

*Kwamra: A Season of Harvest*,  
by Russell Soaba. Boroko, NCD:  
Anuki Country Press, 2000.  
E-mail <rsoaba @upng.ac.pg>.  
ISBN 9980-85-370-0; ix + 59 pages,  
glossary. US\$12.00.

*Captain Cook in the Underworld*,  
by Robert Sullivan. Auckland:  
Auckland University Press, 2003.  
ISBN 1-86940-81-2; iii (unnumbered)  
+ 52 pages, works consulted.  
NZ\$19.50.

These two notable collections share an engagement with issues that concern the relevance of poetry to Pacific histories, cultures, memories, and traditions. Careful reading suggests a close-focused approach to specific cultural and personal concerns, in addition to the fanfare of occasional themes. The appearance of Russell Soaba's collection is a significant event; it takes as its title theme *Kwamra*, the dry summer season in savannah regions, "a season of harvest," as the subtitle states. Robert Sullivan's poem, written as the libretto for the fiftieth anniversary of Wellington's Orpheus choir, was performed by the choir and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in composer John Psathas's oratorio *Orpheus in Rarohenga*, in November 2002 at Wellington Town Hall.

Formally and stylistically these are very different works. Soaba's free verse foregrounds Anuki modes of aesthetic representation, such as *akoa* ("new" knowledge; wisdom, truth) and *maiba* (the common form of Anuki communication that expresses truths through parables and riddles). In its confident combination of Eng-

lish, Pidgin, and Anuki references, the collection is a model of what readers can increasingly look forward to in Pacific poetry. The introduction is a clear and considered declaration of artistic independence: "What we are really doing for the first time is attempting to best express ourselves in our own language through a certain medium of human communication known as the English language. We are no longer merely borrowing the language. Rather, we are transcending both in order to find ourselves actually living the pulse and beat of our languages within the flesh of the English language itself" (ix). Each poem carries the cultural harvest of the poet's social experience, exploring existentially and experimentally form, language, and point of view.

The opening poem, "Return of St Nativeson," refers to Soaba's influential novel *Wanpis* (1977)—the title word translated here as "(i) one piece: one who professes self-hood, commitment and social responsibility in his style of living; (ii) an existentialist in Soaba's writings" (59)—which traces the development of artistic identity through a number of characters. Tension, too, is developed in this poetry collection around the conflict between *lusman* (a loser [58]; also an existentialist) and *wanpis*, in which artistic production requires a coherence and focus the *lusman* fails to achieve. Facing the possible meaninglessness of life as a writer entails risks and challenges. St James Nativeson (a name chosen by the character Jimmy Damebo in *Wanpis* to reflect the influence of James Baldwin) was a character who signified the difficulty of reconciling individual and communal

concerns. This poem reflects succinctly on the relationship between poet and people; the poet's presence of mind is merged into time and place, "the afternoon bare with native anguish" (1). Responsibility to past and future is indicated through the awareness of followers or "disciples" who are the beneficiaries of the labors of the poets, who in turn must depend on those who come before and after to carry on poetic traditions. The statement "The poet will come today" (1) becomes the site for a meditation on the irony that the role of the poet is often signified through doubt, absence, and cultural insecurity; the "nativeson" returns (or can he?) as one who must still juggle an outsider identity with the need to communicate with the multicultural working people of the nation, who each have their own relationship to feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Like Sufi sayings or Buddhist koans (problems for meditation) in the many-layered possibilities of their interpretation, the poems exemplify the poet's understanding and practice of maiba.

& he came in  
 smiling like a nervous poet  
 the result of all that he had  
 thought  
 & explained that he had left  
 his passport  
 somewhere  
 "Prelude to the Third Visit" (6)

Soaba himself has surely often reconciled such roles and relationships in a productive way; other poems in the collection are more at home with the role of poet as the interpreter of cultural forms that

combine living traditional elements and contemporary concerns. He draws on an impressive range of Anuki forms such as the *siapa*, an elegy sung by a poet-singer to the heir of the Gaesasara (king, in Anuki); and the *nipogana*, a long epic poem. The glossary is a helpful and sometimes detailed commentary designed to encourage the reader to appreciate something of the complexity of the cultural and historical context of the poems. They are located across a range of settings, such as "Houses Over Water" (8):

The women wade out to the  
 deep  
 with nets. The children fight  
 over  
 empty bottles along the seawall.  
 Overhead,  
 gulls turn for the coast. A boy,  
 seized  
 by the flash of wings upon the  
 seascreen,  
 leaps skywards, laughing and  
 dancing.

"Afternoon Rain: Campus Consciousness," "Port Moresby in High Savannah," and "Lagoon Dialogue" also convey a sense of a broad knowledge of a range of social and geographical environments. City, village, savannah, and countryside are evoked through social and seasonal consciousness, in biblical and Anuki ways. Dancing is an important element in celebratory events, coexisting with composition and music. The language of "The Cassowary Dance" (called *muruk* in Anuki, and associated with metamorphosis), for example, conveys the energy, dread, and joy of intense

communion across disciplines, forms, rituals, and occasions (10):

He steps out from the radiance  
of the now new morning rising  
sun  
to face the council of haus  
tambaran elders  
the gourd of gourds pounding  
out the rhythm  
of his defense on the muruk  
dissertation.

The task Robert Sullivan set himself as a writer in *Captain Cook in the Underworld* has a different, but comparable set of requirements. As an oratorio, the form carries with it a concern for the sacred and a ponderous tone that Sullivan at particular moments gleefully undercuts. The convergence of the poem's selective postmodern approach to historical fact and poetic influences with a post-colonial judgment of Cook as leader of a colonizing expedition results in an uneven tone. At times the musical model seems to have been Offenbach, at others it might have been Gluck. While the oratorio clearly has a highly serious theme, it sends the famous figure up in order to bring him down. As subject-on-trial, Cook's apotheosis—and the idea that he might have started to believe in it himself—is ridiculed to make serious political points about the damage inflicted in colonial confrontations. While recent revisionary histories such as those by Nicholas Thomas and Anne Salmond have worked hard and at some length to try to convey the complexity of early encounters [see review of their books on Cook, this issue, pages

224–232], Sullivan's poem condenses Cook into a signifier for English imperialism. A leader of men, a questioning, self-questioning hero, a man of science—there are admirable qualities in Sullivan's portrait, yet each of these is accompanied by less commendable attributes—a patriarchal attitude to the crew, xenophobia, the deployment of science for colonial ends. A brief period of social leveling in Tahiti, the possibility of constructing a different kind of relationship—"Christmas in the sun, and mistle-/toe on the stubbled chins of our lads, /from England. Even Joseph Banks /has let his hair down, great hats wear no hats at all" (5)—is followed by the resumption of hierarchy and the mission to "rule the waves" (5). The poem effectively evokes both poignancy and anger at the missed opportunities, at the betrayal of the friendly spirit of so many encounters and for the lives cruelly and unnecessarily taken by Cook and the crew. If Cook himself can be summarized as signifying the flaws, ambivalences, and aims of colonialism, it is more difficult to accept that all of the journeys and most of the crew and company should be reduced to a sort of monological Englishness; class difference is recognized but since the crew are spoken about or speak themselves in unison there is not much space to analyze divergent ethnicities, religions, or general attitudes.

Orpheus is the unofficial accompanying poet on the journey. The Absolution Chorus opens in four-line stanzas; a sailors' chorus, Maui, the soul of a chief killed in an early encounter, and Venus make their contributions.

The printed text could signpost more clearly that these voices are distinctive; as it stands, transitions from one voice to another are not always obvious. The five-line stanza with its occasional rhymes can carry the weighty emotion of the piece, yet the language bounces along lightly enough when the subject matter requires it. Comparisons between ancient Greek poetic traditions and Māori composition are established; most notably Agathe Thornton's study *Maori Oral Literature: As Seen by a Classicist*, which argued that shared themes can cross "time, place and culture" and that archetypes are "common psychology to humankind" (1999, 5).

An opening stanza makes a request to: "Loft the sails of our story; embark for a new start, / an argosy in our Cook's heart: / Carl Jung more than a century in the future / argues for the stories of ancient culture / lodestars for the psyche: here Orpheus / enters Cook's first voyage in fierce / spirit, a bright star guiding Cook's choir" (4). The making of historical and cultural connections, however, requires a close methodology "net" or constellation; and while the poem engages with the need to recover and establish influences that predate the ideology of Cook's time, it may well be that it is an increased understanding of Polynesian connections that the poem is traveling toward.

Focused initially on eighteenth-century masculinity at sea in pursuit of the elusive statistics of the personified Venus, when Maui's confrontation with Kuki and the demand that he recognize the fellow humanity of

the people wounded and killed in early contact comes, it is moving and apposite. As Cook becomes Kuki, his understanding that Venus is a signifier not just for science, precision, and endeavor, but also for love, personified as a woman, harmony, compassion, and aroha (the Māori word for love), becomes a moment of historical shift; the possibility for new relationships being realized in the process of undoing the old. A reader can enjoy the poem's refusal to become balasted by a cargo of historical detail, although occasionally you might wonder if the language has been caught up a little too much in the caricaturing critique it sets out to make.

There are many reasons why this cannot have been an easy form to work in; for one thing, the characters are mythic figures, so that there is not much call for psychological realism, and it becomes the task of the language to hold the reader's interest. This makes the achievement all the more impressive. Those already familiar with Sullivan's work will know that he is an accomplished writer of the short, open-verse lyric; here he stretches out into a longer narrative in language that moves through a wide variety of styles. Gangsta rap hails Cook as recent arrival in the "hood": "Bang! Britain's the talk in town, / let's make Cook a deity. Hail Da King! / The biggest kill machine / with a crew to match—just look at that hat, / he's gotta be a god, blat blat blat!" (20). And being hailed like that you just know his days are numbered. There are lines in Māori, surprising rhymes and poetry of flowing beauty

such as the description of Cook's bodily death (34; ellipses in original):

The sea closes around Cook  
like a mother,  
takes him in as another  
drop in the ocean, speck in  
the sea,  
a bit of flotsam floating free  
in the wreck of a dissolving  
dream. . .

His second death, after many years in the lasting hell of historical fame/infamy, comes as an acceptance of the atua (gods) of Aotearoa and a merging into the future that poetry creates through its relationship to writers from the past. A recording would make interesting listening.

It is testament to the success of both collections that there is a great deal more to say and discover about them than can be said in one review; they will sustain and reward the long-term attention of dedicated readers.

BRIAR WOOD

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*Gender, Song, and Sensibility: Folktales and Folksongs in the Highlands of New Guinea*, by Pamela J Stewart and Andrew Strathern. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002. ISBN 0-275-97792-7, x + 235 pages, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. US\$83.95.

Pamela J Stewart and Andrew Strathern dedicate this remarkable volume to the "humanity of expression that sits in the quiet corners of imagination." And, indeed, the expression of longing, loss, desire, and pleasure

infuses this book's rich and textured examination of the complex relationships between men and women in a range of Highland New Guinea societies. The book draws our attention quite effectively to a number of key interpretive issues. Stewart and Strathern provide a compelling, ethnographically grounded challenge to what has become a recurrent theme in the regional literature on gender in the New Guinea Highlands, that is, male domination, male-female antagonism, fear of menstrual pollution, and a downplaying of interest in sexual activity. The authors set their goal as "reexamin[ing] the terms of this stereotype and . . . build[ing] up a rather different overall picture, one that gives room for what we may recognize as a more positive view of gendered relations in these societies and tak[ing] into fuller consideration the nuanced expressiveness and ingenuity of the New Guinea Highlands people" (1). Questions of embodiment, its expression, and its representation are central to their argument. How somatic experience and desire are conveyed, remembered, anticipated, and actively pursued are critical issues. The notion of "sensibility," "mediat[ing] between the worlds of the mental and the sensory" (5), and, further, between individual actors and sociocultural framework, is pivotal to their discussion. It also allows a particularly revelatory perspective on questions of imagination, agency, and efficacy, and the ambit for action that the sensory can afford.

Taking sensibility seriously provides a compelling framework within which Stewart and Strathern consider a wide range of materials from a diverse