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## Book Review

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Emily C. Donaldson, *Working with the Ancestors: Mana and Place in the Marquesas Islands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 250 pp., \$30.00 (pbk), ISBN: 9780295745831.

With this engaging ethnography set in the Marquesas, an archipelago of the semi-autonomous *pays* of French Polynesia, Donaldson presents an impassioned plea for amplifying Indigenous voices in setting the agenda for how their environmental and cultural resources are defined and sustained. Mostly avoiding any tone of lament and victimization (found in earlier works such as Denning's 1988 'Discourse on a Silent Land'), the author focuses instead on Marquesans' material resilience.

The preface explains her methods of long-term participant observation and semi-structured interviewing across all six inhabited islands, her professional development as an ethnographer of material culture, and her personal involvement in the Marquesas. An undergraduate stint at an archaeological field school and 'adoption' by a Marquesan family led to many annual returns, assisting with the field school and creating an archaeological museum. The introduction poses the researcher-turned-activist problem: how to empower Indigenous peoples when their understandings do not mesh with Western ideals for preserving diverse 'heritage' sites for humanity's universal good.

The next five chapters lay out the complex colonial history and present-day constraints influencing how Marquesans engage with their environment, including traces of their Indigenous history. The reader learns how two centuries of resource extraction, Catholic missionization, and colonial rule (first by the French, more recently by Tahiti-centric territorial administrators) led to radical depopulation and transformation of the remaining inhabitants' everyday lives and spaces. They presently derive sustenance from the land and sea in polyvalent ways that resist full incorporation into the global market economy. While making a living, individuals experience a spiritually infused landscape marked by monolithic structures, the impressive evidence of their ancestors' *mana*, or life force energy, now overgrown by tropical vegetation, religious intolerance, and family tales. Donaldson examines how Western notions of creating natural and cultural reserves that can then be commodified for sale on the global tourist market do not accommodate Marquesan place-making notions and practices in which nature and culture are fused in space by the past and present existence of the ancestors who must be respectfully acknowledged. She proposes a 'working landscape' approach that would allow Marquesans to set and variably adjust the standards for inhabiting and using their resources for both material/financial and social/spiritual ends. Through evocative quotes, photos, descriptions, and narratives, Donaldson reveals how Marquesans' everyday

immersion in this landscape—learning to move around and work within it—leads to enskilled knowledge, emplaced understandings, and embodied ambivalences.

The book offers a critical examination of both the achievements and tensions that have developed out of a 40-year-long movement to revitalize the culture and natural environment of the Marquesas. While movement leaders have enlisted large segments of the population in the production of successful arts festivals focused on (re)building ancient dance sites and training youth to perform (re)created dances there, these leaders have also targeted some projects, such as acquiring a place on the UNESCO list of world heritage sites, that have not met with popular support. Donaldson shows how these cultural sovereignty efforts have provided an apolitical avenue for achieving power by contrast with and in opposition to the Tahitian-driven movement for political independence from France.

This leads to my only substantive critique of the book: although Donaldson explains well how heritage has become a divisive discourse, she does not adequately trace how these tensions emerged out of the cracks created by the French *mission civilisatrice*, the archipelago's long incorporation into the global economy, and the formation of a monied, educated, cosmopolitan elite who tend to base their thinking on Western trends. Her larger point that global NGOs need to do a better job of listening to local understandings of what heritage is and what it means—its material and spiritual value—could have been enriched by analyzing the original disconnect in a movement spearheaded by a Breton archbishop who focused on creating, for instance, a Marquesan Academy on the model of *l'Académie française*. Although this influential and much-loved leader did much to arouse the interest and involvement of a large majority of the Marquesas, he also set the stage for 'preserving' immaterial culture by way of the material (i.e., print-media dictionaries and renovated heritage sites). In short, Donaldson could have explored in a bit more detail how the neocolonial elite and its 'cultural revival' discourses emerged out of a long historical arc, forged first by colonialism and now by global discourses about heritage as a commodifiable object.

Also, although the text flows beautifully, it encounters several bumps in how data are marshalled, and Donaldson's delightful, multisensual vignettes do not always adequately explain the relevant theories: indigenous resistance and sovereignty, place-making and embodied knowledge, neoliberalism and territorialization. More ethnographic and historical specifics could flesh out both her own points and those she cites from other contexts (e.g., Escobar's replacement of human/culture binaries with a 'flow of life'). Fortunately, this is not always the case, and one excellent example of her ability to orchestrate data and theoretical analysis can be found in Chapter 4, 'Living from the Land'; here she harnesses descriptions of bingo-playing and necklace-making, interviewees' accounts of how they make a diversified living, and statistics about local agricultural consumption and craft pricing in order to explain a chart of how polyvalent workers engage in formal and informal markets. This chapter successfully establishes how making a mixed-value living (both spiritual and financial) from the environment could challenge neoliberal dynamics.

Her presentation and analysis of interview data is also sometimes problematic. Quotes are provided without enough reflexive consideration of the setting and language(s) spoken (French or Marquesan), the interviewees' background (age, gender, lineage, and education), and their perceptions of her identity. Without this kind of information, we are left wondering if the quotes reflect the interviewee's actual thoughts or ones sculpted for the content, medium, and audience of the

interview. Additionally, analysis of these facts would be highly relevant to figuring out which Marquesans (elites or others) wish to sustain their heritage and environment and how. Fortunately, she does contextualize some of the interviews in ways that assure us she is adept at finding her way into diverse interactions and adapting her questions to elicit meaningful answers in specific circumstances, all of which gives us insight into her own ontology and epistemology as well as some confidence that the ‘scientific’ knowledge she is producing may indeed help tip the scales of power toward her interlocutors.

Finally, the text includes lots of useful background information organized in charts, tables, and appendices. But for readers unfamiliar with the Marquesas, an additional appendix providing brief explanations of key organizations and their roles and relationships to the complicated French, Territorial, Municipal, and Associational landscape in French Polynesia would have facilitated her analysis of how earlier colonial avenues of governmentality over persons and social relations, land and its technological usage, and knowledge and authority, are being presently reproduced by NGOs.

However, these shortcomings are minor as Donaldson illuminates so much in the way of understanding how Marquesans have been eking out a meaningful living (material and spiritual) in the face of depopulation, missionization, and colonial control, and are presently negotiating a global movement to protect their heritage. Her recommendation for NGOs and other well-meaning outsiders to take a *te aitua* (breaking waves) approach to working landscapes—respecting both change and renewal—is well-argued and evocatively written.

Kathleen C. Riley  
Department of Anthropology  
Rutgers University  
kcr58@anthropology.rutgers.edu

### References

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