the Brindled is "slyly / reproductive," a phrase used by Kanaka ʻŌiwi political leader, scholar, and poet Haunani-Kay Trask to describe her contributions beyond biological reproduction to "reproducing / the rope of resistance" (5) in the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. *Ask the Brindled*'s sly reproductions happen through moʻo. Across the book, Revilla offers eight different definitions of moʻo, including "shapeshifting water protector, lizard, woman, deity," "succession, series, especially a blood line," "story, tradition, legend" (1), "narrow path" (23), and "brindled, of the skin, markings on those who feed and protect'' (55). The number eight is significant here; the Hawaiian term makawalu or "eight eyes" means "approaching a situation or phenomenon from multiple perspectives." In contrast to the consistently present lyrical voice of *'Āina Hānau, Ask the Brindled* spills with overheard voices, "hushed tones" (7) of gossip about girls and women who do not fit into normative categories of gender and intimacy, those with tails "duct-taped" under their dresses (12), who shed skins, who "eat one world at a time" (18). Revilla's language is often sharp-edged, playful, swallowed and spat out. In "Eggs," a beautiful woman who does not have any children and is rumoured to be a lizard is lamented by other islanders: "what a waste, what a waste" (7). After reptile eggs and bones are found across the island, the line is repeated at the end of the poem as a knowing, warning, acerbic aside: "Crack a lizard's eggs and you will fall off a cliff. What a waste, what a waste" (7). Other poems give instructions on "How to swallow a colonizer" and perform erasures on entries from the *Hawaiian Dictionary*, challenging readers to "Remember: you are not making a home here" (42). In "Don't have sex with gods," Revilla plays with the proximities of ai (sex), ʻai (food), and ʻāina (land) in ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi to amplify ʻāina's reciprocal potential.

> if ʻāina is that which feeds,
> if aloha ʻāina is love and lover of land,
> then she who feeds is she who fucks.
> ʻĀina will fuck back. (20)

Revilla's shapeshifting speakers refuse to recuperate colonial and gendered violence,

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while also caring for non-linear successions of moʻo and their stories, of intimacies between women, with land and water, where rain and caves and birds are also lovers (Osorio 111).

iii. moana

"Another of our mothers," McDougall writes, is the waʻa (canoe) in which Kānaka ʻŌiwi voyaged on their way to Hawaiʻi and between other islands, where they "read currents of wind, / ocean" (108). *ʻĀina Hānau* foregrounds Kanaka Maoli spatial knowledges, which are often oral/narrative, multi-perspectival, and embodied (Louis xviii). In "Water Remembers," McDougall returns the popular tourist destination Waikīkī to an ahupuaʻa, a Hawaiian land division running from mountain to sea with the resources and relationships needed for sustenance, and contrasts these flows with the rising waters of climate colonialism. A series of poems interspersed throughout the book attempt to navigate to culturally important locations via Google Maps, "search[ing] / the brown canal water / for any part of us / that is still ours" (85). McDougall's poetic geographies interconnect sites of colonial violence and resistance. "Kūpikipikiʻō, Oʻahu" begins, "Stand here, on the scarred edge / of this island" (8), where Kānaka ʻŌiwi resisted annexation, where settler wealth and military occupation coagulate. This "scarred edge" relates to other places "bombed and shot by Americans" or with US-supplied weapons and technologies, from Afghanistan to Guåhan, the Marshall Islands to Palestine. In a collaborative poem for the Cancel RIMPAC Coalition (RIMPAC is the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, an international maritime military training event hosted biennially by the US Navy in Hawaiʻi), McDougall imagines "a world without RIMPAC" where "there is breath / enough—to stand / against" military imperial violence, "to sing so loud / we drown / all submarine sonar" (72). Written in a time of ongoing colonialisms, intensifying climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic, McDougall's contribution turns poetic expression into a tactic of resistant collectivity, a way of breathing with and caring for ocean places and kin.

As freshwater deities, *Ask the Brindled*'s moʻo gather and vanish around ponds, appear as "a cliff in a girl's body" (12), creating precipitous geographies of Kanaka ʻŌiwi queer femme life. Reaching the ocean towards the end of the book, Revilla imagines "Recovery, Waikīkī" in terms of Kanaka ʻŌiwi resurgence. Written during the pandemic

when the beaches of Waikīkī were briefly quieter, Revilla's speaker, a surfer with a "single fin," speaks back from the ocean:

before paddling this far out,
i dug ten thousand eel-sized holes into the groin facing the royal hawaiian.
i blew maʻi songs inside them.

from ten thousand holes in the season without visitors,
watch the Kumulipo re-emerge and take back Waikīkī. (69)

These lines allude to the unsuccessful 1895 rebellion against the settler provisional government, in which Kānaka ʻŌiwi fighting to recover the independent Hawaiian Kingdom imported and buried guns in the beaches. Revilla also situates recovery in longer histories and cosmologies of Hawaiian relationships with ʻāina. The Kumulipo is a creation chant tracing interconnected relationships and genealogical lineages of stars, coral, deities, plants, and people. The re-emergence of the Kumulipo – through ten thousand eels, maʻi (genital) songs celebrating pleasure and procreation, even more grains of sand – trembles the foundations of settler infrastructures, the hotel resorts that line the shore and erode sites of connection for those who, in McDougall's words, "have always been / part ocean, part land" (7).

What would it mean for poetry to bring about resurgent, living and liveable relationships with places, lands, waters, and those who care for them? As McDougall writes from the volcanic cliffs and turbulent waters of Oʻahu, "*This is not paradise*," "*real estate*," or "*wasteland* […] This is stolen land and ocean. This is ancestor and descendent" (83). These two poetry collections ripple up the spine (another definition of moʻo), make and refuse, attend to intricacies of mists and rains and ponds and streams, sloughed skin and poi crusts arounds mouths, wire, lava, sewage, seeds. They spiral out abundant ways of knowing, feeling, and relating as grounds of remembering Kanaka ʻŌiwi futures, some shared, some held, some hidden. As mist becomes salt and back again, McDougall reminds us: "Stand here. / Stand here."

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