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Special Issue When Mana Whenua and Mana Moana Make Knowledge

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Anae, Melani. (2020). *The platform: The radical legacy of the Polynesian Panthers*. Bridget Williams Books Ltd. ISBN: 9781988587400.

Reviewed by Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni

The Platform by Melani Anae is, as she says, “deeply personal” (p. 7). It is also deeply reflexive, cultural, and unapologetically revolutionist. Especially in its advocacy for social justice and educational empowerment. Jan Fook (1999, p. 11) has said that reflexivity is about “the ability to locate yourself in the picture”. A method that forces the writer to position him/her/themselves squarely within the text, to acknowledge the many always-present subjectivities at play in his/her/their writing, and to write so that the rich learnings that can arise from acknowledging and linking these subjectivities to the issues at hand can be appropriately impressed on us as readers. In a broad stroke, this book is a reflexive picture of a behind-the-scenes account of the Polynesian Panthers Movement (PPM) as seen and experienced by Melani Anae.

In this book Melani Anae makes no bones about her Samoan heritage — her Samoan-ness if you like. This comes through every pore of the book and is evidenced by its oral history style narrative, and its choice of malu (the traditional Samoan female tattoo) as an overarching metaphor to hang its ‘reason for being’ — its vision and tone. Given the book’s overt Samoan-ness (although notably a fofu-i-vao-ese [meaning birthed and grown outside of Samoa, p. 168] Samoan-ness), I am surprised that Melani did not share the fact that among the many lenses and roles she as a Samoan holds and discloses in this book (e.g. daughter, mother, grandmother, sister, principal investigator on a prestigious Marsden research project about transnational matai), she decides to withhold reference to her own two matai (Samoan chiefly) titles. This may mean nothing to non-Samoan audiences, but to a Samoan who is aware of Melani’s matai titles it causes me a little discomfort. I am left to decide whether I break with academic convention and name her

Misatauveve or Lupematasila or both (for not to do so seems culturally disrespectful), or I stay with academic convention and honour her preference to use her Christian and surname only as her author names. I decide to honour her preference.

Melani Anae's decision to privilege her Samoan-ness or ethnic identity in the structuring and tone of *The Platform* reflects the Panthers privileging of the same. This is not to say that the Panthers did not have non-Polynesian members, or that Melani's story cannot appeal to a wider audience, because it did and it does. Rather, that in national identity politics, for groups like the Polynesian Panthers, ethnicity more than class, gender or sexual orientation was, at least in the 1970s/1980s, a more effective mobiliser. A key theme in Melani Anae's politics and scholarship is educational empowerment — 'educate to liberate' especially against racism and discrimination. Identity politics in this activist environment involves, she argues, finding a secure [ethnic] identity (Anae, 1997; 2006) notwithstanding its multidimensionality and fluidity across time and space.

After reading this book the reader is left without any doubt that the author sees inextricable links between her personal biography and that of the PPM. Ascertaining these links is posed as the driving force behind the book. In the preface Melani states that the book deals with three overarching questions: 1. "[D]id the PPP [Polynesian Panther Platform] drive my life's work or did my life experiences drive the three-point platform and [its] continuing work"? 2. "Is there a difference between the two"? and 3. "[D]oes it matter?" (p. 8).

One gains a sense that from the wording of these three overarching questions and the narrative content provided for each chapter and the way in which the book's chapters are structured, that the answer is 'yes, yes, and not really'. It becomes pretty clear by the end of the book that the PPM and its PPP was a significant part of Melani's life, from its early days as a movement through to today. Given this, it is reasonable to assume that Melani's life's work — her scholarly work at university, her research work for her father's Samoa family land and titles court cases, her parenting work, her community advocacy work and so on and so forth — was indeed hugely

influenced by her work with the Polynesian Panthers, and vice versa. Does it matter whether her life's work and the work of the PPM overlapped or not? Not really. What matters is whether the influence was productive. And by all accounts and purposes it seems it was. Pinpointing 'what drove what' seems a waste of time. A better use of time is figuring out whether by the end of the book the radical legacy of the PPM is shared in a way that appropriately honours those, including Melani, who gave birth and nurturance to it. I think it does. As Melani says: "This book is not a definitive book about or history of the Polynesian Panthers; rather, it is an account of my own experience of the Panthers, of my journey with them and as one of them" (p. 8). *The Platform* is therefore both autoethnographical and autobiographical. It is a personal cultural oral history written down. Marked, if you like, like the specific markings of a malu on fabulous Samoan legs.

As soon as Melani mentions the malu, I am hooked. I'm a big fan of the malu. The word refers not only to the traditional Samoan female tattoo, but also to the image of shade. Most notably to the idea of shade as a natural protector against the harshness of the elements. In the case of the malu, it is — in comparison to the Samoan pe'a or traditional male tattoo which is named pe'a or bat because once finished looks like a hanging bat and is symbolic of fecundity — the malu is malu because it gives an image of protection over that sacred place where the magic/mystery of birth and conception happens. For Melani Anae, her malu, is, she says, not on her outside skin, but on the inside. Her malu is the malu she has brought to life on the pages of this book.

Like Melani, I don't have a malu on my thighs. I'd like one though. But alas, I think that ship has sailed. I, like many other Samoan women of my generation (a child of the late 1960s), was raised by strict Samoan Christian parents whose religious beliefs and disciplinary practices washed away quite early any thoughts I may have seriously entertained about taking on such a mark of 'heathenism' (not to mention my great aversion to any tattooing instruments and physical pain). Melani Anae's use of the malu to hang and structure her story drew me like a child to candy and kept me in her candy store right to the end.

From the moment Melani disclosed her moe manatunatu (her dream dialogue with her ancestors, p. 10) about her “steel ink” malu, to when she teased me with Tusiata Avia’s goosebump and eyebrow raising poem about “wild dogs under her skirt” (pp. 15-16), to her story about her grandma Annie’s “breath-taking malu on her legs” (p. 17, raising memories of my own grandmother Ailei’u’s tatau), I was hooked. The malu bespeaks the embodiment of so many things: female empowerment, ethnic identity, personal lineage, family heritage, courage, etc., etc. In a book like this the malu just works. It gives Melani creative licence to paint/tatau herself into the PPM and the PPM into her. While they don’t define each other, they are an inextricable part of each other. By chapter 7 they are getting quite comfortable in and with each other’s skin. Melani states:

The tufuga ta tatau’s (the tattooist’s) marks on my mid-thighs were not as painful as those higher cuts of the first stage. I was getting older; the marks experienced here were shaping who I was, culturally and ethnically. As the tufuga ta tatau’s tatauing edged toward my knees, I was feeling more and more empowered. My malu was almost complete. I was starting to feel more secure in and comfortable in my new skin. (p. 167)

Using the malu as the main literary device to mobilise the story of her experience of the PPM, Melani Anae manages to hold this reader’s attention. And the malu metaphor gives those reader’s whose minds and imaginations need space to wander a bit every now and then, the space to do so. It’s a metaphor that sits well with the reflexive and culturally nuanced narrative approach Melani adopts. Namely, the use of italicised reflexive learning statements, peppered strategically throughout the text and used to help the reader discern key summative learning points at a glance. In the opening section of her Introduction chapter Melani provides no less than seven “lesson learnt” statements. For example: “*Lesson learnt: Palagi people don’t like us for some reason; and it’s not fair!*” (p. 19) ... “*Lesson learnt: Not all palagi were racist and unjust.*” (p. 20). Each statement summarises for the reader a key learning point — helpful for knowledge and information retention. With these tools the book succeeds in weaving a tightly written, very engaging,

informative and enlightening story about Melani's relationship with the PPM and the PPM's relationship with her.

Autoethnographies of social movements, like this one, offer opportunities to also learn about lesser-known characters and their relationships with the movement. Two characters come immediately to mind. One character is very much in the background, the other a very well-known New Zealand leader. I enjoyed learning about Nigel Bhana. That was unexpected. I did not expect the PPM to have members outside of the Māori, Pasefika and Palagi triad. My stereotype of Polynesian social movement members did not include an Indian. *Lesson learnt: Be constantly aware of the dangers of stereotyping.* The other character was New Zealand's soon-to-be at the time Prime Minister David Lange. Though obviously well-known to the New Zealand public, even today, his association with the PPM was – outside of the PPM – generally less well known. As Melani notes in this book and elsewhere (Anae et al., 2006) David Lange's help with the PPM's legal aid handbook was invaluable. This is an important historical fact that all New Zealanders should know.

The PPM's three-point platform (p. 175; a truncated version of its earlier seven-point platform, see pp. 53–74) is to engage in 1. “peaceful resistance against all forms of racism”, 2. “Pacific empowerment”, and 3. to engage with strategies or programmes that “Educate to liberate” (p. 175). This platform provides a firm foundation for the Panthers' current outreach “Rap in Schools” programme (pp. 180–186). Through this programme new generations of New Zealanders are made aware of the PPM and its radical legacy. This book enhances the reach of that legacy.

In conclusion, this autoethnography/autobiography is worth the read. If there is anything worth checking or expanding on it would be to check where there seems some slippage around the period Melani was actively involved in the PPM and when she took time-off to become a mother. And to perhaps explore the relationship between the PPM and gangs – something that I know will be of specific interest to sociologists. The associations between the PPM, the Black Panthers, and Indigenous Māori protest groups such as Nga Tamatoa and He Taua is well known. What is not so well known is the extent

of the PPM's relationship with the King Cobras (KCs) and other local gangs such as the Black Power, Mongrel Mob and/or Peacemakers. While Melani is adamant that the PPM was "not a gang, but a revolutionary movement", the line between one and the other is often blurred. But... that is an oral history/pe'a/malu for another time and another author.

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