

*Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific: Reading History and Trauma in Contemporary Fiction*, by Susan Y Najita. Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures. New York: Routledge, 2006. ISBN cloth, 978-0-415-36669-4; paper, 978-0-415-46885-5; electronic, 978-0-203-01940-5; xviii + 236 pages, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$120.00; paper, US\$39.95.

Susan Y Najita's *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific: Reading History and Trauma in Contemporary Fiction* has arrived into a scholarly field of great contradiction. Despite the immense body of writing produced in the Pacific, the field of Pacific literary studies worldwide (and especially region-wide) remains increasingly under-resourced: Few scholars of Pacific literature are employed at universities, few national or regional school curricula include Pacific texts, Indigenous scholars of the field struggle to publish research, and few book-length treatments of Pacific literatures have achieved publication. It is tempting, then, to applaud the arrival of any critical text, simply on the basis of its existence. However, Najita's *Decolonizing Cultures* not only offers a sustained treatment of five specific texts with a committed focus on decolonization but also calls our attention to the stakes and possibilities of comparative critical work.

In order to foreground the critical basis for her comparative "Pacific" project, Najita brings an interdisciplinary view of the field of Pacific (literary) studies together with the area of psychoanalysis that explores the notion of trauma. The major theoretical intervention of *Decolo-*

*nizing Cultures* is Najita's articulation and productive mobilization of "traumatic realism." A cousin to "magical realism" (in which the inherent fragmentation of the nation prevents systematic realist narration), Najita finds that much of the scholarly work around trauma focuses on the twentieth-century Europe-based Holocaust; therefore, the focus on trauma is, ultimately, in the past; yet colonial trauma in the Pacific is both historical and ongoing. In this context, "traumatic realism" provides a way to read Pacific texts with recognition that the fragments of multiple and ongoing colonial traumas necessarily reemerge in various forms.

In separate chapters, Najita explores single texts by key writers of the region: John Dominis Holt's *Waimea Summer* (1976), Albert Wendt's *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1979), Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1983), Gary Pak's *The Watcher of Waipuna* (1992), and Jane Champion's *The Piano* (1992). With the exception of Champion's feature film, these texts are all prose fiction, and each writer has a different relationship to the Pacific. The texts are all somewhat canonical, and while one fears the cumulative effect of centering certain writers and certain texts when there are so many more who never receive attention, each of these texts demands careful critical analysis—historicized, theorized, critical—of the type that Najita offers here. Certainly the first three writers (Holt, Wendt, and Hulme) are crucial Indigenous writers of Hawai'i, Sāmoa, and Aotearoa, respectively; while Wendt and Hulme enjoy an embarrassment of scholarly as well as popular treatment, Najita

applies a corrective to Holt's comparatively quiet critical reception by treating his work as robustly as she does the others. Neither Pak nor Campion are indigenous to the Pacific, but their positions within their respective occupying nation-states of the United States and New Zealand are different.

Each chapter, in turn, foregrounds a particular configuration or context of colonial trauma, and in these chapters the book moves at a confident and productive pace, conducting conventional readings of the literary text in question but refusing to let such readings stand apart from Najita's impressive and often extremely productive engagement with historical, legal, cultural, and theoretical material. Her repeated turn to the place and metaphor of genealogy provides an important methodological intercession. Rather than simply conduct a historicist critical reading, which might describe the relevant contextual landscape in order to allow various aspects of the text to become more clearly or complicatedly apparent, Najita consciously manipulates the line between the discursive production of legal or cultural material and the discursive work of the literary text. In this way she affirms through practice her claim that, because of the fundamental ruptures—trauma—inherent in colonialism, writers and writing have a potentially radical place in the Pacific through their capacity to name and narrate the unnameable and indescribable.

Najita carefully balances the regional and the local. *Decolonizing Cultures* is not a simple triumphal account of homogenizing regionalism, but a careful and nuanced example

of what can happen when attention is directed away from the nation and toward the region. This is a timely intervention: “decolonization” has not always been understood to demand or even to permit regionalism, and at times the important work of re-centering local spheres has made comparative work seem suspicious. However, singularly local forms of decolonization can risk parochialism, and each of the texts treated in this account benefits from consideration alongside the others—a fact that is reinforced by the attention Najita pays to genealogical links in the Indigenous Pacific. At the same time, it seems important to point out that (as in Michelle Keown's *Postcolonial Pacific Writing* [2005] in the same series) the region is referred to as the Pacific but is in fact anglophone Polynesia. More specifically, all of the writers are physically based either in Hawai'i or Aotearoa. This is not to discredit Wendt's Samoanness, or Najita's capable handling of the Samoan contextual material, but it is to draw attention to the extent to which structures of power—including the power to be heard—underpin any articulation of “the Pacific.” One wonders how a chapter on Vincent Eri's *The Crocodile* (1970), Chantal Spitz's (translated) *Island of Shattered Dreams* (2007), or Regis Stella's *Gutsini Posa* (1999) might profitably extend the analysis.

Ultimately, *Decolonizing Cultures* manages to maintain focus on the concept of “decolonization,” promised in its title, as Najita moves through literary, critical, legal, and historical documents in order to tease out the limits as well as possibilities of engaging with these particular literary

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.  
Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2007.  
ISBN 978-1-86969-319-0, 72 pages,  
notes, glossary. Paper, US\$22.00.

*A Well Written Body*, by Karlo Mila,  
with paintings by Delicia Samperu.  
Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2008.  
ISBN 978-1-86969-321-3, 80 pages,  
including color illustrations. Paper,  
US\$35.00.

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 'Oiwī 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-