

Mediating Aotearoa

By Dieter Riemenschneider. Kronberg im Taunus, Tranzlit, 2021.

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Reviewed by Hidehiro Nakao.

The title, *Mediating Aotearoa*, intrigues. Dieter Riemenschneider calls himself a “mediator,” and explains his role as “someone deeply engaged in reading, analysing, teaching, writing upon, and translating into German literary representations of other cultures, or of acquiring and disseminating insights into their distinct character, historical and poetic traditions, and aesthetic make-up.” (p. 149) This “mediator,” suggesting its religious connotation of the word [1 Tim. 2: 5], engages in rather typical activities of an average scholar of foreign literature studies. Riemenschneider’s field is chiefly literatures in English as the phrase “other cultures” shows. Here for the collection he selected his essays from 2001-2020 dealing with “Aotearoa.” We have no clear outline of “mediating,” though. What specific kinds of mediation are at work here beyond those of daily scholarly and literary exchange?

There is a convincing instance of the actual use of the word where Riemenschneider describes Pei Te Hurinui Jones’s English translation of ancient Māori songs as “mediating between two languages, between two cultures” (p. 84). This is much more convincing than Riemenschneider’s self-identification as “mediator” because there was certainly a great divide between “two languages/two cultures” and those two were worth “mediating” at the time. Jones is probably a “mediator” role model for Riemenschneider.

In her “Preface,” Melissa Kennedy aptly introduces the gist of *Mediating Aotearoa* by paraphrasing “mediating” as “negotiating Māoritanga by reading it in all its media forms” (p. 7). Originally Aotearoa meant North Island in Māori but is now used as the Māori name for New Zealand. The “Aotearoa” of this collection of ten essays deals with the Māori side of the country almost exclusively, with one excursion into Sāmoan theatre, while Riemenschneider covers it in many cultural media. Kennedy’s careful choice of the words such as “negotiating” and “media” leads us to another characteristic of “mediating,” that is, its commercial aspect. The frequent mention of “glocalization” throughout the collection reflects Riemenschneider’s strong interest in this respect.

Although Riemenschneider covers Māoritanga in “all its media forms,” we can easily know his favorite writers and subjects: Witi Ihimaera, Robert Sullivan, and Ranginui Walker. Out of ten essays of the collection, seven deal with Ihimaera, six with Sullivan, five with Walker.

Firstly, Witi Ihimaera. Ihimaera is a successful writer from Riemenschneider’s “glocal” perspective. He praises Ihimaera almost without exception in seven essays, which seems his consistent manner as a “mediator.” This is a kind of manner which presupposes great attainments of the field. Ihimaera is arguably the most famous literary figure of the country, especially after the international success of the film *Whale Rider* (2002). Naturally his novel of the same title (1987) is discussed in “Contemporary Māori Films” section and a “rather harmonious ending of the film,” typically “Hollywood-type” according to Riemenschneider, is approved of because “the cinematographic effects of filming the coastal landscape and the sea combined with the music and the acting, and here especially of twelve-year-old Keisha Castle-Hughes as Paikea are so powerful” (pp. 83-84).

There is no doubt that this waka does not only contribute to “the cinematographic effects” but also to a post-film tourism. After Peter Jackson’s unprecedented success of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, post-film tourism in New Zealand has become a key part of the industry’s promotion and self-presentation. The filming location, Whangara, is the destination of the Whale Rider tour, and the centerpiece of the tour is the very same waka from the film. As is often the case with the film props, the *waka* does look authentic on-screen but it is actually made of synthetic resin – nothing but a simulacrum. This is quite symbolic since the Whangara in the film is an “imagined borderland” or an “oppressive simulacrum” as Brendan Hokowhitu points out (“Understanding Whangara” in *MS JNZ*, January 2007, pp. 24-25). The film is definitely Hollywood-type to the core and Whangara is “glocally” exploited but this seems too trivial to attract Riemenschneider’s attention. A more extended view would have been welcome.

The staging of Ihimaera’s *Woman Far Walking* is analyzed fully in one essay “A Theatre Play.” Comparing the published text of *Woman Far Walking* (2000) with the typescript of the 2002 staging, Riemenschneider prefers the 2002 version for its “breaking up of a strict diachronic sequencing of events in combination with the continual shifting of the narrative’s perspective” to the 2000 version which has “many more affinities to realism with its often comprehensive stage directions” (p. 74). Riemenschneider concludes that the published text shows off “Ihimaera’s talent as an excellent teller of stories . . . at the expense of the play’s dramatic purchase.”

Robert Sullivan’s work is central to this collection. He is praised without fail in six essays. Riemenschneider commends Sullivan for his “glocal” vision: “The fantasized discursive exchange between the collapsed mythic guide-figure [Orpheus/Maui] and the Western explorer [Captain Cook] who has gained knowledge . . . represents a glocal representation of a transcultural imagiNation” (on *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, p. 114) as well as for Sullivan’s advocacy of love: “Transcending the culturally differing concepts of death and spiritual life, it is love that will bind the living and the dead” (on *Casino: City of Martyrs*, p. 134). “Moving between cultures, creating connections, looking at parallels and differences . . . draws him on to such central concerns as attempting to understand history, warfare and heroism, life and death, but above all to understand love” (on *Casino: City of Martyrs*, p. 136). Riemenschneider is good at providing a brief overview and Sullivan is an important poet worthy of advocacy and a wider readership. But not much, finally, is said. Genuine analysis is yet to begin.

Riemenschneider refers to Sullivan and Ihimaera together, suggesting that Sullivan’s “multiple-coded” poems could transgress limits set by the bicultural formula in their hybridity but that “such cross-cultural interchange would . . . make it difficult to precisely notify the Māoriness of a text” (p. 60). Ihimaera’s *Woman Far Walking* expresses a “multiple-codedness and thus signify[es] a poetic Māori discourse on Te Tiriti that is moving away from an insistence on biculturality.” Does Riemenschneider have concerns about Sullivan’s radical cross-cultural departure from biculturalism? Ihimaera’s distancing from biculturality in his narrative representation meets his critical approval. Again, more could have been made of this encounter to develop a truly comparative reading.

Thanks to Riemenschneider's untiring devotion to his study, *Mediating Aotearoa* extends our knowledge of New Zealand literature and broadens our views of New Zealand culture. It is a matter for regret that the book's breadth of scope doesn't match its depth. Much is introduced between these covers: much more needs to be developed and drawn out for criticism of these important literary and artistic works to be extended and deepened.