



A Call to Arms for the Earth. Environmental Poetry in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific Islands: The Case of the Anthology **No Other Place to Stand**

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ABSTRACT: Poetry is a major artistic expression in New Zealand and Pacific culture, including a longstanding tradition of indigenous oral literature. Besides its many functions, it can also have a crucial militant role. In the present climate emergency, the potential of oral and written poetry for environmental activism has been rediscovered: “poet-performers” have risen as militant figures that write verses and act them out on websites, during public performances and in important political venues. The effects of global warming are dramatically real in the Pacific region, especially in consequence of the sea-level rise that has caused the flooding of many atolls and is threatening the survival of populations and cultures. Aotearoa has always been sensitive to environmental problems, also thanks to the prominent voice of the Māori minority in the country’s politics. It is thus not surprising the recent publication of *No Other Place to Stand* (2022), the first New Zealand poetry anthology to deal with climate issues from a specifically New Zealand and Pacific perspective. The book forms a dedicated platform for creative work in response to the climate crisis. Half of the contributors are indigenous and a good number under thirty, giving voice to the people of the land and to those with the most at stake for their futures. My article will provide a critical analysis of the volume against the Pacific cultural and political background.

KEY WORDS: Pacific performance-poets; eco-poetry; New Zealand literature; Māori literature; Pacific indigenous literature; *No Other Place to Stand*



THE ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCY: THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

It is now “a truth universally acknowledged”, to quote Jane Austen’s famous incipit in *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 1), that climate change is one of the most urgent issues of the new millennium, probably the most urgent. The word “unprecedented” has become a constant in the media with reference to unusual and extreme weather conditions occurring everywhere on our planet on a regular basis: summers with temperatures up to 30° centigrade in the Arctic; glaciers melting across the world; yearly heat domes in Northern Europe, USA and Canada causing droughts, fires and water shortage; frequent storms and floods devastating communities in Central Europe—Germany, The Netherlands, Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia—but also in the Far East—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and China. The landscape of many countries is changing: the proverbial grassy green spaces in the UK turn dry and yellow every summer (Government of Canada; Tandon; Bennett; European Greens).

As to the Southern Hemisphere, during the 2019-2020 summer extreme drought caused several mega-bushfires of unprecedented intensity in Australia, which expanded the ozone hole contributing to global heat rise. Their smoke was even visible from New Zealand (Coleman), another country now affected by regular cycles of droughts and floods. Moreover, the emergency of the so-called “sinking islands” is no longer a threat but a reality. Coral atolls in the Pacific are being constantly flooded by the ocean due to sea-level rise, caused by the melting of continental ice sheets and the expansion of sea water as ocean temperatures slowly increase. The consequences of this phenomenon are coastal and land erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources, degradation of ecosystems and lack of food security. Many outer low-lying islands in archipelagos such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands are no more liveable, a fact that, in turn, results in internal migration toward the main islands and external migration to Aotearoa,¹ Australia and the Western coast of the USA. Climate-induced migration equates to loss of identity and threats to sovereignty (McLeod; Kempf and Hermann; Smith).

ACTIVISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL POETRY IN AOTEAROA: THE ANTHOLOGY *NO OTHER PLACE TO STAND*

Given the gravity of the environmental crisis in the Southern Hemisphere, it is not surprising that when the editors of the anthology *No Other Place to Stand*—Jordan Hamel, Rebecca Hawkes, Erik Kennedy and Essa Ranapiri—launched an open call for

¹ Aotearoa is the Māori name of New Zealand. It means “the land of the long white cloud”, which is the image seen by the Polynesian explorers when they arrived, presumably in the late 13th century (King, *Nga16*; Te Ara).



poems on climate change in 2020 (right in the middle of the Covid-19 epidemic), they received hundreds of submissions. As mentioned in their "Introduction", they selected ninety-one writers, all with connections with New Zealand, to contribute to the first poetic collection on this issue from a New Zealand perspective. Half of them are of indigenous origin (Māori or Pacific islanders) and a good proportion under thirty years of age, a choice that privileges the "people of the land" and those whose future is most at stake (Hamel *et al.* 2, 11).

Aotearoa has a long tradition of powerful protest and activism for human rights, the Māori cause and anti-nuclear stances. In 1969 an organization called HART (Halt All Racist Tours) was set up to stop all sport contacts with South Africa, due to its Apartheid politics. The protest reached its apex during the Springbok Rugby Tour of 1981 (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, "Springbok" and "Clash"; Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "1981") with a spread of riots all over the country against the visit to New Zealand of the South African team, a vocal expression of civil disturbance which also questioned racism at home. The Land March of 1975 led by 79-year-old Māori woman Whina Cooper is another good example. The charismatic leader left Te Hapua in the far north with fifty supporters and walked for 1000 km to Wellington parliament, collecting 5000 marchers on the way and "dramatizing a national Māori determination not to lose further land to Pākehā² or Crown ownership" (King, Penguin 479-80; Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Whina"). Finally, the 1963 New Zealand Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament resulted in the biggest petition presented to parliament from the successful campaign for votes for women in 1893. The claimants called for a Southern Hemisphere Nuclear Free Zone, summarized by the slogan 'No Bombs South of the Line'. This act gave rise to the "people's peace movement" in the 1970s, which led to official protests against French nuclear testing in the Pacific and the banning of all foreign nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered vessels in New Zealand ports (King 495; Disarmament). A strict anti-nuclear legislation continues to be applied in Aotearoa, which still stands as a nuclear-free-zone today.

As to the climate crisis, in the "Introduction" the editors underline that an effective movement is still in the making, despite the actions of militant groups, in particular those of young adults and poets:

a truly mass movement for radical climate action is still in the process of coalescing [although] [t]he efforts of groups like School Strike 4 Climate, 4 Tha Kulture [*sic*], Generation Zero and Extinction Rebellion are all contributing to national consciousness-raising, as are the voices of poets on slam stages and in independent bookshops. (5)

Poetry is therefore acknowledged as a valuable tool for climate change education and the development of environmental consciousness. The rising interest in environmental issues expressed by poets in Aotearoa and the Pacific can be seen as a new form of militant activism similar to the civil movements of the past. Poets convey

² Pākehā: New Zealanders of European origin.



their message in printed collections and/or in presence: during readings in bookstores, recitals in theatres, and performances in important political venues. They also take advantage of the global visibility offered by the new technologies and media, uploading videos to YouTube or their own websites. Some of them are published authors, others prefer to define themselves as “poet-performers” or “spoken-word artists”, relying more on orality and performance. Whether performed in public, recited in slam sessions, posted on websites or printed, poetry appears as a powerful and popular means to explain, remember, comment, dramatize and claim crucial issues. The following paragraphs will provide some examples.

Marshallese poet and academic Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner performed one of her most moving environmental poems dedicated to her baby daughter, “Dear Matafele Peinam”, at the 2014 United Nation Climate Summit in New York. Her aim was to urge effective policies by the industrialised “First World” in order to contain the rise of global temperature and, consequently, the sea-level rise that is devastating the Marshall Islands. Jetñil-Kijiner’s performance was followed by a standing ovation of the UN members. The poem later appeared in her printed collection *Iep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* (2017).

Four Pacific Islanders and spoken-word poets were selected from an international contest to perform at the 2015 UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris: Samoan American Terisa Siagatonu, Filipina Australian Eunice Andrada, rapper John Meta Sarmiento from Guam, and Filipina American Isabella Avila Borgeson. They represented some of the countries that are undergoing the worst effects of climate change. Andrada is also the author of two printed collections: *Flood Damages* (2018) and *Take Care* (2021).

Performance poet Selina Tusitala Marsh, who also contributed to *No Other Place to Stand*, was the first New Zealand Poet Laureate of Pacific origin for the period 2017-2019. Born and raised in Aotearoa, but of Samoan, Tuvaluan and German ancestry on her mother’s side and Scottish, French and English ancestry on her father’s side, she is the figure that best embodies the complexity of Pacific Islanders’ condition at present. The theatrical recitation of her poems in videos, on websites and in presence, during a myriad of different events, is characterized by a performative use of poetry, rooted in the oral indigenous tradition, but also represents a multi-modal way of making poetry, involving acting, body movements, facial expressions, the musical instrument of the voice and the use of technology. Probably, her best-known performance is that in front of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey, on March 14 2016, during the Commonwealth Day Service (Marsh).³ Marsh has also authored several poetry collections, among which *Fast Talking PI* (2009), *Dark Sparring* (2013) and *Tightrope* (2017).

Needless to say, these spoken-word artists have their own websites, with the texts of some of their poems, pictures, videos and the recordings of their readings and performances, and can be contacted through chats. The political, educational and

³ See also the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHWFI54jEg4>. Accessed 14 Mar. 2024.



activist intent of their art is declared from the way they introduce themselves. On the homepage of their respective websites Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner appears as “Poet, performer, educator”; Terisa Siagatonu as “poet, educator, community leader”; Eunice Andrada as “poet and educator”; and John Meta Sarmiento as “rapper poet speaker educator”. Selina Tusitala Marsh prefers to accompany her photo with the motto: “Tell your tale or someone else will... or won’t”.⁴

Despite its traditional in-print form, the anthology *No Other Place to Stand* represents a challenging enterprise. By offering a dedicated platform for creative work in response to climate change, the book shows “how mere poetry could capture the enormity of climate change’s presence on our world” (Hamel *et al.* 1). It conveys a variety of issues and views from an original Pacific perspective, using different poetic styles (lyrical, narrative, argumentative, elegiac, satirical, ironic) or, as the editors underline, reflecting climate matters “with grief, urgency, humour and despair” (Hamel *et al.* 1). The poems are not divided into thematic sections and resist easy categorisation. Topics and issues often overlap or are included in the same poem. However, the sequence chosen by the editors creates clusters of poems on various major themes that merge organically with other clusters, as in conversational threads. The following sections will illustrate the main themes of the collection.

GREENWASHING, ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES, UNLIMITED FAITH IN SCIENCE

A group of poems regards controversial environmental policies, greenwashing, unlimited faith in science and the inefficacy of science communication in representing the emergency of climate change. In “EMAILS FROM AIR NEW ZEALAND ARE THE BANE OF MY EXISTENCE”, Rhegan Tu’akoi satirizes the jargon of “corporate values” (Hamel *et al.* 7) employed in the marketing policy of New Zealand’s largest airline and aimed at highlighting their efforts towards environmental sustainability: “all my unread emails are from AirNZ/clogging my inbox the way their fuel/chokes our rivers/ [...] *our coffee cups are made from plants/not plastic*” (139). The poet also refers to their “Fly Neutral” carbon offset programme (Air New Zealand. “Fly Neutral”), which demands from their customers for a contribution in order to buy carbon credits for international projects of reforestation and reduce the carbon footprint produced by flights: “*only \$3.99 to offset your upcoming flight...*” (139). Tu’akoi is disconcerted by the request that a billion-dollar company is making to an unwaged student like her, but she tithes every time because “a clean green future is my choice” (140).

Michaela Keeble’s “science communication” reflects on the inadequacy of climate models provided by scientists that are difficult to be interpreted. She laments her being

⁴ The poets’ websites are: <https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/>; <https://www.terisasiagatonu.com/>; <https://www.euniceandrada.com/>; <https://www.reachmeta.com/>; <https://www.selinatusalamarsh.com/>. Isabella Avila Borgeson does not have a website.



cast into “a mocking world/where science communication/must not rely so heavily/on metaphor” and underlines the distance between facts and scholarship because “in the anthropocene/models are reality/and language is/approximation” (24).

In “Techno-optimism” Zoë Higgins denounces the hypocrisy of unlimited faith in science and technology, which celebrates unconditioned progress and is blind to the urgencies of the present: “Our progress delivers probes to Mars,/our progress delivers clean energy hot in thirty minutes or your money back./ [...] In my mouth thermohaline thundering the seafloor.⁵ In my mouth/the monthly rotting moon. In my mouth a green river flooding” (147). Interestingly, the techno-optimist in the poem, enthusiastically enumerating the extraordinary achievements of technological development, is a guy who later raped the female speaker, an allusion to the traditional Western predatory attitude towards women and the earth, as eco-feminism well explains, hidden under the false rhetoric of progress (Merchant): “The guy who later raped me said he felt good about the future” (147).

A direct vocal answer to the ambiguous behaviour of corporations, scholarship and science comes from the writer and climate activist Tim Jones in his “Not for me the sunlit uplands”, where he points to the necessity of individual and collective action. He has no time for “the sunlit uplands” because he is “down in the trenches” (27), he does not care for “grand gesture” as he is “critiquing positions,/building coalitions, planning occupations/opposing mining interests, finding all our futures/are hostage to our actions” (27). For Jones, poetry and writing must be necessarily accompanied by militancy.

ECOLOGICAL DISASTERS

Specific ecological disasters are described and stigmatised. In “The Rena”, Te Kahu Rolleston remembers the shipwreck of a container ship, which occurred on 5 October 2011 in the Bay of Plenty, while approaching Tauranga Harbour. The Rena ran aground on the clearly marked Astrolabe Reef due to human error. By January it had broken in two and the stern section had slipped off the reef bank and sunk. At the time, it was carrying over 1,300 containers and 1,733 tonnes of heavy fuel. It was New Zealand’s worst maritime environmental disaster, which took years to clean-up.⁶ Rolleston recollects the tragic event by mixing real facts and mythological images, in what appears as a crime against the gods of the Māori pantheon, first of all the ocean (Moana) and the god of the sea Tangaroa: “Her knife-like features with a sharp blade/pierced my

⁵ Thermohaline circulation, also called Global Ocean Conveyor or Great Ocean Conveyor Belt, is the component of general oceanic circulation controlled by horizontal differences in temperature and salinity (“Thermohaline Circulation”).

⁶ A salvage operation which cost \$700 million—second only to the billions spent in Italy removing the cruise ship Costa Concordia—ended in April 2016 after sea conditions had frequently hampered work (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, “Wreck”; Shuler).



Moana” and “How dare you!!/poison the swells and the realm of Tangaroa” (57). The containers of the ship floating on the water surface are seen as an army of *taniwha*, monsters of Māori mythology, polluting and killing the life of the sea, once “pantry and sanctuary” to living beings (57). The poem ends with an indictment against capitalism and Western values, that turned the sea into material goods, losing the connection with its spiritual meaning, its *mauri* (spirit): “Because the sea is a *resource*,/to followers of capitalism,/but what’s a *re-source* to a *Mauri-source*, our people’s very essence of living?” (58). And the unity of Māori people, gathered to clean the shores and feeling one with the sea, is the only reason for smiling that is left to the poet.

David Eggleton’s “Deepwater Horizon” also deals with the damage caused to the sea, this time not by an extraordinary event but by the ordinariness of oil drilling: “Drill, baby, drill:/never mind the spill;” (59). Profane rituals, prompted by oil pollution, desacralize the ocean. “Pelicans and dolphins read the runes” (59) written by oil waste on the sacred texts of the sea and “the waves anoint the beach with gunk” (59). Oil tycoons and corporate CEOs appear as matadors or circus artists mystifying reality for profit.

Another disaster is recalled in a heartfelt tone by Hele Christopher-Ikimotu’s “Dear Banaba”. The poet sorrowfully evokes one of the most shameful episodes of environmental exploitation in the Pacific and laments the loss of his island in the Kiribati archipelago, the home of his ancestors, his identity and his culture, sacrificed to phosphate mining by the Australian Pacific Islands company in the course of 20th century. The exploitation of this mineral, used in agriculture to make fertilizers, turned the island into an open-air cave and rendered it uninhabitable. All the residents, about 1,000 people, were forcedly moved to Rabi island in Fiji, on 15 December 1945 (Edwards; Australian National University). This story of exploitation, devastation and dislocation is revived in order to remember, as a testimony and a lesson for the future: “Dear Banaba,/I will never forget you/Your blood and sweat nourished the land I currently live on/You died so I could live” (89). Like an orphan the poet fears he might lose his adoptive parents, too: “Will I lose my other islands the way I lost you?/To corporate greed, injustice and carelessness for the environment?” (89). The poem ends by claiming the impossibility of forgiveness for him.

General environmental disasters are also lamented: glaciers retreating, lack of rain and drought, the devastation caused by hurricanes and floods. One of New Zealand’s most famous glaciers, Franz Joseph, in the Southern Alps, has receded 1 km over the last 10 years due to global warming. Ankh Spice’s “Franz Josef Glacier 2020 (will they say)” recounts the retreat of the glacier like a white body having an internal haemorrhage: “In the pitching dark the origin sea/is flooding—a black vein swelling deep below/a white-chase wound [...] but these short months are a spreading bruise, frozen flesh/fevering hit after hit to wear a giant down” (44). It will be difficult to describe what happened or how it happened because “Even glaciers want to forget/what’s coming next” (44).



In "Best Before", Philip Armstrong describes the bewildered monstrous creature realized by Dr Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's famous novel coming to life one more time with a strong headache due to the steel bolts in his skull, after being buried for centuries under the Arctic ice. He is woken up by the warm breath of a muskox, now grazing in the tundra that has replaced the melted ice, and feels "like a bag of mince defrosting on the bench/long after its expiry date" (37).

Alexandra Hollis' "Stormchasers" sensationalizes the sublime beauty of a tornado at dusk, silently whirling in the distance through a field, from the perspective of ill-advised people, who are turning it into an extraordinary spectacle of wild nature. Sitting inside a car, they are listening to music and waiting "to see something destroyed" (110): an aesthetic attitude characterising climate change negationism and short-sighted disengagement.

A much more realistic vision is provided by Cassandra Barnett's depiction of hurricanes in "Storm Mother". Every night the speaker reads books to facilitate sleep but she is perfectly aware that she must be on the alert because the hurricane may come: "Hurricane doesn't need my reading/Hurricane needs me fully present & awake/[...] Hurricane doesn't know time/like I do/[...] Hurricane wants attention/& all the words can't erect seawalls/[...] only an open eye/can meet/another eye" (111).

Bushfires are also seen from different perspectives and with different tones. Dadon Rowell is the daughter of Australian immigrants to New Zealand. In "There isn't a right way to feel when your country catches fire", she offers a dramatic account from Aotearoa of the bushfires in her country of origin, to which she feels a great attachment because: "you know your veins are lined/with red dirt" (72). She is torn between distress, anxiety and anger while watching the news on TV and learning first-hand updates from her relatives, getting to know that their house has burnt down and how they spent the night on the beach "because the fires aren't hot enough/to boil the ocean" (72). The poem conveys a sensorial experience of the far-away disaster, which makes it real and close to her. She smells "each strand of burnt fur/through the LED screen" and sees dark orange dust on her windowsill and the blackened sky over Auckland. The poet also alludes to the inefficacy of Australian PM Scott Morrison's measures in the emergency and denounces the short-sighted energy policy of a country that has steadfastly backed anti-ecological coal-fired power for its economic value, despite the evident connection between climate change (in particular, the unprecedented heatwaves in Australia) and bushfire crisis. She tries not to cry, out of respect for those who were directly touched by this tragedy and lost everything, but in the end she can't help, and she does.

On the other hand, Brent Cantwell, a New Zealander living in Queensland, Australia, describes the bushfires as an eye-witness in "the sounds of Mallacoota". The poem depicts infernal regions: "the hell-red sky", "the new-black coal dawn", "the inferno of thunder". Sounds are also overwhelming: "the screech of sap boiling", "fire-storm whips", "the crackling fire trucks" and the helicopters (74). The nearby Mallacoota Lake is the only possible salvation. As in the previous poem, the author refers with sharp irony to those who "preach/clean coal solutions to nature's aberration" (74), an allusion



to Morrison's unwillingness to deal with Australia's dependence on fossil fuels. Australia is in fact one of the world's biggest profiteers from fossil fuels and continues to increase coal's mining and sales, downscaling its contribution to global warming (Irfan).

Finally, Victor Billot offers an imaginary satirical reconstruction of Scott Morrison's superficial approach to the bushfire crisis, in his narrative poem "How good is this?", dedicated to the PM himself. At the beginning, the speaking voice (who embodies Morrison) mentions he has just come back from a Hawaiian holiday with his wife, a reference to the notorious trip to Hawaii Morrison made with his family in December 2019, while the country was grappling with the bushfire crisis (Baj). He seems totally incapable of realizing the gravity of the situation and even admires the colours of the sky: "The horizon was a lovely pink colour, or perhaps maroon/or red. The sun was a ball of fire sinking into it/ How good is that?" (75). The cellular is inexplicably (for him) not working but he is reached on Skype by Gladys (who embodies Gladys Berejiklian, New South West premier) who tells him that his town has been evacuated. Finally, he notices the flames over the fence. The poem ironically continues depicting the man trying to minimize the events around him, blaming his wife and Gladys for their imprecations, making jokes with the rescue teams and being totally unable to do anything but praying in an increasingly infernal context. Scott Morrison was not re-elected in 2022, in what is considered the most serious political defeat for the liberals in Australia (Karp).

SINKING ISLANDS

Another group of poems concerns the emergency of sinking islands. Bernadette Hall's "In search of happiness" is an anecdotic short poem about losing one's home. It describes an island that becomes two islands, with a river in the middle, and then turns into a no-island. Both parts become waterlogged and uninhabitable. While the families evacuate, the speaker wonders "What about the funny little black and white dog?/Where would she have to run to? And could she swim?" (48).

Faumuina Felolini Maria Tafuna'i writes two poems on sea-level rise in low-lying islands. In "If I could be so lucky", a teacher who lives in Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands, juxtaposes actual reality to the Western idealization of life in the South Pacific. She drives to school every day "Past lagoon rising/Coral dying/Rubbish piling" (51) and plays imagination games with her students to make them conscious of the emergency: "Imagine if we do nothing/What will your island look like in 50 years?/Who will live here?/What will you eat?". She also prepares them to speculate about migration and what would be like to be an eco-refugee: to live in a street where people cannot pronounce your name, where your ancestral name is turned to Frank or Terry, and where your grandchildren will wave a flag that does not correspond to a land any more. The other poem, "Marshallese Blue", describes the chromatic metamorphosis of the landscape that is occurring in her islands: green, brown and black are gradually being replaced by the colour blue. The level of the sea rises and water claims the islanders not



because of natural evolution (they are not developing grills and turning into amphibious creatures) but as a punishment because (other) people “have burnt all that was green/Chopped down all that was brown/Dug up all that was black/Until all that covers my family/is blue” (50).

ONTOLOGIES AND IDEOLOGIES BEHIND CLIMATE CHANGE

In the “Foreword” to the collection, Alice Te Punga Somerville underlines the connection between the environmental crisis and colonization:

The consciousness-raising and decolonisation through which we come to understand that climate change is inextricable from Everything Else That Has Happened Here Since 1769 (and in other places since other ‘firsts’) demands reconsideration of relationships that have been violently chopped off: between tangata and whenua,⁷ the relation between humans and non-human animals, the relationship between the seen and unseen worlds ... (Te Punga Somerville xiv)

The year 1769 refers to James Cook’s arrival in Aotearoa New Zealand, which led to the British colonization of the island and opened the way to Western thinking and later to the capitalist system.⁸ The ecological crisis of the present demands a reconsideration of the existing economic paradigms and a re-evaluation of other possible ontological principles to conceive the relationship of humans and the earth, and of human and non-human species. A de-colonial approach is therefore applied in many poems of the collection. Those written by Selina Tusitala Marsh and Karlo Mila are crucial to this regard.

In “Unity” Tusitala Marsh reflects on the interconnection of all things in nature, epitomised by the ancient concept of “Va” in Samoan thinking: “it’s called the Va in Samoan philosophy/what you do, affects me/what we do, affects the sea/land, wildlife—take the honeybee/nature’s model of unity/pollinating from flower to seed” (81). As the title of the poem suggests, unity is a principle that should be recovered and respected in Western thinking too, as suggested in the word “ecology”, which means “the set of relationships existing between organisms and their environment (“Ecology”). Marsh underlines the soundness of indigenous experiential knowledge, which led her ancestors across the Pacific Ocean by watching the stars and the currents much earlier than Columbus and the other European explorers set sail. As a consequence, “we face the future with our backs, sailing shore to shore/for we’re earning and saving for our

⁷ In the Māori language *tāngata* means people, human beings, men; *whenua* means land, but also afterbirth, placenta. *Tāngata whenua* means the people of the land, the indigenous people.

⁸ The first European explorer to sight Aotearoa was actually Dutch Abel Tasman in 1642, but he never set foot on New Zealand soil after four of his sailors were killed by Māori warriors in Golden Bay (King, *Nga* 23).



common wealth/a common strong body, a common good health” (81). The principle of walking backwards into the future is a basic axiom in Polynesian thinking, as expressed in the Māori proverb *Ka mua, ka muri*: “looking back in order to move forward”. Humans go forward led by the knowledge previously tested and handed down by their ancestors. The final message of the poetess is one that advocates a selective approach to progress, encouraging the union between past and present, humans and nature, as in the “u” (You) and the “i” (I) of the word unity.

Karlo Mila’s “Poem for the Commonwealth, 2018” summarises the meaning of the whole collection. It is a plea to change our paradigm, so that we can “salvage” what has been “savaged” (94). Mila reflects on the word Commonwealth and, deconstructing it, pinpoints that Pacific people have inherited more common problems than common wealth. Like the previous composition, it is a heartfelt hymn to survival: the survival of the islands that risk being submerged, of cultures that are bound to disappear, of the life of the ocean that is about to be choked by plastic bags, and of humans in general before the earth rejects them. There is wealth that can be offered by Pacific people. The real common wealth is the re-discovery and sharing of what has been forgotten, a precious book of ancient knowledge on what it means to be alive. Mila invites the readers to openness, to welcome “The uncommon wealth/of multi-world-views” (93), that is to say, to change perspective, to move from the dominant one (Western, capitalist, rationalist, binary) to other possibilities. This effort implies dismantling the sense of superiority of the West and undergoing an educative process founded on different subjects, values, priorities. This is a school that has taught Pacific Islanders to survive and thrive in that fragile network made of sea, sky and islands, the ecosystem of Oceania:

Almost completely silenced,
schooled out of us,
in lost languages
that were beaten
out of the mouths of children.

There. It is there,
there lie the answers,
evolving in cultures that hold a
wealth of knowledge,
intergenerational meditations
on what it means to be alive,
what it means to survive
in a certain set of conditions,
specific parameters of earth and sea and sky. [...]

It is the heart of who we are,
how we see the world to be
our richest offering.
Let us share. (93-4)



The message is therefore political and decolonial as well as environmental: an attack to the cultural superiority of the West, that imposes a notion of unconditioned progress, based on the unlimited faith in science, as the only possible paradigm.

The bias of Western scholarship against indigenous or non-Western knowledge has also been highlighted by Mcleod *et al.* in their study “Lessons from the Pacific Islands—Adapting to Climate Change by Supporting Social and Ecological Resilience”. The authors underline how Pacific islanders are leading climate action: “By necessity, Pacific islands have become hubs of innovation, where climate strategies are piloted and refined to inform adaptation efforts globally” (Mcleod *et al.* 1]. They can do so by “combining their own systems of knowledge with western science to implement locally relevant climate solutions” (2). Mcleod *et al.* also underline that “the lack of appreciation for Pacific climate leadership is exacerbated by biases in climate research that *prioritize western science and technological solutions over other systems of knowledge*” (2, my emphasis). The study shows how traditional experiential knowledge together with a close bond with the territory can help develop local strategies of resilience. In this specific case they include, for example: revitalizing traditional wells, implementing climate-smart agriculture, utilizing drought-tolerant species and the benefits of nature, such as using seaweed as compost to make soil more fertile or using palm fronds to shade plants during droughts, and planting vegetation to reduce flooding and erosion along coastlines. The communities in the study by McLeod *et al.* are not prejudicially against technological innovation and combine traditional practices with the new scientific advancements, such as the development of salt-tolerant and heat-tolerant crops (2). However, they also follow traditional practices if these prove useful, more sustainable and ecological. This study can be seen as a good example of local revalorization of ancient knowledge. The effort advocated by Karlo Mila, instead, seems to involve a larger set of principles, values and priorities that should be changed globally in order to save the earth.

UTOPIAN, DYSTOPIAN, APOCALYPTIC AND POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES

Other thematic clusters include utopia, dystopia or apocalyptic narratives; overtly postcolonial indictments; and mythical readings of the climate crisis. Craig Santos Perez rewrites Neruda from an ecological dystopic perspective. His “Love in a Time of Climate Change” is followed by the subtitle *Recycling Pablo Neruda’s ‘Sonnet XVII’*, in which the verb “recycling” is deliberately used instead of “rewriting” to stress his environmental concern. As in Metaphysical Poetry, analogies are established between things or ideas far apart. The poet’s love is measured according to what is important or valuable in an environmental emergency. He does not love his beloved as if she were a diamond or an oil field but as “one loves the most vulnerable/species: urgently, between the habitat and its loss” or “as one loves the last seed saved” (43). The urgency of their love is amplified by the threat to their survival. Craig’s elaborate metaphors recall the Metaphysical poets’ cleverness in inflecting concepts or ideas taken from scientific areas



to express emotions and erotic images, as in the following lines: "In the nitrogen-rich compost of our embrace,/so close that your emissions of carbon are mine" (43). The love expressed by the poet is passionate but desperate as in a war, an emergency or a tragedy. As if the end of the world had already begun.

The narrator of Aimee-Jane Anderson O'Connor's poem did live in a simulated state of emergency. In "My ex-boyfriend was a doomsday prepper", O'Connor describes her daily life with a "prepper": a person who actively gets ready for worst-case scenarios (like the end of the world or mass extinction) by practising survivalist techniques or preparing survival kits. The speaker is a little sceptical of his dystopic view, but she has to reconsider it: "It seemed history book and dystopia, until I watched David Attenborough narrating the icecaps melting [...] seals throwing themselves from cliffs, flamingos stumbling in salt water cuffs, anthrax stirring half-asleep in the permafrost" (34).

In Ash Davida Jane's "Carrying Capacity", the poet makes a simile between the earth and an airplane where passengers have inflated their life jackets too early and exceed the limits of space and weight. Now the plane is plunging and all the emergency exits are blocked for passengers. The poet, falling into a childish escapist dream, would like to take refuge in a pink world: "I don't ask for much ... I just want everything/in baby pink /... here is my baby pink landscape/look at the baby pink forests and lakes/the baby pink house..." (114).

Direct and postcolonial is Tusiata Avia's "Jacinda Ardern goes to the Pacific Forum in Tuvalu and my family colonises her house". The Pacific Islands Forum is the region's premier political and economic policy organisation and comprises Australia, New Zealand and other 16 members, from Oceania: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The Forum is meant to foster cooperation between governments, activate collaboration with international agencies and defend the interest of its members. As explained on its official website: "The Forum's Pacific Vision is for a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy, and productive lives" (Pacific Islands Forum). The colonization of the New Zealand premier's house by the noisy and numerous members of the narrator's extended family is a provocative commentary on the gap between the rhetoric of the Forum's vision and the reality. The poem reports that in Tuvalu, one of the Pacific archipelagos most affected by sea-level rise, "the school kids have to sit cross-legged in their classrooms up to their waists in seawater, but they still wear their uniform proudly" (78). In this satirical picture, the young New Zealand premier⁹ becomes the emblem of

⁹ Jacinda Ardern (leader of the Labour Party) became the world's youngest female head of government when she was elected prime minister in 2017 at 37 and gave birth to a baby girl while holding office. She was re-elected for a second term in 2020, when the Labour Party secured a historic landslide victory in the general election, with 49% of votes. She unexpectedly resigned on 19 January 2023 before the end of her second term, after having led the country through the Covid-19 pandemic and a series of



Western imperialism, colonialism, and the economic paradigm that has led to the present climate crisis. A reversal of perspective is given through the occupation of her beautiful house by a large indigenous community, who could also be a group of eco-refugees, and a parallel is made between her safe condition in Aotearoa and the emergency in which the Tuvaluan prime minister lives, “sitting on his own roof to stop from drowning” (78). In July 2022 Kiribati withdrew from the Forum because of its failure to address the concerns of Micronesian countries, a blow to the unity of the body. It has recently announced its possible return to it (Lyons, “Kiribati Withdraws” and “Kiribati to Return”).

INDIGENOUS AND MYTHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Finally, a cluster of poems laments the loss of the bond between humans and nature in mythological terms, evoking the deities of Māori or Polynesian cosmogony, the primeval parents of the human species, and deploring the disrespect towards the ancestors of their offspring. Miriama Gemmel’s “ngā pakitara e whā” is a dramatic monologue of a heartbroken person talking to mother earth (Papa) and trying to comfort her. Nature is personified and the poet frequently code-switches between English and Māori: “e papa/e noho puku ana/I don’t know what to do/can I hug you/can I elbow your knotty shoulders?” (64). The narrator proposes remedies as if she was trying to help an old and sick woman: “make a fist,/e papa/then relax your hand/perhaps you’ll cool as tsunami ebbs”(65). A doctor/patient attitude is also found in Jessie Puru’s “Papatūānuku Gets a Prescription”, where all the organs of mother earth (arteries, lungs, bosom, shoulders) are examined. The diagnosis is that the earth should provide by herself, as her children have abandoned her: “you must bring yourself back/by your own means/to your cinched and fertile self” (137). James Faiu’s poem is the translation into English of an indigenous song in the Solomon Islands language, which is also reported in the original version. It is a prayer to *asi* (the ocean) and includes an inventory of formulaic phrases without verbs. It illustrates the ocean’s immense wealth and connection with humans, the adversities that it is going through, the punishment that can occur if the ocean reacts and finally it concludes with an apology and a plea to the ocean to have compassion towards humans (82).

critical situations, including the terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch and the White Island volcanic eruption. She simply confessed that she “no longer had enough in the tank” to do the job (McClure; Graham-McLay). She also announced that she would not seek re-election. The new Prime Minister is now the opposition leader, Christopher Luxon (National Party), who won the general election in November 2023.



CONCLUSION

In the "Introduction", the four editors explain why they chose poetry as a medium to convey testimonies of environmental concern and protest: "Poetry has a long history of trying to answer the unanswerable questions and serving as the debating chamber for doubts" (Hamel *et al.* 3). *No Other Place to Stand* is a volume that confirms the vitality of poetry today and what its function is, that is, to illustrate, comment and penetrate crucial issues of the present but also to act as a form of activism by involving, engaging and denouncing. Poetry has entered the world of environmental global politics and is used in the Pacific area as an instrument to 'humanize' environmental issues, namely, to make them visible and tangible through the power of imagination.

As Martha Nussbaum explains, in her *Poetic Justice*:

The literary imagination is a part of public rationality [...]. In fact, I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own. (xvi)

Nussbaum is inspired by "a Kantianism modified so as to give the emotions a carefully demarcated cognitive role" (xvi). For Nussbaum, literary works promote identification and emotional reaction and are therefore necessary for the formation of conscious citizens. This is exactly the role played by poetry, a genre in which language and content are inflected by imagination into a whole aimed at raising emotions, spreading knowledge of relevant issues, prompting revelations, and stimulating constructive engagement. A mix that is found in a volume like *No Other Place to Stand*.

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