texts. She is mindful of the somewhat newcomer status of the book’s subject in anglophone literary studies, a field that struggles to find the Pacific on the map, yet Najita does not spend time explaining “us” to “them.” Instead, the book strikes a precocious balance between explanation and critical engagement, which makes it an awaited and welcome contribution to the field of Pacific (literary) studies, as well as a great emissary for the field in wider literary studies conversations. I must admit that, in contrast, the value of the word “cultures” in the title left me a little confused; because the book draws its strength and its critical insights from the fragmentary and negotiated rather than from the whole and ethnographic, the value of a concept like “cultures” is unclear.

It seems ungracious, when reviewing a book that has ably covered so much critical territory, to point out the possibility for covering even more, and yet it is striking that few Indigenous literary critics make an appearance in the bibliography. Certainly some are named in the book and certainly the work of Indigenous scholars is less easy to source than many others, but in a project invested in the possibilities of an Indigenous archive, which holds at its center the multiple ways in which Pacific people—and especially Indigenous Pacific people—negotiate the ongoing legacy of rupture brought about by colonialism, and which draws unpublished theses and conference papers into its bibliographic scope, the quietness of Indigenous scholars feels a bit odd.

At the end of Decolonizing Cultures, Najita expands on her notion of self-consciously “reading with a side-glancing historical eye,” a practice she has foregrounded and practiced throughout the book. While the theoretical work around traumatic realism and genealogy does important work within the context of literary studies (and perhaps historical and psychoanalytic studies as well), Najita’s vision, clear articulation, and practical demonstration of a critical, mindful, politicized, and nuanced comparative reading practice is, ultimately, a generous contribution from which all of us working in Pacific studies stand to benefit.

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Tapa Talk, by Serie Barford.

A Well Written Body, by Karlo Mila,
with paintings by Delicia Sampero.

It is a delight to be writing two reviews in the context of a wealth of recent indigenous poetry publishing originating in Aotearoa, Fiji, and Hawai‘i. Publishers such as Tinfish Press, Huia Publishers, Kuleana ‘Ōiwi Press, Auckland University Press, Victoria University Press, Institute of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific, and University of Hawai‘i Press have recently made major contributions to the genre and deserve to be applauded for support-
Serrie Barford’s *Tapa Talk* is a poetry collection that values traditional knowledge and incorporates its manifestations such as indigenous words and concepts, decorative arts, and aesthetics. I hesitate to reduce Serrie Barford’s poetry to general academic categories, however. To borrow Blake’s phrase, there is “eternal delight” here; additionally, the quality of thought and poetic practice is praiseworthy.

This generous collection highlights a number of cultural constructions such as siapo or bark cloth, Lapita shards, and kava (45), naming Ouvéa as “croissant-shaped” (47), and thus reminding us of its colonial situation without being mired in the politics, and a threnody or sorrow-song where “Samoa spread a mat on the shore for someone lost at sea” (59). Each poem is additionally lit with an emotional intelligence informed by the poet’s knowledge of Polynesian and other poetics. The overall effect of Barford’s sophisticated and soulful collection is of an accumulation of momentary sensations and thoughts—on the tongue and ear, or informing the nose, eyes, and hands of the poetic encounter—amounting to a poetics of praise.

This book rewards rereading. Yet the work’s effect on me is firsthand or primary, rather than secondary as in the experience of reading a text; it is figural, lifting off the page, drawing air, blood, and a pluralistic identity.

The suite of five poems “Making Siapo” ranges between personal memories and anthropologically derived observations the poet cites from an essay by Teri Sowell. Without the benefit of reading Sowell’s essay or bibliography myself, I believe the source essay also draws on the section entitled “Bark Cloth” in the book *Samoan Material Culture* by Sir Peter Buck (Te Rangihiroa) (1971 [1930], 282–294), because the headings in the poem are similar headings to those used by Buck. This creates a poem that humanizes the 1920s anthropological text with the poet’s own memory. For example, here is Te Rangihiroa’s text (1971 [1930], 285; italics and bold in original): “Scraping the bast. The scraping of the bast (*fai u'a* or *fafai u'a*) requires a scraping board, a number of shell scrapers, and a strip of bamboo for a knife. / The special scraping board (*papa fai u'a*) is dubbed out of *iliili* or other wood and was formerly smoothed down with coral. An average sized board is 37 inches long, 18.5 inches wide, and about 0.75 inches thick at the edges. Sometimes a piece from the side of a canoe is used.”

In comparison and contrast, here is the third poem in the suite by Barford (25–26; italics in original): “3. Scraping the bast / I’ve mistaken the pouring of water / over a sloping board for a wash day/ then realized the board / accommodated strips of bast / and siapo was in the making / sometimes an old canoe suffices / it is an inclined surface that is required / running water and something sharp / shells or bamboo or a knife / that can scrape away / remnants of the coarse outer bark / that eluded the bast peeling / clung stubbornly / to its soft inner flesh.”

Barford’s early reference to the washing board differentiates the
cultural/artistic activity from domestic labor, while connecting art and labor through the use of the same tools. Art here is personal as well, lacking the epic certainty of libations: “I've mistaken the pouring of water / over a sloping board for a wash day.” This intimate, everyday tone mutes but does not deny symbolism: the canoe is old, the inner bark or bast is “soft inner flesh,” the narrator realizes that the board has “accommodated” the bast. The latter past-tense verb’s polysyllabic nature invites a reader to dwell on it because it is easily the longest word in the stanza; additionally, the word’s noun-form of “accommodation” suggests dwelling or even home-comfort, as well as the verb’s Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edition) definitions: “to fit one thing or person to another,” or “to adapt, fit, suit or adjust (one thing or person to another) either actually or in idea.” The narrative fits together the social science data and the personal observations so that the Buck/Sowell account is revitalized by the very human, affectively significant details Barford values. These details then possess the quality of memories belonging to personal rather than grand narratives, and, in a sense, this quality safeguards them from such reductive grands récit accounts (Jean-François Lyotard’s formulation) of knowledge from a non-Western culture. This handing on of intimate knowledge is Barford’s achievement here, enabling a reconnection between Te Rangihiroa’s vividly passionate text, which draws on firsthand Samoan accounts, and her own poem.

It feels inadequate in a brief review to say that Barford’s collection is satisfying on cultural, feminist, spiritual, and literary levels. Here at least are some images that stay with me:

- from “Nautilus Woman” (39): “I can feel the drag of her babe’s head / positioned to move from buoyancy / into its mother’s arms”
- from “The Sabbatier Effect” (44; italics in original): “once you stroked my slight curves / whispered in my ear / who’d know / you’ve given birth to men / wrote / I love you / in Cyrillic script / on a shred of paper / I keep for the sliver of passion / left in me”
- from “Culture Shock” (51): “lectureed and air-conditioned / hundreds of us at a time / freezing or sweltering / you’d have thought they’d get it right / all those brains inculcating us / and no idea of how to set a thermostat”
- from “Connections” (10): “we shook hands / not a city-corporate shake / just a gentle slipping / of fingertips over palms / like origami cranes / delicately pressing / their bills together / a hongi of sorts”

*Tapa Talk* is a very beautiful, finely hewed, mature-minded, and attentively human collection of poems.

Karlo Mila’s second book of poetry, *A Well Written Body*, combines poems with paintings by Delicia Sampero. One connection with Serie Barford’s book *Tapa Talk* is the poem “Paper Mulberry Secrets” (29), which describes the process of making Tongan tapa or ngatu. Here are the first three stanzas: “Women sit / with each other / and beat heartwood / into the finest veils / of ngatu. // Stories stripped, sun-dried / soaked, scraped clean / bark beaten lean. // Fragile layers / so thin / the tapa is barely connected / to its own self.”
The stanzas reveal the poet’s approach here: culturally centered, communal, minimalist images imbued with affirmation. Just as Barford deploys siapo in a multi-layered Samoan context, the tapa for Mila is a useful vehicle for manifold formal and informal situations and aesthetics. Yet tapa’s very explication exposes a fragility of being, which Mila highlights in the final stanza: “You see, / you cannot peel this back / to the heart / without breaking it.”

I would not describe these poems as vulnerable, however. They have cultural and political strengths, such as in the praise-poem for King Tāufa'āhau, “Duty is Joy” (42–43) where the king is likened to a mountain “descended from divinity / yet chose to serve a greater God”; and the flip-side poem “Backslash” (41), which attacks the king’s detractors: “Have your banana republic comments . . .” Contemporary and traditional culture move seamlessly within Mila’s poetics, as do the class politics surrounding the pro-democracy movement in Tonga, celebrating both the late champion of that movement, Prince Tu‘i'ipelehake, and the late king himself. Mila’s poetry humanizes the struggle. I feel I have a more well rounded understanding of the enduring nature of Tongan aristocracy, and sovereignty, from reading these poems.

Mila has a quietly passionate diction, a noblesse in her affective and effective subject matter. She is also vitally aware of the denaturing discourses of identity exchange: “There is no language // cross-pollinate, hybrid / that cultivates / insight and pain / of embodied / cultural exchange. // There is no language // for our sweet nashi offerings” (“There Are No Words for Us,” 14).

“Creation Myth” (18–20), a modern retelling of a love story between the legendary ancestors Sina and Māui, is an expansive gift of language and humor: “the demigod living a legend / in the post-oil-industrial-crisis of the ‘70s” who “met / at the intersection / of Hinemoa and Tūtāneka streets.” The dialogue of their first meeting consists of code-switching lines from the hit musicals Grease and Evita.

The book is necessarily large to accommodate the beautiful images by Sampero. The introduction says that the poet and painter generated work as a dialogue. The paintings are gorgeous portraits of the poet in community, occasionally incorporating poem texts. The 8.5 by 11 inch format makes it slightly harder, however, to focus on the poetry, which is often broken into columns, and so the poems in 12 point font appear smaller than they would in a more compact book.

My larger impressions are of a poet who continues to richly engage with the commonalities and the limits of intercultural understanding, as she does with heart and verve in Dream Fish Floating (Huia Publishing, 2005). Mila locates her writing in Tonga and New Zealand and relates to Māori perspectives with compassion rather than appropriation, celebrating and wondering at the wealth of her identity, daring to speak about the richness of love.

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