



Center for Pacific Islands Studies
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

The Center for Pacific Islands Studies presents

Unsung Tongues: Language, Performance, Anxiety, and Hope in the Contemporary Pacific

Alexander Mawyer, Lake Forest College

Wednesday, 20 March 2013

12:00 pm – 1:15 pm

Center for Korean Studies Auditorium

Over the 20th century, numerous human languages have entirely melted away or begun to evaporate, their speakers absorbed into national and international speech communities. Processes of language loss, alas, have not abated and are perhaps now accelerating. Some linguists estimate that the next decades will see vastly fewer languages informing the human experience. In the context of this ongoing age of linguistic crisis, this work explores some dimensions of language loss bearing on core facets of a culture and being in the world in the French Pacific. Drawing on fieldwork in French Polynesia's Gambier Islands, I draw attention to a number of cultural domains as particular sites of language in performative use and culture at risk. I discuss ways that language and culture change and loss are closely hinged to a number of other anxieties, worries, concerns, and moments of cultural ambivalence in the contemporary Pacific. The talk concludes by turning to the topic of hope.

Alexander Dale Mawyer is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Lake Forest College. His MA in Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i–Mānoa led him to doctoral study at the University of Chicago. He has conducted fieldwork with the Mangarevan community in the Gambier and Society Islands of French Polynesia, focusing on language at the intersection of culture and history, and he served as one of the co-editors of *Varua Tupu: New Writing from French Polynesia*, the first anthology of Ma'ohi literature to appear in English. He is currently the Book and Media Reviews Editor for *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs*.

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