

## The Authors / Interpreters, a Twig, and Paradise: In the Shadows of Maratja Dhamarrandji, Emmanuel Garibay, and Mariana Waqa

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### Abstract

Audre Lorde declared many moons back that *the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*, yet many biblical scholars still chase meaning potentials (Blount) with the master's tools. And the master's house stands. My aim in this article is not to dismantle but to make space in the master's house. I take up one of the master's tools – writing – along with native tools – story, conversation, art, poetry – as *alternatives for Our Discipline* (Yee). There are limits and stumbling blocks with native tools and native wisdom (e.g., in Oceania, local *authorities* now occupy the master's house), but they have potentials for adding space to the master's house.

### Key Words

Art, Native wisdom, Pasifika, Poetry, Talanoa

First, a talanoa<sup>1</sup> concerning the coloring and racializing of bodies: over several conversations with Maratja Dhamarrandji, a Yolŋu elder from up north of the cluster of islands now known as Australia, i became more attuned to colored and racialized metaphors, and the intersectional thinking behind them.<sup>2</sup> And so

- in the place of seeking or promoting “the light,” which unconsciously privileges whiteness and fairness (pun intended), i advocate going into “the shadows” of our ancestors;
- instead of identifying myself as a brown person and Maratja as a blackfella, i remind people that i am a native, and Maratja is my Yolŋu mentor, and thereby flip (at) the insults that white folx threw at our forbearers (as uncivilized natives, pagan savages);

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<sup>1</sup> The word *talanoa* is used in several (but not all) Pasifika islands to name three *oralizing events* – story (which is usually a weaving of stories), telling (of stories), and conversation (or weaving of stories, and of tellings). These three events are interdependent: a story (talanoa) comes alive in its telling(s) and the conversation(s) that it sparks; a telling (talanoa) needs a story so that it has content, and both the story and the telling grow when conversation ensues; and a conversation (talanoa) makes sense when it involves both story and telling(s), and erupts into more stories, more tellings, and more conversations.

<sup>2</sup> The controversy here is obvious: i claim that the process of intersectional thinking contributes to fueling discrimination along color and racial lines. Nonetheless, as Gale A. Yee advocates, intersectional thinking may also be used to untangle the mess that it helped to create. In other words, intersectional thinking is part of the solution to a problem that it helped create in the first place.

- in the place of reading texts (e.g., Gen 2–3) for the responsibilities of humans to care for the domains of earth, i read the same texts for the productive and creative energies in dirt and dust;
- instead of shading our daughter from the sun to protect her fair skin, i encourage her to unteach her friends – so that they understand, that dark skin is not dirty;
- and instead of using the tools of the masters according to the directions of the masters, i follow the directions and wisdoms of our people.

In this reflection, i bring those learnings into the shadows of “Our Discipline.”<sup>3</sup> I offer a native reflection that echoes the elders whose wisdoms ripple in this special issue of *B&CT* – Brian K. Blount, Gale A. Yee, Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, Karri L. Whipple, Miguel A. De La Torre, Mary Foskett, Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, Gregory L. Cuéllar – and i bring along learnings from interactions with two other native colleagues, Emmanuel Garibay (a Filipino activist and artist, who goes by the name Manny) and Mariana Waqa (a Fijian activist, who does slam poetry). The wisdom and courage of Maratja, Manny, and Mariana are testimonies to the resilience of bordered bodies and defiance of intersectional minds (even though they do not operate by these categories).

The question that drives this reflection is straightforward: What would Our discipline look like if we come into the company and wisdoms of local, native people *like* Maratja, Manny, and Mariana?

### **Authors / Interpreters**

Second, a talanoa concerning bordered bodies: The image that i chose for the cover of *Scripture and Resistance* (2019) was an early version of Manny’s *Mga may Akda* (The Authors / Interpreters; see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> The work did not meet the approval of the cover designers because they saw it as anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish (the latter escapes me, but it is suggestive). In a last-minute dash, i sent another work by Manny for the cover ([Akademiko, The Academic](#)), and it is also critical of Our Discipline.<sup>5</sup>

On this occasion, i come back to one of the controversies that Manny has drawn me into. (I humbly add that, thanks to this controversy – i am here able to present Manny’s works in color!)

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<sup>3</sup> I am alluding here to the shift from “the Discipline” (in the title of the Presidential address in the 2019 SBL program) to “Our Discipline” in the *JBL* printed version of Yee’s address. This shift is noted in my Editorial article.

<sup>4</sup> I discussed the two versions in my opening chapter to *Scripture and Resistance*, but the comparison that i drew between them was not as effective because the 2009 version did not make it onto the cover nor to the black and white pages of the book.

<sup>5</sup> The switch was so last minute that i was not able to insert a reading of the replaced cover to my opening chapter. I would have said something along this line: “In *Akademiko* (2009), Manny paints academics as authorities who work for the reward (represented by the apple) that they receive from their students and disciples but, when they remove their reading glasses, they cannot see the world in front of them. Their eyes are stuck to their reading glasses, and they are experts in reading texts but blind to the world in front of them.”



Figure 1: *Mga may Akda* (oil on canvas, 2009)

Two full-bellied men sit on matching thrones. They represent mainline – academic, orthodox (in the Western sense) – interpreters who are “authors” in two ways: they author texts (articles, books, commentaries, bulls), and the tone of their interpretations give the impression that they know the authors of the texts that they have interpreted. (Some even give the impression that they themselves authored the texts.) They decide what the text means, but flush out meaning potentials. Such interpreters become, and effectively silence, the real authors.

The winged interpreter on the left opens a tome over his open legs and rubs his long nose with a quill. He models a traditional scholar – male, focused and hardworking, even at the toilet. He turns to his right to study a white rose, and a discarded piece of paper (an earlier draft? a meaning potential? a proposal by another author?) lies crumpled by his left foot between him and his colleague.

The churched interpreter to the right, with his golden mitre, has a longer nose. He closes his right fist and lowers another symbol of his office with this left hand.

The head of the cross is lowered, as if in homage to the scholarly interpreter. And also, the lowered cross lowers the eyes of the viewer toward his penis ... in case one misses it. Despite his mitre and the size of his belly, he is a regular old man.

With this work Manny draws viewers into a private space, an inner sanctum, in the ivory towers of scholars and bishops, and strips the *authorities* to show that in their bare basics they are like other old *grumbled* (an oralized meaning potential in the *crumbled* paper) and grumbling men. They might be healthier than impoverished, bordered and crossed people, but they have the same number of digits.

Manny calls attention to one of the toiling settings in which authors and interpreters write and think, the toilet, a place where the excreted and refused are crumbled and flushed out. Put another way: at the border, the toiling of authors and interpreters are flushable.



Figure 2: *Mga may Akda* (oil on canvas, 2013)

Four years later, Manny offered another work with the same title (Figure 2). The scholarly interpreter still turns to his right, but without a halo this time. In this

second work, there is no rose in his line of vision. Instead, a red rose is under his foot. The red rose represents a crossed body.

In this second work, the scholarly interpreter rubs his nose with the quill, a posture that signals snootiness. He looks to the side, away from the eyes of the viewers. He seems to think that he is better, smarter, more important than his viewers.

There is no crumbled paper in this second work, and i wonder if someone has picked it up (since the first work).<sup>6</sup> In this second work, the eyes of the churched interpreter are closed to suggest a frown, maybe in disgust (with what he read in his colleague's writing) or in pain (as he lets off steam).

In both works, the churched author makes a fist and raises his right arm as if to say "amen" to what he reads in his colleague's writing. On a second reading, his right arm is suspended at the "oops" position – poised to point at, or pulled back because of, something in his colleague's writing that he did not approve. In this second reading, the churched author breaks away from his scholarly colleague. Manny offers both possibilities, and viewers may author their own interpretation.

Juxtaposing the two works – two versions of the same title (read: synoptic texts) – shows that authors / interpreters sometimes focus on rosy subjects, and sometimes step on and crunch up those subjects. Authors / interpreters are sometimes interested in the writings of their colleagues, and sometimes pained if not disgusted by them.

## Twig

Third, the talanoa of a twig. The human subject in *Sanga* (Figure 3) is a woman (as Manny intended) who passes (in my eyes) as trans / androgynous – they invite seeing inter-sexuality and hearing intersectionality. With long disheveled hair, they signify unruliness. Their eyes – one eye opens wider than the other – eerily look at the viewers, but the viewers can't expect them to speak.

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<sup>6</sup> I raise this possibility because i have found another work by Manny in which the woman subject sniffs a red rose, but i have not found a work with a crumbled piece of paper.



Figure 3: *Sanga* (oil on canvas, 2012)

Their mouth is covered over. Their lips are sealed. Shut up. Viewers may still imagine the words that could pour out if their lips were parted, but the uttering of

words is not the critical concern of this work. Rather, the more critical question is how one might be seen by the eerie set of eyes on this subject.

The writing of words is also not the focus of this work. There is no quill here, and no paper or tome to write on. Instead, there is a twig (*sanga*) and a wall at the background. They hold a twig (*sanga* also translates as “branch”) that points to a crack in the wall, to the left of their left shoulder. They appear poised to poke their *sanga* into that crack. This work is not about authoring, but an invitation to twig (at) the wall, the border.

Compared to the clean-shaven authorities in *Mga may Akda*, the androgynous (in my reading) human subject in *Sanga* spells t-r-o-u-b-l-e. *Sanga* tells Manny’s own story – he is like a twig that is ready to “bust” the cultures of domination and whiteness in the church, and in the society. In my interactions with Manny, i have learned to appreciate his use of the canvas of the masters to twig the walls and borders of the master’s house.

## Paradise

Fourth, an invitation to a poem that slams (read: twig, bust) the privileging of “paradise” as symbol, metaphor, depiction, representation for the Fiji Islands (Mariana’s home). Mariana’s reading of “Paradise” (2019) is available on YouTube ([at this link](#)), and i here call attention to three elements:<sup>7</sup>

First, in Fiji (and the same may be said with regard to its Pasifika neighbours), the colonizers in the modern time are local people – the local leaders are the current colonizers. The colonizers are not foreigners who have come from afar, but from within – and they too “don’t give two fucks” about local people; they too would “sell their mothers to save their own interests.”

Second, the local colonizers / leaders silence dissidents and demand loyalty from the local people. And like good, faithful Christian worshippers, the local people comply; the local people don’t question the leaders because they believe that they are in Paradise, and they dare not give the impression that Fiji is not Paradise. But in the silence of the local people, the local leaders / colonizers fill their deep pockets and “manipulate the *Mana* [energy, power, authority] to do their corrupt bidding.” The local leaders / colonizers have mastered the tools of the former, European masters. And they have succeeded without violence, because local people have swallowed whole the myths of Paradise.

Third, like Pinocchio, the local colonizers / leaders are “the boy[s who] became the puppet[s].” Their noses “grew and grew,” and their hearts become “hard as wood.” The leaders wiggle to the pulls of their masters, “censoring those who dissent, [with] middle fingers up to the notion of freedom.”

In modern Fiji: local leaders occupy the proverbial master’s house, and they are ruthless and deceitful. As Mariana’s forbearers let the former master deceive them,

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<sup>7</sup> I present a longer reading of Mariana’s “Paradise” in another reflection – “Native scriptures: An invitation” forthcoming in *Thresholds of Theology: Invitations from Aotearoa New Zealand*.

through the power of the stories about Paradise, so have the people of modern Fiji bowed to local colonizers – “singing with those Bula smiles” and “put[ting] on a show for everyone to see.”

Mariana’s challenge is sharp: Paradise is “nonsense talk of mythical feats” that have no place in Fiji. What she desires is real justice, which is “a dish best served without hypocrisy.”

## **and so**

Finally, to close, i return to the question raised above: What might Our Discipline look and feel like if we sit in talanoa with – and be taught, twig’ed, and slammed by – elders like Maratja, Manny, and Mariana?



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