

E Vaine Toa, E Rangatira: Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe (D.Litt), 1930–2022

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To cite this article: Debi Futter-Puati (2023) *E Vaine Toa, E Rangatira*: Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe (D.Litt), 1930–2022, *The Journal of Pacific History*, 58:2, 195–200, DOI: [10.1080/00223344.2023.2179716](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2023.2179716)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2023.2179716>



Published online: 18 Mar 2023.



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OBITUARY

E Vaine Toa, E Rangatira: Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe (D.Litt), 1930–2022

DEBI FUTTER-PUATI 

The following text has been slightly adapted from a eulogy given by the author to friends and family attending Marjorie's funeral at The University of the South Pacific (USP) Cook Islands campus on the 26 July 2022.

Kia Orana tatou katoatoa, ko Debi Futter-Puati toku ingoa, Ko au te pu o te USP I konei. To the Crocombe family, the Prime Minister, members of the Arongo Mana and other dignitaries, Ko teia te reo pu'ma'ana ki a kotou, turou ora mai.

The University of the South Pacific is deeply honoured to host this last event for Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe. I speak on behalf of all USP to remember Marjorie or, as most of us knew her in more recent times, Mama Marjorie. She was a hugely influential *Vaine Toa E Rangatira* of the Cook Islands who made an immense impact on generations of Cook Islands writers and scholars and who leaves behind an enormous legacy of scholarly work. As many of you know, Marjorie was a teacher, writer, academic and activist. She was an ally for all things scholarly, not only in the Cook Islands, but her influence, alongside her loss, swims within the currents and tides across *Moana Nui o Kīwa*.

Marjorie's academic life began as a teacher graduating from Ardmore Teachers Training College in New Zealand. After a year of teaching in Auckland, she returned to Rarotonga to begin work for the Cook Islands Department of Education, first as a teacher then, in 1955, she became the first Cook Island's female lecturer at Nikao Teachers' College. During this time, she worked on developing primary school readers in the Cook Islands Māori language and so we begin to see that her ongoing passion for revitalization of *reo Kūki Airani* (Cook Islands language) was strong right from very early on in Marjorie's career. In later years, as she continued her academic life, while falling in love with Ron,¹ getting married, raising children, all while also moving countries *several* times, she went on to become USP Cook Islands' first graduate alongside Lionel Brown in 1971.

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¹ Professor Ron Crocombe (1929–2009).

Lionel Brown (1939–2021) was also a graduate of Ardmore Teachers college and worked in education for 56 years. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts majoring in History and Education. Between the Diploma of Teaching, family life, and the BA, Marjorie also studied creative writing and worked in partnership with Ron on their research. This combination of skills led to her becoming a researcher and academic in her own right.

In the 1970s, Marjorie was the editor of the *Mana Annual of Creative Writing*.² The first edition, in 1973, included 32 pages of stories, poems and articles by 83 Pacific writers such as Albert Wendt, Konai Helu Thaman and Alistair Campbell, many of whom went on to become the Pacific's foremost and distinguished authors and academics. When one thinks of Marjorie, one thinks of the word *mana*. As Marjorie herself wrote in the first editorial of the annual, 'the word Mana means power | authority | influence | something infused with magic | and prestige'.³ I, for one, cannot think of a better way to describe this woman lying here with us today. Allow me now to take Marjorie's words, the ones she used to describe Mana, and apply them to her.

AUTHORITY

To attest to Marjorie's authority, an honorary degree of a Doctor of Letters, a D. Litt, was awarded to her by USP in 2011. A Doctor of Letters is *highly* prestigious. It is a higher doctorate than a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and is only awarded in recognition of *superior accomplishment* in the creative or cultural arts. This doctorate is also conferred *honoris causa* to recognize and honour a lifetime of excellence in a particular field, or contribution to society. USP awarded this degree to recognize Marjorie's long-standing status as a senior staff member of the university, and her exceptional academic, literary and community achievements. The conferring of the D. Litt to Marjorie provides ample testimony to the Mana and authority of this woman.

POWER

When I think of the word *power* in conjunction with Marjorie, I think of her influence. She continued to support scholars right through her life and to the last of her days. University of Otago Pacific Studies scholar, Dr Emma Powell, considers Marjorie's influence such that perhaps there would not be such a thing as 'Pacific Literature' at all if Marjorie and her colleagues had not tirelessly given their time and energy to the South Pacific Creative Arts Society. She never ceased encouraging others to write, to continue their education at whatever level, to challenge the status quo, and she constantly reminded people that their stories were important to tell. 'Just

² The Annual of the South Pacific Creative Arts Society merged with *Mana Review* in 1976 to become, simply, *Mana*.

³ Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe, 'Editorial', *The Mana Annual of Creative Writing* 1 (1973): i. Emphasis added.



FIGURE 1. Portrait of Marjorie Crocombe by Nanette Lauleu'u, 2013. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

write!’, she would often say. Marjorie used her power to support, encourage and challenge the next generation of writers and scholars. This is the way power should be used in academia. She was humble and generous with her knowledge and time throughout her life and what is a more powerful way to live than that?

INFLUENCE

When I think of the word ‘influence’, I think of what I call the ‘Marjorie effect’. When Marjorie asked you to do something, you somehow just wanted to do it. You felt inspired by her wisdom and encouraged by her compliments. Or maybe, it was that expression so expertly caught by Nanette Lauleu'u in the portrait above (Figure 1) that would make you shake in your boots and too scared to say no?

In terms of influence, Marjorie was always a champion of USP and together, she and Professor Ron advocated strongly the vision of a decentralized regional university. Marjorie as Director of USP Extension Studies was responsible with her team to deliver studies right across the university's 12 member countries. Within the Crocombe Archives, now held on campus at Te Puna Vai Marama: the Cook Islands Centre for Research, we will hold close Marjorie's papers, writings and musings, and honour her legacy and enable her thoughts to continue to influence future Pacific academics.

PRESTIGE

The word prestige means respect, esteem, and kudos. In 2019, when Te Vairanga Kite Pakari | the Cook Islands Research Association was considering who they could ask to be their patron we asked ourselves who was an academic that we held in high enough esteem and who had the appropriate kudos to sit as our patron? It will be no surprise to learn that Marjorie was our choice. She was the person who had most influenced this contemporary group of Cook Islands researchers, most of whom had PhDs. Marjorie was held in such prestige by us all, and so we asked her to be our patron. Imagine our shock when she said no! However, we did manage to convince her in the end. She was never one to seek the limelight but would rather be the person behind the scenes, working at the grass roots level to implement change.

SOMETHING INFUSED WITH MAGIC

Marjorie's magic was that in her many roles – whether writer, researcher, teacher, mentor or role model – she instilled belief into those she surrounded. She was a visionary of a decolonized Pacific, where the first languages of all Pacific nations would be revitalized through both oratory and written spaces. As Marjorie pointed out in her translation, annotation and editing of the Cook Island's missionary, Materu's, 1871 book, *Cannibals and Converts*,

the writing of the Pacific has been, for many years dominated by European researchers The published results have inevitably been Eurocentric and will continue to be so until the Pacific Islands have adequate experts to present facts, ideas and evaluations from indigenous sources.⁴

Marjorie set out to grow Indigenous experts in all kinds of fields. She was visionary in encouraging Pacific peoples to be aware of their untapped talent. She inspired

⁴ Maretu, *Cannibals and Converts: Radical Change in the Cook Islands*, trans. and ed. Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, USP, 1983), 13.

hundreds of people to write, to research and to value, and record, their own cultural writing to offset the dominant viewpoints of foreign writers. Her magic was her post- or de-colonial mindset and sewing that mindset in those around her.

Her magic was the ability to articulate how furious racism made her, to challenge the racism she experienced firsthand as an Indigenous woman. That ‘*something that is infused with magic*’ she had; whereby she would push back on the all too present sexism that more often than not, went hand in hand with her indigeneity, and in doing so, she became an Indigenous activist and feminist role-model for other Pacific women to look to for strength. Today you see Marjorie everywhere in the younger Pacific feminist undertakings. They owe a huge debt to her persistence in giving birth to a Pacific literature that was entirely feminist in spirit. Historian of the Black Pacific, Quito Swan, talks about Marjorie’s importance in the birth of a Pacific literature that was inclusive of the voice of young Pacific women.⁵ *Mana* published work from all over the Pacific, including women such as Nora Vagi Brash, Haunani-Kay Trask, and many more. To paraphrase the work of Sara Ahmed

It might be assumed that feminism travels from [New Zealand and Australia to the Cook Islands]. It might be assumed that feminism is what [these two countries give to the Pacific]. That assumption is a traveling assumption, one that tells a feminist story in a certain way, a story that is much repeated; a history of how feminism acquired utility as an imperial gift. That is not my story. We need to tell other feminist stories.⁶

Marjorie’s story was a feminist story. And so here, I rest my argument. I believe I have successfully argued that the words MANA and Marjorie are synonymous and I hope you agree.

Our friend and mentor, you will be sorely missed. May you rest in peace Marjorie Tuainakore Crocombe. Our sincere condolences go to the Crocombe *anau* (family) and all those that mourn the loss of Marjorie alongside us.

The following poem from Lisa Leilani Williams was then read aloud and has been reproduced with permission from the author:

IN SAMOA THEY KNOW THAT EVEN THE STONES WEEP
 In Samoa they know that even the stones weep
 In Papua New Guinea, the tears of wailing babies and people will lift
 up in the hauskraia song
 In Fiji the mats and tapa will be rolled out, the shells of kava raised
 For yours has been a Pacific journey,
 Your ipukarea feet at home on any ground, your Maori mind con-
 quering worlds beyond any room where you filled space and

⁵ Quito Swan, ‘Giving Berth: Fiji, Black Women’s Internationalism, and the Pacific Women’s Conference of 1975’, *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 4, no. 1 (2018): 46.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

crafted new worlds so beautifully
Let it all go from student to teacher
From maiden to matriarch, we've felt your gaze and your glare
We've been filled by your laughter
Cut to size by your honesty
Lifted by your truth
And now it's time to sing you home.
Let the pastor lecture us on heaven
Let the parents hug their babies closer as they reach for your final
uma
Let these hands pause, lost for words
Let it all go I'll keep the photo of you, a defiant protestor of fly in
voters
I'll keep the mana of being that one who won't be told what to think
I'll keep the lesson of being the storyteller, because stories are some-
times all we have
And I'll keep the faith, as you must have that life, as you have shown
only beats stronger
When we trade the sounds of our frail human hearts for the whale-
song call of an Ocean.

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