



Cultured Conversations



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Cultured Conversations is a digital series produced by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Exploring issues and ideas from the cultural sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, this series is hosted by Gallery Director, Kirsten Lacy, and invites exceptional leaders from arts, philanthropy, economics and politics to discuss topical issues facing the sector today.

A Tongan Pākehā New Zealander and mother to three children, Dr. Karlo Mila is poet, writer, academic and cultural leader. Her latest poetry collection, Goddess Muscle, sold out within weeks of release and her postdoctoral research created a leadership curriculum that is changing lives and shaping Aotearoa.

Filmed in January 2021, Dr Karlo Mila speaks with Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki Director Kirsten Lacy on spirited leadership, the importance of dipping into our diverse cultural knowledge paradigms in the workplace and in leadership in Aotearoa.

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Kirsten Lacy:

Kia ora. I'm Kirsten Lacy, Director of Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery. Thank you for joining me for a Cultured Conversation, back in the atrium of an open Gallery. There'll be sights and sounds of people coming and going around our conversation today, which is with a creative talent and cultural leader whom I greatly admire – for her work, her mind, and her courage, all of which I hope to draw out in the next few minutes of our conversation. Her third and latest poetry collection, Goddess Muscle, sold out within weeks of release. Her postdoctoral research created a leadership curriculum that is changing lives and shaping Aotearoa. Her name is Dr Karlo Mila. She is a cultural leader and has agreed to begin this conversation with a poem of hers that inspires me as much as it does challenge me, and it's also the topic of our conversation today: spirited leadership. Karlo, over to you.

Karlo Mila:

Mālō e lelei, and kia ora, Kirsten, it's lovely to be here. Usually, my poems are more eloquent than I am in person, so I'll go straight into the poem. It's called 'Spirited Leadership', as you said, and it was written for Louise Mara when I did Leadership New Zealand.

Spirited Leadership

Let us navigate today, open-hearted, with a spirit of enquiry, leaving our judges behind, embracing the archetype of the learner. We have learned that leadership is not about putting more on but about taking stuff off, letting go of what we have accumulated that no longer serves us, daring to be bare. Sometimes

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being naked is your only protection from life, stripping the layers away to find the pūtake within the taproot, where we draw energy to sustain us going forward. Let us navigate today with aroha and hope for the future. Let us heal ourselves in the land itself, in the salt water of our seas, in the green of our forests. Let us wash ourselves clean. Let us create practices of care so that we can prepare for the hard journeys, the lonely ones that involve standing on chairs and seeing the long view, the distant view, the storms brewing on far shores and let us step up and stand up and look at that view from the mountain for all those who are simply too busy surviving, heads down in the engine rooms, too busy trying to stay afloat. Let us be bold enough to look beyond their horizons and let us resist the lure to be passengers, to cruise or to follow the seductive sirens singing their songs of private good. Let us follow the call to what is shared, knowing that decision-making can be fraught with danger. The winds can change the course, can be perilous, but wondering, always wondering, how do we find a way through this? Insight is the journey. Let us navigate today with strength of self. Let us work out what we will take bullets for. Let us practise our passions and let us not be good, because we do not want to navigate the narrower lives, tip-toe the tightropes of expectation, the fine lines of perfection. Instead, we want to be whole, aware of our shadows that loom long over our decks and let us take the time to look. Let us hold on to our discomfort for long enough to know what it means. Let us be responsible for our own inner culture, knowing that what is within is so often without. Let us navigate today with purpose. Let us not be consumed by the urgent, the reactive, the risk-averse, the bland leading the bland, the business as usual. Let us get off the autocue queue. Let us be the ones who take risks in service of a greater vision, knowing that we cannot control outcomes but we can understand the causal chains that inform our intervention logic, open to doubt, encountering the unknown, avoiding amygdala hijacks of shame and fear and blame rooted deep in our psyches. Let us hold on to our uncertainty in our potential vastness. Tap the taproot. Stand in our power with awareness. Let us navigate today in a spirit of manaakitanga, embracing diversity. Let us be open to disagreement with our attachment knowing that when everyone thinks the same no one is really thinking. Let us be open to being challenged and see where we are triggered. Let us communicate with people in ways that they can hear and let us temper what we are good at. Let us know what is me and what is not them. Let us walk in their jandals. Let us be able to influence others who think differently from us. Let us listen with our hearts and not know the other in ways that render them done and dusted. Let us remember it takes less energy to stick with our own biases, so let us find believers in diversity and be prepared to disagree, experiencing the fullness of reality through other people's perspectives. Let us navigate today with courage and when we find that we are digging ourselves deeper into holes of our own making, let us be brave enough to put down the spade and call it the spade, the spade. Let us dare to be disruptive. Let us be wise about what we are dependent upon. Let us be bold enough to rethink a system that sends our waste into rivers that are life-giving. Let us disinvest in what will one day destroy us. Let our values consciously underpin the bricks and mortar we build and our designs for life. Let us use our knowledge to navigate a finite world. Let us thrive in a world with limits. Let us be the people who just went and built the bloody thing, until other people turned up. Let us get our gumboots on and let us nut it out for all of us. Let us navigate today in a spirit of unity. Let us up our conversations about what really matters and find the levers of change, contribute to collective wisdom, creative thinking, consciousness, but let us have a broader vision that catches the periphery and the rear view that can bear to see who benefits from our

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leadership and who benefits by the smallness of our groups and who doesn't. Let everyone on this waka know that they are welcome guests. Let us believe passionately that people can do a lot more than what they think. Let us create environments in our circles of influence where people feel empowered enough to make something happen and let us harness the institutions we are a part of to enable these visions. Let us stand in our power with awareness. Let us navigate today with the long view. Let us have 150-year-long strategic plans, be the ones who invest in the technology that prepares us for the unexpected, who design the tramways, who add value to the milk you add milk to the diets of the next generation stretching beyond the short-term and the self-interest. Let us plant trees with strong roots in anticipation of those brewing storms on the changing climate of the far horizon so that the land holds, so that the land holds, and the people prosper when it hits our shores. Let us navigate today, embracing and open-hearted. Let us take everyone with us and let us never forget where we come from. Let us be humble knowing that we walk in the paths other people have carved with their bullshit odometers on, asking themselves, is it true, is it true that we cannot do this? Let us take responsibility for our conscience knowing that others might walk in the trails that we leave behind or lack a trail because we were not courageous enough to bushwhack them, to walk them or to make them wide enough so that we could move as a collective. Let us be those leaders who beat the drums, orchestrate drama, dance, theatre and sing songs of the seas in all sorts of strange languages that ache with purpose, passion and possibility, and inspire the next generation to build boats that will carry them into the future, navigating wisely with courage, unity, spirit, purpose, strength of self, manaakitanga, hope for the future, aroha, open-hearted, with the long view and with the spirit of enquiry. Let us be those leaders who operate in ways so that people barely know that we were trying to lead them, so that they will say we did it ourselves.

KL:

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Karlo. I know it's a long poem, but it's given me great stewardship over the last few days and weeks. I want to respond to the reading but before I do may I finish your introduction?

KM:

Yeah, of course.

KL:

Of all the accolades – civic, academic, creative – that you have earned and enjoyed throughout your career, the two things you want to be introduced by are these: that you're a Tongan Pākehā New Zealander and a mum of three children. Tell me why those two things are so critical in the way in which you introduce yourself to the world.

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KM:

I grew up in Palmerston North, of all places, really conscious of being really different from everyone else and trying to make sense of who I was and what my identity was. I looked – look – very Māori and so I was often misrecognised in that way. I was very clear and told very clearly, actually, that I wasn't and I needed to try to figure that out, that I was manuhiri. So, I went on a really big journey to try and understand my Tongan-ness that included going to Tonga, living in Tonga, included doing a PhD, to be perfectly honest. I might have overthought it, but it is really quite central to who I am and how I make sense of myself in the world. Then mothering is pretty much 80 per cent of what I do, so it feels really ridiculous not to have that in the line. I get asked for bios all the time and sometimes mother will be taken out of it but when it's actually one of your primary roles, it feels really weird.

KL:

And there's a civic responsibility in raising children into the world as well, right? In the way in which you hope life might carry on beyond us.

KM:

Yes, so true. Yeah, absolutely.

KL:

The poem, 'Spirited Leadership' – perhaps I ask first the context of its writing, because it's been gifted to some people.

KM:

Yes. In 2013, I went on the Leadership New Zealand journey. I work for them now, oddly, but I didn't think that was ever going to happen at that point. We had some of the most amazing speakers from all over Aotearoa come and inspire us, so I wrote a whole journal full of things that impacted on me – some of them are so specific. I'll give you an example: Bob Harvey, the ex-mayor of Waitākere, talked about the very last thing he did as mayor was open up a nudist camp and he decided that he would do it naked. So, there's this line that says sometimes being naked is your only protection from life; but he had really made a very conscious choice to be truly himself, because he had a career in advertising and done all kinds of stuff that would be problematic if it came out. So, he's like: I'm gonna be so myself that it's actually the way I protect myself.

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KL:

There's nothing to hide . . .

KM:

Nothing.

KL:

. . . if we take it all off, that's right.

KM:

And so, the penultimate of that was him choosing to open up, completely naked, and so that's a reference. There are many, many references but those are the things that I really learned on that journey and valued and then pulled into a big poem.

KL:

He's a great supporter of the Gallery.

KM:

Oh yeah, I adore him! Just wow. I was really impressed.

KL:

Your poem also says let us be the people who just went and built the bloody thing. What's the sentiment in that line?

KM:

It's really interesting. It was a very well-known New Zealander who said that, and it was in the context of risking something quite big when generally there'd be a lot of resistance at a public level. It's a bit like, say, Mount Eden – there was this big talk about maybe building a stadium, and then we ended up going, 'Oh, no. We'll just take it back to Mount Eden because there's just so much mumbling and grumbling.' But when you push past the resistance and you're really brave, it starts being successful in its own right, and then those people will show up. But you've got to get your gumboots on. You've got to take that risk.

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And it's quite hard, it is quite a strong, in my experience, like tall poppy syndrome culture here – not quite haters and wreckers but a little bit, to be honest . . .

KL:

Because you also write about being open to disagreement without attachment.

KM:

It's so hard. Can I just say – it's aspirational.

KL:

It's an aspirational statement. I'm definitely not there myself. And also, in knowing what triggers us. When everyone's thinking the same no one's thinking. But so often in leadership, we feel the need to build a coalition of support around us to get things done. There's a sense that there's another kind of strategy that we often fall towards. I'm leading an institution, clearly as a new migrant and white Australian woman, and it's built on this colonising dream, which we no longer accept. We need to build something new here but there's a lot of hurt and anger and shame, and these are hard things. But it's also perhaps common, is it, in your experience, not peculiar just to Auckland Art Gallery but in contemporary leadership in Aotearoa?

KM:

Absolutely. There's so much intergenerational trauma, I think, on all sides as well, that hasn't really been well addressed, that often is just simmering behind all of our surfaces and then bursting through, and entangling us, I think, in ways that makes it really hard to find solutions that are not at the same level of the problem-making, if that makes sense. I run a leadership programme for Pasifika peoples; I've just actually given them to the Pacific interns, so there's all these young people who are doing internships with the government and it's a list of questions that open up space. One of them was: If we were to be open to disagreement, what would be the other perspectives? There are all sorts of ways of opening it up so that we're not forced into a shortcut of consensus but allows those other ideas that may not be so popular, that may not be agreed with, to be voiced safely.

It's really interesting. Having done all that research on what it means to be a Pacific person, to explain my entire PhD really simply, I say: Okay, I grew up in Aotearoa and I was socialised and encouraged by my dad to have the Gucci bag or the Michael Kors bag, and that's all my cultural capital that comes from doing well in a New Zealand system. I'll have that bag, it'll be filled with money, that's what my dad wanted. I can walk into a job interview and I can pull out the right things to say and it tells me how to operate in a certain

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way. But what I haven't got is this finely woven bag that's just as precious, filled with cultural knowledge and language and worldviews, because this other bag was prioritised and to not live a monocultural life then I want to fill that bag. I want to be able to dip into it and I think in that bag is the diversity dividend. If we're employing, say, in the public sector, particularly Pacific people and they're only allowed to have that bag and finding it really hard to be courageous to reach into the other one, then we all miss out.

KL:

Totally. So the Mana Moana programme – it's uniquely based on your research and a contemporary approach for leadership here. My leadership learning was all in the Western tradition. You're building a curriculum for now; is that how you're seeing it? Bringing together these two handbags – I'd quite like to have more than one.

KM:

In such a globalising world, to only have one and not at least appreciate that other people are dipping into others is just a little bit limited. We have so many complex problems, so to be able to dip into all of the different knowledge paradigms attached to different cultures – I think we need so many perspectives to solve what's going on in the world right now. I just tried to fill that bag and for many of us it's like: How do we even go about doing that? I feel like I created something that was for dummies, because I was one, if that makes sense. That worldview, I suppose, is word by word by word by word – there are 90 power words and they are words that have intrinsic meaning to a culture. It's for people who are fluent in our languages, so words like mana and tapu, and even rā or matangi, the word for wind. And because there are so many different Pacific islands, we've gone for proto-Polynesian or Austronesian context, so moana itself is in 35 different languages. It's going back to those root words of when we were anciently connected, so building on connections. Then, say it's moana, I've got the Sāmoan, Tongan, Niuean, Tokelau, Rarotongan, Hawaiian and New Zealand Māori proverbs that map onto that concept. Then I've researched what different people have said about it – it's deep, it's filled with bounty. And then looked at the Edward Tregear comparative Polynesian–Māori dictionary for all the translations. It's just a big resource book full of these.

We're trying to activate that and like kind of teach it, explore it and work out how we activate it in everyday lives – all of this knowledge. It's kind of embarrassing, because, I don't know, we're very Western-trained. At the beginning, I had all these concepts in a grid like a taxonomy; I used to work at the Health Research Council and we used to make taxonomies. After a while, actually, while I was drinking with my friend Maui, I suddenly realised, had this real 'aha' moment – I was about three years through it, which is embarrassing, that all of these concepts actually dropped onto our shared landscape of island reef, deeper ocean, mountain, sky, and so it was like the library of the land. That our ancestors had deeply theorised every single little bit of it, so the journey follows an exploration of this imaginary ancestral

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island and we encounter the demigods that are storied and associated with the different parts of the geography. That's how it rolls.

KL:

I love that – the library of the land. And a different structural way of understanding the interconnection of meaning and word in topography. It's so beautiful as a manual for leadership, too, of sorts. Then, of course, the way you access those ideas is different; it provides a different structure for access, too. One of the questions I have for you is about a challenge I have. You say in your poem that we should have awareness; we should stand in our power with awareness. Some have said that power is something I should not stand in – I should give it away, actually. Is it that there's times in which we do both?

KM:

This is such a confronting issue. Louise Mara, who ran Leadership New Zealand – I found it really confronting; she made us stand in a line and say those of us who are really comfortable with standing in our power and those who don't, put yourself on a spectrum. Then she just said: If you're not aware of your own power, you have a naïve relationship with it. I'd like to think that I had power but it's really hard to use it wisely if you don't acknowledge it, and so that has been quite a journey for me. Having done that exercise now, with quite a few people, I will find that the people who are really resistant to thinking that they have power actually do misuse it, which I've seen. It's really interesting. It doesn't rule out power sharing; actually, if you're really conscious of your power then you're in a much stronger position to use it wisely, to share it, to understand how it's operating in different contexts. I can see all kinds of ways that my power and my privilege operate. I feel like when I'm conscious of that and I stand in it, I'm a better human.

KL:

That's a wonderful teaching for me. I'm really going to reflect on that. I also wanted to just acknowledge that for me, finding your book – this book you've just released, Goddess Muscle, now sold out – I'm lucky I've got a copy. It's poetry in itself. You've found a way for it to be an act of leadership in itself, to find teaching in creating, the creativity of the written word, and in English here, too. It's really interesting to me. Having come from doing my MBA and all my leadership learning throughout my career, in the Western tradition, to then find in your work that there's leadership expressed in the art itself is really amazing. I'm curious to know how you arrived at recognising poetry for the learning that it can offer to others.

KM:

Oh, that's a really good question that I actually really struggle to answer, primarily because largely I just write about what moves me, in every way. I have a terrible break-up, so many problems about it I'll struggle with, or lose my best friend – there'll be poems about it. Because I've just thought so much about

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these issues about leadership, about culture, about decolonisation, I can't help but process it through poetry, digest it in a way. Then when I have to re-present these ideas, which has happened more and more – there's a poem for CHOGM, for the Commonwealth, but to be really, really clear about what I was communicating, so sometimes poetry is just clarity. To be honest, I'll figure something out; it'll be figured out in the poem. There's the clarity. Then moving away from it, done now, sorted. Yeah, it's a little bit of that.

KL:

Perhaps there's a final comment for young poets of Aotearoa that watch this. What message might you leave with them?

KM:

Just that your voice counts, your experience counts; the less you see it in print, the more it's going to mean to someone. Oversharers saved my life!

KL:

There's got to be a meme . . .

KM:

I am a bit of an oversharer, most poets are. Sometimes, we don't choose the words, the words choose us, and if that's the case for you then just roll with it.

KL:

Thank you so much, Dr Karlo Mila. It's so wonderful to have you and thank you for coming on Cultured Conversations.

KM:

It's my pleasure. It's nice to have this conversation with you.

KL:

And thank you for joining us today for our Cultured Conversation. You can find more of our episodes online at www.aucklandartgallery.com.

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