

Oral Goes Viral – Reversing the Print Revolution

Peter H. Marsden

Abstract

This paper attempts an evaluation of the phenomenally rapid growth over the past few decades of spoken-word poetry – a genre which is currently attracting more and more exponents across the globe, whose work is being disseminated with increasing speed to a worldwide audience. It is a genre both facilitated and shaped by the most modern of electronic media. After revisiting classic definitions of orality vs. literacy as media of communication, particularly in poetry, the paper goes on to illustrate the phenomenon via an examination of specific instances of a relatively recent revival of the oral tradition by Aotearoa New Zealand poets within the broad context of the Maori Renaissance. These authors, ranging from Hone Tuwhare via Muru Walters and Apirana Taylor to Robert Sullivan, might be said to have paved the way and set the pace for the meteoric post-millennium emergence of a substantial cohort of predominantly female poets from a Polynesian – and very often specifically Samoan – background, among them notably Sia Figiel, Tusiata Avia, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Courtney Sina Meredith. What these two groups have in common is their location on the margins of society and their articulation of protest against the associated status quo.

* * * * *

The last several years have seen an exponentially, indeed explosively, increasing global dissemination of spoken-word poetry in English – a genre which is being simultaneously facilitated and shaped by state-of-the-art electronic media. One case in point, which happens to lie within my own personal field of academic interest, is the relatively recent revival by Maori and Polynesian poets of their respective indigenous oral traditions. Comparable instances of this rapidly unfolding phenomenon can, however, easily be found in many other parts of the world too. Even the most cursory of glances at the list of scholarly contributions to the 2016 Essen workshop ‘Voices from the Margins’ is sufficient to confirm the huge geographical spread and cultural reach of the genre. Alongside Pacific exponents, this local microcosm alone comprises items from the UK and the US, Zimbabwe, East Africa, the Caribbean, Pakistan and West Bengal.

Etheridge Knight’s assertion that ‘there were poets long before there were printing presses’¹ may well encapsulate a truism, but like many truisms it is no less true for being obvious. An inmate of Indiana State Prison for the best part of a decade, Knight (1931–91), reportedly a superb practitioner of one of Black America’s many vigorously expressive oral genres: ‘toasting,’ achieved a considerably wider profile as the author of *Poems from Prison* (1968). Much of Knight’s prison poetry, according to Patricia Liggins Hill writing in *Black American Literature Forum*, ‘focuses on a modern kind of enslavement, imprisonment, and searches for

¹Etheridge Knight, ‘On the Oral Nature of Poetry,’ *The Black Scholar* 19, 4-5 (1988): 92.

and discovers ways in which a person can be free while incarcerated'². Even out of what must surely be the ultimate form of marginalization, poetry can emerge.

The gradual supplanting on a wide scale of the term *oral* by *spoken-word* – ‘a form or genre of poetry intended to be performed to an audience’³ – from the 1970s onwards might seem to be indicative of the sea-changes that have been taking place. The breathtaking virality of this phenomenon enhances and vastly broadens the scope of a performer’s empowerment and consequent emancipation, freeing her or him – at least apparently – of the restrictions of first having to find a third party who may or may not want to publish their work. Not for nothing is the modern medium for many such messages called *YouTube*: It’s *yours* – not ‘theirs’; it’s *your* platform from which to express your ‘I’ – a truly grass-roots democratic set-up. Giving voice to the marginal is a way of ‘channelling’ it. No longer forced to listen passively (and devoutly) to ‘Your Master’s Voice,’ you can achieve mastery through your *own* voice, with a considerable chance of thereby removing yourself from the margins to centre-stage. First it goes oral, then visual, and then viral – all thanks to YouTube.

Further support, leading to more empowerment, is available via powerpoetry.org.⁴ In full do-it-yourself internet mode, this website offers definitions and instructions on ‘how to do things with words’. Spoken-word poetry is a speech act. Perhaps more properly, a series or sequence of speech acts or, in Hymesian parlance, a speech event – ‘event’ both in this (technical, linguistic) sense and in the more general sense of an occasion that can be (stage-)managed. Significantly, the base illustration on the website is an image of a woman – wearing a headscarf. Topical stuff, this! Contentious stuff, too, highly political, politically charged. It’s all about (poetic) power to the people, power to the voice, voice/s to the people, especially to those who without the internet as their outlet would effectively remain – *silent* – on the margins. Now they can stand up and speak out, call attention to themselves, be *out-spoken*, in full accordance with one of powerpoetry.org’s mottos: ‘If you don’t learn to write your own life story, someone else will write it for you.’⁵ Increasingly, public performance is being privileged over conventional publishing, making the private public. And publishing is ceasing to be a status that can only be achieved through a (decidedly *for-profit*) commercial enterprise, aka ‘a publisher,’ making it that much more difficult for invidious distinctions to be casually and cavalierly made between ‘poets’ and ‘published poets’.

As Lioba Schreyer and Lena Mattheis put it in their Introduction to the present project (‘Listening to the Margins: An Introduction’): ‘A suitable form of protest, poetry constantly re-invents itself, bending and breaking the language and form, and drawing its readers into the conflict.’⁶ The last point hints sharply at the dimension of commitment and activism to which spoken-word poetry lends itself so well as a medium, a vehicle that involves the poet’s listeners as intrinsic and integral elements – an active, participating audience – in the live performance. By performing the poem, the poet *is already* publishing it – in the sense of making it known, presenting it to the outside world, a process which can dispense with the outside agency of a

² Patricia Liggins Hill, “‘The Violent Space’: the Function of the New Black Aesthetic in Etheridge Knight’s Prison Poetry,” *Black American Literature Forum* 14.3 (1980) 115f.

³ ‘Spoken word,’ *Oxford Dictionary Online*, 06 December 2106

https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/spoken_word: ‘earliest use found in Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), poet’.

⁴ The switch from upper to lower case might be seen as subtly flagging up the next step after PowerPoint.

⁵ ‘If you don’t learn to write your own life story, someone else will write it for you,’ no editor, place or date of publication. 06 December 2016 www.powerpoetry.org.

⁶ In this special feature: Mattheis, Lena and Schreyer, Lioba. ‘Listening to the Margins: An Introduction.’ 4.

publisher. One might even go so far as to say that the poem is publishing itself. This is not to deny that videoing a live performance which is then uploaded to YouTube may also involve forces and influences external to the poet and the text but inherent in the medium, such as decisions about camera angles, the way the performer uses the microphone, the addition of props, scenery, video clips and other instances of directorial intervention – any or all of which may affect and alter the character of the finished product. So far from being a one-to-one ‘translation’ or transposition of the text into another, different medium, the outcome is more than likely to have been *shaped by* the medium that facilitates its publishing in the first place.

What we are looking at is the fascinating phenomenon of a revolution (in the present case, the print one) being reversed. It’s ‘Goodbye Gutenberg!’ time – movable type was yesterday; now it’s the *world* that has moved on. In temporal terms, the oral has *always* preceded the written – whether in the linguistic development of the individual native *speaker* or over historical time in the development of speech communities. Then for centuries the written gradually came to take precedence over the oral in terms of social status, as an indicator of putative educatedness, and social status. It is a linguistic commonplace that all languages exist in an oral form – many, worldwide, have no written form. Written-ness is by no means an indispensable prerequisite for language survival. And in the last generation or so, electronically transmitted orality would seem to have been unstoppably *overtaking* written-ness as the medium of choice.

Orality vs. literacy

The late twentieth century saw a great deal of soul-searching among scholars as to whether the concept ‘oral literature’ might not perhaps be a misnomer, a contradiction in terms – the general idea being that *literature* is derived from Latin *litera* (pl. *literae*), meaning in the original sense letters written in some form or other and therefore an inappropriate concept in connection with *oral* transmission. To get round this supposed problem, the companion (morphologically equivalent and semantically ‘correct’) term *orature* was coined (by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu⁷) but it hardly seems to have caught on. In any case, perhaps one should try to free oneself of ideological semanticism and pedantic purism, not to mention etymological literalism. Why not, for instance, simply substitute *phoneme* for *letter* as the basic unit of the oral?

Significantly in the context of speech and the production thereof, one and the same word in Maori, namely *pukapuka*, can be used to mean either ‘book’ or ‘lungs’. Voice comes – is projected – from inside the whole body. Breath – essential for life (primarily) and speech (secondarily) – emanates from the lungs, having been pushed upwards by the diaphragm. Consider the Maori notion of *tihei mauriora* – literally ‘I sneeze, it is life’. The explanatory comments offered by editors Albert Wendt, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan on the title they chose for their second anthology of Polynesian poetry in English are very pertinent to this notion:

The term ‘mauri ola,’ or ‘mauri ora,’ is found in most Polynesian cultures. In combining the Māori ‘mauri’ and the word ‘ola,’ common in many Polynesian languages, the new pan-Polynesian title makes the anthology more inclusive of all our peoples. Mauri or maui is the location of the emotions, usually the centre of the person: the moa (Sāmoan), the nā’au (Hawaiian), the ngākau (Māori). Ora or ola is life, to be alive. Together, mauri ola is the life

⁷Pio Zirimu, ‘Wikipedia no editor, place or date of publication (last edited 20 October 2017). 02 January 2017 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pio_Zirimu. (Zirimu died in 1977.)

force that runs through all things, gives them mana and holds them alive and together. Language is at the heart of every culture: it is what binds, defines and expresses the mind, heart, spirit and body of that culture, and it also reflects cultural changes and new directions. *For us, poetry is the mauri ola of language.* Tihei mauri ora! Look, we are still alive, we are still here! Despite the radical changes we have suffered, and are still undergoing, we are vibrantly alive and well and continue to define, to determine and to create ourselves and our destinies. The poetry in this anthology expresses that loudly and proudly.⁸

Considering that the literal meaning of the Maori *nā'au* is 'intestines,' it might not be too far-fetched to see a parallel here to the English notion of 'gut feeling,' connoting, as both expressions do, the reliability and authenticity of the deepest-seated intuitions when these are body-based. In effect, Maori orators (whose 'sneeze' may remind us of a newborn child clearing his or her 'air-ways' or air passages to take the first breath of life) are announcing that their speech organs are ready to perform – perhaps comparable in a Western context to the clearing of the *throat* preparatory to speaking. Oral performers inhabit – and are inhabited by – their poetry; the poem lives and breathes and has its being within its author. Thus, an oral performance can project an authorial authenticity that is not producible via the mere parroting of a written text, whereas Western cultures, by contrast, have come to regard the written as definitive, as (legally) binding.

The existence – and persistence – of this profound and fundamental cultural divide is exemplified by the experience of the unnamed Maori elder in Patricia Grace's 1980 story 'Journey,' when he takes the eponymous rail trip from his native village to the capital city in a last-ditch fight for his family's land, which has been marked out for Government re-development. He is confronted in the ministry responsible (not, unfortunately, a responsible ministry) by an overbearing Pakeha bureaucrat with documentary 'proof' that the old man's ancestral land no longer belongs to him. The old man retorts: 'that's only a piece of paper and it can be changed, you can change it'⁹ – a remark that succinctly sums up the status of the written word in *his* culture as opposed to that of the government official. In the context of a Pakeha/Maori face-off, it cannot be ruled out that this simple affirmation might be alluding to another – much better-known but equally contentious – 'piece of paper', namely the Treaty of Waitangi, the controversy about the 'correct' interpretation of which continues to dominate the discourse of daily life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Not for nothing do many Maori scathingly refer to this historical – and historic – document as the '*Cheaty*' of Waitangi. The British colonizers *wrote down* what rights the Maori had – to be precise, what rights they thought the Maori should have – in their own native country. In more senses than one, the two ethnic groups continue to speak a different language, and to a not inconsiderable extent the difference is also that between a written language and a spoken tongue.

Crucially, the notion of literacy is itself equivocal. *Literate* can be quite neutral in the sense of 'being able to decipher letters' or 'having a command of the alphabet'.¹⁰ The word may also denote 'possessing/having knowledge of (many) (literary) texts – of literature (with or without a

⁸Albert Wendt, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan, 'Introduction,' *Mauri Ola: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English: Whetu Moana II*, ed. Albert Wendt, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010) 2, my emphasis.

⁹Patricia Grace, *Selected Stories* (Auckland etc: Penguin Books (NZ), 1991) 104.

¹⁰Cf. latter-day figurative usages such as 'computer-literate'.

capital L)'. But there is also a value-judgmental meaning with strong connotations of 'educated,' or 'cultured' – the corollary being an equation of *illiterate* or *non-lettered* with 'uneducated' or 'uncultured'. The notion of being *well-read* in the sense of well-informed implies that knowledge can only be derived from, or transmitted via, the printed word.

Various attempts have been made to catalogue the principal characteristics of orality – especially as compared and contrasted with literacy – but perhaps none so exhaustive and systematic as those of Walter J. Ong. Ong's foundational and seminal work, particularly as enshrined in his key volume *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) has been built on and taken further by many subsequent scholars, prominent among them Viv Edwards and Thomas J. Sienkewicz, for instance in their catchily subtitled 1990 volume *Oral Cultures Past and Present: Rappin' and Homer*. Ong pinpoints four major criteria, or bundles of features, for evaluating oral text (for which he favoured the terms: 'oral art forms' or 'verbal art forms' – neither of which, incidentally, could be said to be usefully free of ambiguity) by implicit or explicit contrast with written texts: evanescence, memorability, non-closure, and contextual features. In what follows, I will briefly revisit these criteria in turn, from the perspective of our current standpoint.

First, **evanescence**, memorably formulated by Ong as follows:

All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a spatial relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. *Sound exists only when it is going out of existence*. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permanence', by the time I get to the '-nence,' the 'perma-' is gone, and *has to be gone*.¹¹

What is increasingly and readily available to us now in forms and dimensions unimaginable at Ong's time of writing in the early 1980s¹² is the ability to *capture* that evanescence and *record* it using means substantively different from either script or writing, namely electronic impulses. The word 'permanence' as spoken at a particular point in time does indeed vanish – as do its constituent syllables – but nowadays it can, if recorded using technical equipment, be retrieved more or less at will. We can re-wind or fast-forward the recording so that what was or has been originally delivered orally can – thanks to modern, especially electronic and digital, technology (whether CD, video or DVD/Blu-ray) – be not only fixed and preserved but also very flexibly reviewed and handled. The possibilities opened up by these modern media are endless, the implications for creative potential enormous.¹³

Second, **memorability**¹⁴ – a category constituting the rationale for many prosodic and narratorial features of oral work. Self-evidently enough, the material (text, script) for an oral performance – in other words, for something that has to be learnt by heart or committed to memory – needs to be constituted in such a way that it is memor-able, memorizable, and to make use of certain rhetorical or prosodic features (mnemonic aids, or *aides-mémoire*) that might

¹¹Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, New York: Methuen, 1982) 31–32, my emphasis. See also Ong 91.

¹²For the record, Ong did produce a revised version of *Orality and Literacy* in 2002.

¹³As the subtitle of Ong's book implies, the very first technological medium in which orality was expressed was *print*. Since that was the norm in the Western world for so long and hence 'backgrounded,' there is sometimes a tendency for those familiar with print to forget that it too is only a medium.

¹⁴See Ong 26, 67.

appear repetitive, or over-formulaic, in a written text. Interestingly, the verb *to record* is derived via Old French from a Latin root: *recordari*, meaning ‘to repeat (or store) *in the heart* (*cor, cordis*)’ – the traditional metaphorical seat of the memory – something heard through the ears, in order to remember it. Hence the idiomatic sense of learning something *by heart*. By contrast, recording a message – whether on the page, on a tape or on a silicon chip – removes it from inside the body to an external location. But here too, technological developments are available nowadays which can reduce the burden on both heart and head. Think teleprompters.

Third, **non-closure**:¹⁵ This is a quality shared with much modern and postmodern literature in Western culture/s. The oral text, being the authorial product of a community rather than an individual, is – theoretically at least – capable of indefinite, infinite extension; indeed, it is almost by definition incomplete. The speaker develops patterns which in the manner of building-blocks with a fixed underlying (metrical) structure can be assembled *ad infinitum*, a prime example being the basic stanza structure employed by Selina Tusitala Marsh in her signature tour de force ‘Fast Talkin’ PI’: three lines, with three heavily accented beats in the first two and seven in the third – all insistently ending with the same (key) word: ‘PI,’ just to make absolutely sure the point hits home:

I’m a fast talkin’ PI
I’m a power walkin’ PI
I’m a demographic, hieroglyphic fact-sheetin’ PI¹⁶

Fourth, **contextual features**¹⁷ – by which are meant paralinguistic elements such as body language including gesture and facial expressions, but also in a more general, wider, sense: eye movements, body posture, use of space (proxemics) etc; prosodic features such as intonation, volume, pitch and pace; visual and musical support systems, choreographic elements – all of which may substantively complement the oral text proper. These (contextual, paralinguistic) features strike me as being the cluster of criteria *most* relevant to recent and current developments in what we might term ‘the new orality’ – in the form of spoken-word poetry.

A further (fifth) criterion that one could consider adding would centre on the relevance or irrelevance of (individual, authorial) **originality** – a concept which is probably to be seen historically, as a persistent legacy of the Romantic movement, with its apotheotic celebration of genius. The artist, the author, as ‘I’ – as unique, distinct/ive and unmistakable identity, the ultimate individualization. Against that, oral works often presuppose at least some degree of collective or group authorship. Historically, in Maori culture, according to Jane McRae: ‘Although the fame of certain composers lingered, compositions were not always attributed to individual authors because they were first and foremost vested in the public forum.’¹⁸ I think it is, however, fair to say that this feature of traditional oral performance has in many cases and in many ways morphed back into its opposite. A signal feature of contemporary spoken-word utterance and performance is the firm foregrounding of the individual performer telling *their* personal story, in and with their own personal voice – in what might perhaps at a pinch be seen

¹⁵See Ong 133.

¹⁶Selina Tusitala Marsh, *fast talking PI* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009) 58.

¹⁷See Ong 161.

¹⁸Jane McRae, ‘Maori Literature: A Survey,’ *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, ed. Terry Sturm (Auckland etc: Oxford University Press, 1991) 1.

as the modern extrovert form of the personal diary. Not for nothing does powerpoetry.org advertise itself as being, representing, and giving a voice or voices to ‘the largest mobile/online teen poetry community’ (my emphasis).

From Aotearoa New Zealand to Polynesia – and back

Turning now to some practical examples (drawn from my own ‘field’, the Pacific, but, as I have already ventured to suggest, probably representative of a worldwide trend), I will attempt to trace a possible development from traditional oral poetry to spoken-word performance, drawing on poems by Maori authors still relying to various extents on traditional forms (Hone Tuwhare, Muru Walters and Apirana Taylor) – with Robert Sullivan as a link to the self-conscious use of modern media in the service of making meta-comments on what it is like to be a Maori in today’s world. These authors were writing within the overarching context of the Maori Renaissance, which took place within the latter half of the twentieth century. Over the last few decades, as covered in this paper, this dynamic has culminated in the creative fulcrum and momentum moving first from Aotearoa New Zealand to the Pacific Islands (Samoa, in particular) but then subsequently back again, in the wake of the general population flow patterns whereby so many Pacific Islanders live in New Zealand but commute on a regular basis between that mainland and their respective home islands to visit family and friends. This movement, initially triggered by economic factors, has resulted in a good deal of cultural cross-fertilization, with the emergence of female performers such as Sia Figiel, Tusiata Avia, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Courtney Sina Meredith (all with Samoan roots) pushing the envelope further and further.

The first poem I am going to look at is by *Hone Tuwhare* (1922–2008, b. Kaikohe, of Ngāpuhi descent):

Papa-tu-a-Nuku (Earth Mother)

We are stroking, caressing the spine
of the land.

We are massaging the ricked
back of the land
with our sore but ever-loving feet:
hell, she loves it!

Squirming, the land wriggles
in delight.

We love her.¹⁹

This formally very simple poem takes more or less literally the profoundly intimate relationship between human beings and the land they live on (*tangata whenua*) – between nation and mother earth – which is central to the holistic Maori world-view. The issue is, of course, related to the ongoing Treaty discourse already touched upon above. It grew out of a very specific background, a knowledge of which it presupposes in the listener, namely, the Land March of 1975 – ‘The Awakening,’ as it was known at the time –, organized by Maori activists in open

¹⁹Hone Tuwhare, ‘Papa-tu-a-Nuku (Earth Mother),’ (1978), *Mihi: Collected Poems* (Auckland etc: Penguin Books, 1987) 24.

public protest against the way they had been consistently deprived of their most fundamental indigenous land rights, which they were now claiming back. This impressive event was a classic contemporary instance of a *hikoi* i.e. a protest march or parade traditionally involving a journey taking days or weeks. A large-scale hikoi was staged in 2004 at the height of the ‘foreshore and seabed controversy’ in opposition to Government plans to nationalize the New Zealand coastline – a problematic project which in an only *apparently* democratic gesture would have made the coastline accessible to all and sundry, thereby ‘relieving’ the Maori of their centuries-old exclusive guardianship of the liminal littoral.

Both marches symbolically wound their way from the northernmost tip of the North Island (Cape Reinga – itself a highly symbolic locus of Maori identity and continuous, unbroken connection with the ancestors back in Hawaiki) to the Parliament Buildings (popularly known as ‘The Beehive’) in the Capital, Wellington. Within the framework of a modern Western-style democracy, this protest effectively staged an *ur*-Maori way of physically, visibly, showing just how devotedly attached the marchers were to the personified land to which they ancestrally belong. In Maori culture, it is axiomatic that the people belong to the land; in Pakeha terms, the land belongs to (the) people. The stark contrast between these two world views could hardly be more graphically expressed than it is in Hone’s²⁰ pared-back, compact poem, drawing as it does on the traditional poetic imagery of Maori orality. Incidentally, though a Maori through and through, Hone never wrote in his native ancestral language (which he had spoken at home up to the age of around nine) but rather in English, of which he had a magisterial command in all its registers and nuances.

The author of the next item, **Muru Walters** (*1935: Te Aupouri, Te Rarawa), is also a Maori and also an activist. Unlike Hone, however, he composed his poem not only in traditional Maori *style*, using a number of the rhetorical devices enshrined in the oral Maori tradition, but actually *in Maori* (his first language) before producing his own English translation of the text. In several other ways too his poem is a very different kettle of fish – starting with the most obvious and considerable external difference, namely that of length (more than 40 lines to Hone’s slim seven).

Muru’s poem was inspired by a major *cause célèbre* of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period when specific ecological, ecopolitical issues began to play an important part in Aotearoa New Zealand and to be addressed in various *ecopoetic* ways, felicitously melding modern European-style ecopolitics and traditional Maori stewardship of the environment. One of the first of many such instances was the proposed construction of an aluminium smelter at Aramoana (Maori for ‘the seagate’) Beach, a site of stunning natural beauty at the mouth of Otago Harbour near Dunedin, South Island. This location also happens to be very close to the habitat of an extremely rare royal albatross colony at Taiaroa Head, the only mainland breeding colony in the world for the species, which was at risk of becoming an endangered and threatened species as a direct consequence of environmental pollution. Quite apart from the threat posed by the wider, indeed global, issue of nuclear and non-nuclear waste in the Pacific there was reason enough to believe that the building of the plant might well result in a mass migration of these rare birds.

At least four New Zealand poets (three Pakeha authors: Cilla McQueen, Steve Thomas and Ian Wedde; and the one Maori whose poem we are looking at now) wrote poems dealing with the controversial subject of the Aramoana smelter, indeed expressly and openly directed against

²⁰I am taking the liberty of adopting the common practice in Aotearoa New Zealand of referring to authors by their first names.

it, using poetry as a medium for taking sides in the political debate. The poems and their respective approaches are individually quite different. Muru's take on the issue comes across as a pastiche of a traditional Maori form, the haka explicitly referred to in the title, a form which has itself gone viral now that international rugby matches are globally televised (think Samoa vs. Aotearoa New Zealand) and which is a pre-eminent exemplar of a performance drawing on just about every paralinguistic device imaginable with the object of putting the fear of God into one's enemies. Adopting and adapting this ancient ancestral tribal weapon allows the author to pull out all the stops in his onslaught on the foreign invaders who are polluting the land and threatening its natural order. A show of almost martial force. (It *is* a haka, after all...)

From the outset, the perspective of the poem is that of the putative future victim of the proposed construction – an albatross as protagonist, clearly identified as a rightful denizen of the region (Pukekura being the name of the albatross colony), just as much a natural part of the environment and ecology as a cloud in the sky and at the same time associated with the ancestral home of the Maori, namely Hawaiki. The literal bird's-eye view enables the listener to perceive in its entirety the endangered site of outstanding natural beauty down there on the ground:

Haka: he huruhuru toroa / Haka: the feathered albatross²¹

Like a cloud the feathered albatross
 alights on the summit of Pukekura
Aue! You came from the great Hawaiki
 the lofty Hawaiki, the distant Hawaiki
Aue! From a world of orphans, from a world deserted
 you have returned to embrace
 your homeland.
To your confiscated homeland
Remaining in shame! Remaining bare! (ll. 1–9)

No words are minced, no prisoners taken, in this full-frontal attack:

Witnessing great foreigners!
Lofty foreigners! Distant foreigners!
Aue! Polluting
 our land (ll. 21–23)

A notable feature of the poem is the frequent reinforcing repetition (a time-honoured rhetorical device in the Maori oral tradition) – sometimes of individual words:

Look! Look! Look!
Look! Look! (ll. 24–25)

flying here
flying here (ll. 27–28)

²¹Muru Walters, 'Haka: he huruhuru toroa / Haka: the feathered albatross,' (1982), *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* ed. Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen (Auckland etc: Penguin Books (NZ), 1985) 394–96.

By Koputai!
By Koputai! (ll. 33–34)²²

– sometimes of structures (syntactic ‘chiming’):

(...) From a world of orphans, from a world deserted (l.5)
Remaining in shame! Remaining bare! (l.9)
Great albatross! Lofty albatross!
Flying albatross! Distant albatross! (ll. 12–13)

A time of intense darkness!
A time of intense sadness! (ll.15–16)

(...) Great darkness! Deep darkness! (l.19)

The next poem – by **Apirana Taylor** (*1955), who is of Pakeha and Maori (Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, Ngāti Porou, Taranaki) descent – does not revolve around (principally human) threats to the natural environment but rather articulates threats *to* the marginalized, deracinated and detribalized indigenous individual *posed by* the built and social environment:

Sad joke on a marae

Tihei Mauriora I called
Kupe Paikea Te Kooti
Rewi and Te Rauparaha
I saw them
grim death and wooden ghosts
carved on the meeting house wall

In the only Maori I knew
I called
Tihei Mauriora
Above me the tekoteko raged
He ripped his tongue from his mouth
and threw it at my feet

Then I spoke
My name is Tu the freezing worker
Ngati D.B. is my tribe
The pub is my marae
My fist is my taiaha
Jail is my home

²²Koputai is the original Maori name (literally =‘the stomach of the tide’) of the place dubbed Port Chalmers by the British colonizers (and, before that, of the beach off Aramoana, at the comparatively narrow entrance to Otago Harbour).

Tihei Mauriora I cried
They understood
the tekoteko and the ghosts
though I said nothing but
Tihei Mauriora
for that's all I knew²³

As in the same author's 'Taiaha haka poem'²⁴, which searingly evokes the sad spectacle of an erstwhile Maori warrior stripped of his *mana* – the dignity and self-esteem traditionally guaranteed by his membership of the tribe – , the speaker here too is only just managing to choke back his frustration and impotent rage. What might still have been pent-up in the case of Muru Walters' haka, is scarcely containable in this poem. I was once privileged to hear and see it performed by the author in person²⁵ – and what an impressively powerful, toweringly emotional performance it was: full of pity and fear, sound and fury – and signifying *everything*.

Paul Millar remarks on 'the poignant intensity of Tu – a casualty of colonialism and Maori urban drift – reciting his whakapapa' and then goes on to quote Peter Simpson's judgment that Apirana's 'raw, powerful and angry poems (present) a Maori voice utterly different from the lyricism and gentle ironies of Hone Tuwhare'.²⁶ The *whakapapa* (the genealogy of one's ancestors) as performed on the *marae* (the ancestral, tribal meeting-ground of the community) is the age-old vehicle of the oral tradition (especially in the word's etymological sense of a 'handing on') for establishing one's credentials, one's indivisible identity as the link between past and present. Linking up with the continuous present of the Maori consciousness by enunciating the names of one's ancestors and antecedents, those that have gone before, it is the existential oral act par excellence in the Maori cultural repertoire.

In this poem, the speaker's link to that continuity has been broken – it is ruptured. The ancestral language of the old incantations has become an empty shell, deprived of its magic and the associated power, reduced to the stark staccato of 'X, I said' (ll.1, 8, 13, 19, 22). The poem's speaker (who really *is* a speaker in the full sense of the word) is going through the linguistic motions, repeating phrases emptied of their original meaning. They are hollow and without resonance; withered, stunted and atrophied. Images of impotence prevail. The *langue* remains, the speaker's *parole* is powerless. Not only is the warrior no longer required to wage war – the speaker can hardly speak, his linguistic competence having been reduced to a few syllables: 'the only Maori I knew' (l.7). Mind you, the only Maori he knows just happens to be a highly significant piece of Maori – 'meta-Maori', so to speak – namely the formula 'Tihei Mauriora' already discussed above in the quotation from *Mauri Ola*,²⁷ a speech act by which permission to speak is sought.

²³Apirana Taylor, 'Sad joke on a marae,' (1972), *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* eds. Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen (Auckland etc: Penguin Books (NZ), 1985) 521–22.

²⁴Apirana Taylor, 'Taiaha haka poem' (1979), *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* eds. Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen (Auckland etc: Penguin Books (NZ), 1985) 521.

²⁵LIFESPAN New Zealand Writers' Week, Dunedin, 24 March 1993. <http://www.worldcat.org/title/lifespan-new-zealand-writers-week-dunedin-march-20-26-1993/oclc/156766177>.

²⁶Paul Millar ('PM'), 'Taylor, Apirana' *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* eds. Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (Melbourne etc: Oxford University Press, 1998) 527. The article by Peter Simpson quoted by Millar appeared in the Evening Post, 14 February 1997.

²⁷At footnote 8, above.

What Apirana is voicing here is the *de profundis clamavi* (Psalm 130) of the modern urban, deracinated Maori who, having lost touch with his roots, is left with only a vestigial competence in his supposedly native language. The proud warrior has been reduced to a cypher, a cog in the wheel of the white man's economic system, working in a soul- and body-destroying job, performing meaningless repetitive work, symbolically enough, on a conveyor belt in the meat factory (shades of Marxist alienation or of Chaplin's *Modern Times* – minus the humour). The only affiliation remaining is his membership of the bogus modern tribe (*Ngati*) of beer-drinkers.²⁸ It is a sadly well-known fact that alcohol was 'introduced' to the country by the colonizing Pakeha, as one of the fruits of European 'civilization'. The sole reaction to Tu's plight is that the symbolic carved ancestral warrior on the meeting-house wall symbolically enough deprives himself of language by ripping out his *tongue*.

The next poem – by yet another, again quite different, Maori author, **Robert Sullivan** (*1967) – also deals with culture clash, the suppression of cultural ties, and the plight of the (partially) bilingual, bicultural individual attempting a balancing act between his two sets of roots. But the tone is markedly different, less strident, calmer, musing. No anger here, no righteous indignation, no helpless desperate rage – more a calm, reasonable, patient voice and presence. Of Ngāpuhi and Galway Irish descent, Robert Sullivan grew up in Mangere, South Auckland. He was for quite some time an academic librarian in charge of rare books – a professional guardian of that Pakeha icon, the printed page – who in his own 'writings' nevertheless strives to uphold the (albeit modified) oral tradition while also modifying it himself. Significantly, considering that his country is officially bicultural, Robert Sullivan describes himself as '*multicultural*':

Te Hokinga Mai

Tena ra koutou. We're hiring
a video camera to film our powhiri

at the marae on Monday. I'm busy practising
waiata, the hardest is 'tangi a te ruru . . . '

I've been practising hard to remember not only
to greet the meeting house, the marae and my iwi,

but to point to each as I speak, and to sound
as natural as possible. Nan tells me not

to drag out words, that I'm over-pronounced.
It's koh-rua, not caw-rua, for instance.²⁹

I saw a video entitled *How d'ya do Mr Governor*
with a lot of different people saying a lot

²⁸DB is one of New Zealand's most popular brands of beer.

²⁹A language-learner's typical hypercorrection, perhaps? (The mispronounced phrase means: 'You two./The two of you.').

of different things about the Treaty. One
of the panel said the Maori way of looking

at the world was that we are who we are because
of our past, and that we take that into the future.³⁰

Here the two cultures and languages are not tearing the individual apart, they come across more as a mutually enriching duality, twin strands of identity that are being carefully and caringly knitted together (again), capable of culturally and linguistically enriching the individual and making her/him whole (again). The tone is conciliatory, constructive rather than destructive: upbeat, not downcast. Nevertheless, the tension between the two forces is expressed in (linguistic) fragmentation; indeed, language itself is clearly a recurring, dominant, key *theme* in many of these poems. Here we see and hear a man re-learning his native language, going back to his cultural and linguistic roots, as a vital and indispensable means of regaining his inner balance. This has the flavour of a coming-out, or a spiritual re-birth. At the same time, the speaker is a thoroughly ‘modern’ Maori, a plugged-in, clued-up denizen of the electronically technologized world, who can observe in an arrestingly matter-of-fact way that: ‘We’re hiring a video camera to film / our powhiri at the marae on Monday.’ (ll.1–2) Robert’s style is demotic, casual-conversational – by contrast with, say, the lyricality of Hone, or the rhetoric of Muru, let alone the polemics of Apirana.

Those familiar with Maori cultural practices will need no reminder that the culture possesses a rich repertoire of ritual ceremonies of welcoming and encounter, each with its own distinct function, which includes not only the *powhiri* but also the *hokinga* of the poem’s title and the *Tena ra koutou* of the first line along with such concepts as *kia ora*, *haere mai* and *mihi*. It was all in place aeons before a neo-European phenomenon called *Willkommenskultur* hit the world’s headlines. ‘Go to New Zealand to be greeted!’ – to slightly modify Billy Crystal’s memorable Oscar message. In fact, you don’t even have to be a *person* in order to be greeted: ‘remember ... / to greet the meeting house’ (ll.5–6). After all, according to Maori tradition, the tree you want to cut down in order to build a canoe or waka has at least to be asked for permission first.

The poem is not just about learning to *speak* – it is also about learning to use new ways of making that speech widely available, retrieveable. Authentic indigenous practices, ceremonies and rituals (the living essence of *maoritanga*) that have been traditionally transmitted orally can be accurately and authentically *recorded for posterity* using state-of-the-art electronic equipment rather than the technology of the print era – a living exemplification of the axiomatic Maori world view enunciated in the concluding couplet of the poem (‘we are who we are because / of our past, and ... we take that into the future’ – ll.15–16). The wheel has come almost full circle. Ironically enough, the new post-print tools primarily developed by the Pakeha ascendancy can, by capturing those all-important paralinguistic dimensions of actual delivery (gesture, facial expression, body language), facilitate a superior preservation of indigenous folkways. In this poem, Robert Sullivan is not so much performing *Maoritanga* as *writing about* performance-in-context, making a meta-statement about how such performances may be recorded and disseminated. His lines seem almost prophetic, heralding the promise of a new era in which the spread of orality is to become an everyday phenomenon. Pioneering words! It’s no surprise to

³⁰Robert Sullivan, ‘Te Hokinga Mai,’ *Piki Ake! Poems 1990–92* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993) 34. Ellipsis (including spacing) in original. The book’s title is Maori for ‘climb!’.

find him in later work – e.g. *STAR WAKA* (1999) – dropping casual references to emailing, the internet and IT terminology.

Robert's conceit marks a breakthrough, a paradigm change, which has in the meantime led to an increasingly liberating, enabling, facilitating, empowering, democratizing force of the internet in, and for, the Maori community. Granted, many still don't have access to it, but millions more do than only a few decades ago, say. If a powhiri can be videoed (without violating *tapu*), then why not a poem? And if it is filmed now, it will no longer be done as it would have been done twenty-odd years ago, with a hand-held camera containing a video cassette to be taken home and inserted in a VCR (the most recent – *used-to-be* state-of-the-art – gizmo to hit the obsolescence scene). No, you will just point your smartphone at the proceedings and then instantly share the product with the (rest of the) world. The Third Industrial Revolution³¹ (the *digital* one) is, among many other things, making individual performance in all its facets and three-dimensionality universally recordable and infinitely re-play-able. Oral works of art too have long since attained the age of their full technological (audiovisual, contextual-situational) reproducibility, to invoke Walter Benjamin. What a productive cross-fertilization between the old and the new! All dimensions of the authentic original event (acoustic, visual, behavioural-paralinguistic) performed by the author can be transmitted faithfully and instantaneously in ultra-naturalistic form (what you get is what you would have seen had you been there) to a (potentially) global audience in the global village sitting in front of the global computer screen in the comfort and privacy of their own abode. Authors can thus almost literally take their work into the audience's home (the stated aim of many a TV programme back in the 1950s and -60s), thereby enabling virtual but nevertheless personal, individual interaction of a hitherto unprecedented intensity.

Yes, indeed – the Gutenberg Galaxy is inexorably heading off into the black holes of outer space. Language can be transmitted (by the sender) without the need for it to be consciously and actively decoded by the receiver. The actual process of mediatization has become so effective and efficient and operates with such technological perfection below the surface of our consciousness that we scarcely notice that most, if not all, of the encoding is now done by the programmers and algorithmists – invisibly to the end-user, who does not need to, used to *have to*, but these days rarely ever *has*, a command of the code. They do not even have to learn a new alphabet. The message is no longer passed through the filter of abstract symbols, marks on the page etc. User-friendly – for both performer and audience. Using, in the spirit of the times, the means of the times, i.e. electronic-digital. Moving with the times, going with the flow – going viral!

All of which lends a whole new dimension to the concept of the digital native. In fact, one might well be tempted to go one further and decide to call these cutting-edge wordsmiths 'digital indigenes'³². It strikes me as a particularly felicitous completion of the full circuit of the wheel that while the Australian Aborigines have been using message sticks for millennia, we Westerners can now, after a mere fifty thousand years have elapsed, put our messages on a stick too. If that's not progress...

Moreover, orality lends itself to the addressing of topics of crucial interest to indigenous people/s – e.g. eco-issues. (cf. powerpoetry.org, above). A new – almost universally available

³¹'The Third Industrial Revolution (book),' *Wikipedia* no editor, place or date of publication (last edited 20 April 2017). 02 January 2017 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Third_Industrial_Revolution_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Third_Industrial_Revolution_(book)).

³²A Maori consultancy had a similar idea as early as 2001. See: 'Nau Mai, Haere Mai: Digital Indigenous,' no editor, place or date of publication, 2 January 2017 <http://www.digitalindigenous.com>.

and accessible – vehicle of empowerment for the oppressed and marginalized, whether indigenous or not: (a) because they are very often most directly affected by outside projects invading their ancestral space or territory, and (b) because this medium is the traditional vehicle for transmitting the voice of a community, particularly when it is threatened, oppressed, suppressed – or marginalized. Voices from the margins indeed!

Talking about margins, it's now high time to turn the spotlight on the growing role that women are playing in this new development. After tentative beginnings and first stirrings, they are actually spearheading it. They have really come to the fore and into their own under the unofficial banner of (The) Niu Wave and Pasifika Poetry. This is where women have in recent years started to dominate the performance scene, hitting the spoken-word platforms and forums big-time, very often doing so from a feminist point of view with a strong gender agenda, writing typically with a 'post'-colonial or anti-colonial focus, for instance about the way colonized women were treated by colonizers (doubly colonized, in effect), the introduction of STDs and other boons of Western 'civilization'. Given this scenario, it comes as no surprise to discover a poem by Selina Tusitala Marsh entitled '*Realpolitik*'.³³

With conspicuous frequency, these women writers are Oceanian/Polynesian/Pacific Islanders ('PI's) – and, especially often, specifically Samoan – in origin. Samoan literature is rapidly becoming more than merely a one-man show, although there are very many Samoans – male and female – writing today who will only too readily declare their debt to Albert Wendt's singular pathbreaking role in putting their country of origin on the map. The increasing Samoan dominance in this area may well be reflecting a wider demographic pattern. For quite some time Auckland has enjoyed the statistical distinction of being the biggest Polynesian city ('in the world,' to add the Guinness-Book-of-Records dimension) in the sense that there are more people with a Polynesian background living in Auckland than in Polynesia itself. It would seem that Samoans not only constitute the single largest Polynesian group in New Zealand – there are almost as many Samoans living there as the entire current population of Samoa itself (200,000) – but that Samoans are also 'disproportionately' represented in the world of spoken-word utterance.³⁴

In her '**Songs of the fat brown woman**'³⁵ **Sia Figiel** (*1967, b. Apia), explicitly aligns herself with a transoceanic sisterhood, saluting another woman writer from a different, geographically very distant culture with whom she declares her solidarity in the dedication of this sequence of poems: '*for sista grace (nichols) and the fat **black** woman*' (my emphasis). Grace Nichols (*1950, b. Georgetown. Guyana; UK 1977–), who after her debut volume: *I is a Long-Memoried Woman* (1983) had gone on to create *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984). Here we have a typical example of an emerging author already forming and forging her *own* frames of reference *within* – or *across* – the margins, drawing strength and self-confidence from the knowledge that (Pacific) Islanders are not necessarily isolated.

Tusiata Avia (*1966, b. Christchurch), of Samoan and Palagi descent, caused quite a furore touring with her solo show *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt* (2002) and then with the more

³³Marsh 43.

³⁴In their first anthology of Polynesian poems in English – *Whetu Moana* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003) – the editors Albert Wendt, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan feature work by 72 poets from seven countries of origin. Almost a third of these are from Samoa. – the largest single group after the Maori contingent.

³⁵Sia Figiel, 'Songs of the Fat Brown Woman,' *Whetu Moana Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* ed. Wendt, Albert, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003) 60–63.

conventional publication of a volume of poetry with the same title two years later.³⁶ No compliant dusky maiden, she. On the contrary, a robustly independent modern young woman, confident in her female sensuality and sexuality – a phenomenon most effectively underlined by her live performance of the piece. Neither poem nor performance would appear designed to make an audience relax back into their seats – particularly a male audience, should they be bold and brave enough to take up the challenge of attendance. The performer’s provocative in-your-face stance constitutes an articulate denial of all the Western/European/colonizing heterosexual male stereotypes of Samoan women and what they are – or are not – allowed to do or say. This is how the title poem of the collection begins:

I want to tattoo my legs.
Not blue or green
but black. (ll.1–3)

It goes on like this:

I want my legs as sharp as dogs’ teeth
wild dogs
wild Samoan dogs
the mangy kind that bite strangers. (ll.1–19)

And this is how it ends:

I want to frighten my lovers
let them sit across from me
and whistle through their teeth. (ll.30–32)³⁷

Selina Tusitala Marsh (*1971, b. Auckland) is of Samoan, Tuvuluan, English, Scottish and French descent. Her volume *fast talking PI* (2009) includes the long title poem from which I have already quoted. It consists of 44 three-line stanzas (plus one stanza of four lines and two of five, as well as a concluding 33-liner), marked by rap-ish repetition – of words and structures. The fast talking this poem performs with such panache is a fireworks of verbal facility – a confident, punchy, up-front telling of it like it is. Satirically-sarcastically-sassily, the speaker reels off a seemingly never-ending catalogue of Polynesian self-definitions – in brilliant defiance of the usual simplistic, reductive, formulaically othering generalizations of the ‘All Samoans are lazy, incompetent overstayers’³⁸ type which are sadly all too common in the context of the uneasy New Zealand–Polynesian symbiosis:³⁹

³⁶Tusiata Avia, *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004).

³⁷Avia 65–66.

³⁸A derogatory term in New Zealand for illegal immigrants. Tusiata Avia has a power-packing pair of poems on the subject: ‘Ova-sta-ya: Part 1; Ova-sta-ya: Part 2: In the nius today,’ *Landfall* 211 (Autumn 2006): 7–8.

³⁹Cf. Christine Robertson, ‘Growing up Samoan in New Zealand and the racist microaggressions I’ve faced along the way,’ *Samoan Observer* 25 October 2016, 12–13. Cf. on the other hand, a socio-psychological study by a large international research team: Chris G. Sibley, Kate Stewart et al., ‘Ethnic Group Stereotypes in New Zealand,’ *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 40. 2 (2011) 25–36.

I'm a fast talkin' PI
I'm a power walkin' PI
I'm a demographic, hieroglyphic fact-sheetin' PI

I'm a theorizing PI
I'm a strategizing PI
I'm a published in a peer review journal PI

I'm a slot machine PI
I'm a lotto queen PI
I'm a tote-ticket church bingo TAB PI

I'm a vegan PI
a rainbow warrior PI
I'm a protest sign against the rising waters PI

I'm a criminal PI
behind the bar graphs PI
I'm a gun smokin' patching totin' king cobra PI

I'm a fale PI
I'm a marae PI
I'm a living breathing dwelling of my ancestors PI

I'm a lazy PI
I'm a p-crazy PI
I'm a hard drinkin' hard speakin' where my eggs? PI

(etc etc etc)⁴⁰

The target strikes back, as it were. Fed up with being defined by others, with being at the receiving end of the marginalization-reinforcing 'us–them' stereotypes, the speaker proactively takes the floor and seizes the right to speak for herself, in the first person – of whom there are many. Inventively ringing the lexical changes while the syntax retains the same subject-copula-complement structure, she (or *they* – the 'I' might just as well stand for a different first person in every line) kaleidoscopically conjugate(s) the entire spectrum that being a member of any group can represent *regardless* of that group's ethnicity – thereby multiply re-defining what it is to be a PI: You name it, she *is* it. – Well, actually *she* names it! The speaker is empowering herself with the spoken word. Unsurprisingly, it turns out that a PI can at the same time be anything and many things: scholarly and/or down-to-earth, political and/or personal, traditionalist and/or trendy, serious and/or fun-loving, refined and/or vulgar, lazy and/or hard-working. In other words, a PI can be just as individual and complex as a member of any other ethnic group; PIs collectively can be as different and life-spicingly various as any other group of human beings.

⁴⁰Marsh 58.

In this Whitmanesque song of *herself*, Selina celebrates the co-existence within any human being of the unique and the universal. She convincingly and persuasively demonstrates that, like anybody else, a PI can ‘contain (marginalized) multitudes,’ of whom she as poet is the ‘tongue’ – to whom she, as ventriloquist, lends her powerful creative voice. Selina here unfolds a veritable panoply, she spouts forth a cornucopia of *counter*-stereotypes with which she bombards those who usually throw the verbal projectiles and brickbats. To quote Morecambe and Wise, there’s no answer to that.

Last but by no means least in this formidable new wave of feisty female performance poets we have **Courtney Sina Meredith** (*1986), born in New Zealand of Samoan, Mangaian⁴¹ and Irish descent. As a reaction against the ethnic descriptor ‘*Afakasi*’⁴² (=‘half-caste’), commonly used in Samoa but regarded by many as a racial slur, she defines herself as an ‘urbanesian’ (urban Polynesian). Courtney characterizes her writing as an ‘ongoing discussion of contemporary urban life with an underlying Pacific politique’.⁴³ Her first book of poetry, ***Brown Girls in Red Lipstick*** (2012), launched at the Frankfurt Book Fair, includes a poem entitled ‘Don’t trust a Samoan Girl,’ in which the speaker states: ‘The girls all lie, they lie like me,’ thereby invoking that age-old paradox traditionally connected with another island, in another hemisphere.

This vibrant new author has received a glowing accolade from Robert Sullivan, who is quoted on her website characterizing her as:

a leader of the new generation of writers and performance artists gracing our poetry ... Through her absorption of Berlin’s high and low literary culture, her roots in the Auckland Samoan diaspora, and her familiarity with world Polynesian writing, she brings together an edgy singer’s strength, wry insights, sensual material, beautiful shards, blood and breath, monsoons, and glistening water.⁴⁴

Courtney has performed before the German President and the British House of Lords. Selina, in her capacity as Commonwealth Poet for the year 2016 (already a signal distinction), has performed before Queen and Parliament on Commonwealth Day.⁴⁵ These two authors have thereby inaugurated a long literary march through the institutions. One can only hope that such milestones amount to more than mere political symbolism and that they reflect true recognition of the power of Polynesian spoken-word poetry by the powers-that-be (and that still *continue* to be), that this boldly *not* going in awe of authority or establishment, this self-confidence in the presence of the high and mighty, is not being killed softly with kindness, that these poets are not being instrumentalised, or even misused, as court performers.

⁴¹Mangaia is the most southerly of the Cook Islands and the second largest, after Rarotonga.

⁴²In her poem ‘afa kasi’ – *Whetu Moana* (2003) 133 – Selina Tusitala Marsh deconstructs the notion to great effect.

⁴³‘Courtney Sina Meredith’ *Courtney Sina Meredith* no editor, place or date of publication. 12 December 2016 <https://courtnymeredith.com>.

⁴⁴‘Courtney Sina Meredith’ <https://courtnymeredith.com>. Ellipsis in the original.

⁴⁵‘NZ poet Selina Tusitala Marsh visits (and sasses) the Queen: ‘Fast Talking PI Visits the Queen by Selina Tusitala Marsh’ (Westminster Abbey, London, 14 March 2016),’ *Booknotes Unbound*. New Zealand Book Council, 08 June 2016. 03 January 2017 <http://booknotes-unbound.org.nz/selina-tusitala-marsh-visits-the-queen>. See also ‘A little lippy: Author, poet and playwright Courtney Sina Meredith (27 November),’ *Noted* Nicola Shephard, 17 November 2015 no place of publication. 03 January 2017 <http://www.noted.co.nz/archive/listener-nz-2015/a-little-lippy-author-poet-and-playwright-courtney-sina-meredith>.

To close on the upbeat: We're talking about authors who have made it from the margins to the centres, if not into the actual corridors, of power. They possess not only self-confidence but also considerable self-empowering 'oral cred'. Thanks to the immense immediate impact made by modern digital-electronic media, they have been able to make their voices heard from the margins. It is gratifying and uplifting to see and to hear that poetry is playing its rightful part in that ongoing process.

Born in the UK, Peter H. Marsden read Modern Languages, with a special emphasis on German language and literature, at the Universities of Oxford, London and Manchester. Relocating to Germany, he spent most of his working life as a lecturer in the English Department at Aachen University of Technology – a post from which he retired in 2007. His research interests encompass linguistics (varieties of English, bilingualism, translation studies) as well as literature, with a particular focus on Australian, New Zealand and Irish poetry. He has published on the oral tradition in Aboriginal and Maori writing as well as on individual authors including Peter Bland, Peter Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Robert Sullivan and Hone Tuwhare. A long-term project on literary relations between Germany and New Zealand continues to be ongoing and open-ended.

Works Cited

Primary Texts

- Avia, Tusiata. *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004. Print.
- . 'Ova-sta-ya: Part 1; Ova-sta-ya: Part 2: In the nius today,' *Landfall* 211 (Autumn 2006):7–8. Print.
- Figiel, Sia. 'Songs of the Fat Brown Woman,' *Whetu Moana* eds. Albert Wendt *et al.* (see below under Wendt), 2003, 60–63. Print.
- Grace, Patricia. 'Journey,' *Selected Stories*. Auckland etc: Penguin Books (NZ), 1991. Print.
- Marsh, Selina Tusitala. *fast talking PI*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009. Print.
- Meredith, Courtney Sina. *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick*. Auckland: Beatnik Publishing, 2012. Print.
- Nichols, Grace. *I is a Long-Memored Woman*. London: Karnak House, 1983. Print.
- . *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. London: Virago Press, 1984. Print.
- Sullivan, Robert. *Piki Ake! Poems 1990–92*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993. Print.
- Tuwhare, Hone. *Mihi: Collected Poems*. Auckland etc: Penguin Books, 1987. Print.
- Wedde, Ian and Harvey McQueen, eds. *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. Auckland: Penguin Books (NZ), 1985. Print.
- Wendt, Albert, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan, eds. *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003. Print.
- . *Mauri Ola: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English: Whetu Moana II*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010. Print.

Walters, Muru. 'Haka: he huruhuru toroa / Haka: the feathered albatross.' (1982) *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*. Ed. Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen. Auckland etc.: Penguin Books (NZ), 1985. 394–96. Print.

Secondary Texts

'Courtney Sina Meredith.' *Courtney Sina Meredith*. N. p. N. d. Web. 12 December 2016. <<https://courtneymeredith.com>>.

Digital indigenous. Digital Indigenous Maori Consultancy Services. 2016. Web. 02 January 2017. <<http://www.digitalindigenous.com>>.

Edwards, Viv and Thomas J. Sienkewicz. *Oral Cultures Past and Present: Rappin' and Homer*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. Print.

'If you don't learn to write your own life story, someone else will write it for you,' *Power Poetry*. No editor, place or date of publication. Web. 06 December 2016 <<http://www.powerpoetry.org/>>.

Hill, Patricia Liggins. "'The Violent Space": the Function of the New Black Aesthetic in Etheridge Knight's Prison Poetry.' *Black American Literature Forum* 14.3 (1980): 115–121. Print.

Knight, Etheridge. 'On the Oral Nature of Poetry.' *The Black Scholar* 19. 4-5 (1988) 92–96. Print.

Lifespan New Zealand Writers' Week. Dunedin. March 20-26, 1993. OCLC WorldCat, n.d. Web. 03 Jan 2017. <<http://www.worldcat.org/title/lifespan-new-zealand-writers-week-dunedin-march-20-26-1993/oclc/156766177>>.

McRae, Jane. 'Maori Literature: A Survey.' *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Ed. Terry Sturm. Auckland etc: Oxford University Press, 1991. 1–24. Print.

Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 'NZ poet Selina Tusitala Marsh visits (and sasses) the Queen: FastTalking PI Visits the Queen by Selina Tusitala Marsh (Westminster Abbey, London, 14 March 2016).' *New Zealand Book Council*. New Zealand Book Council, 08 June 2016. Web. 03 January 2017. <<http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/aotearoa-reads-details/nz-poet-selina-tusitala-marsh-visits-and-sasses-the-queen>>.

Millar, Paul ('PM'). 'Taylor, Apirana.' *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*. Ed. Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie. Melbourne etc: Oxford University Press, 1998. 527. Print.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 2nd ed. London, New York: Methuen, 2002. Print.

'Pio Zirimu.' *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. N. p., ed. 24 September 2016. Web. 02 January 2017. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pio_Zirimu>.

Robertson, Christine. 'Growing up Samoan in New Zealand and the racist microaggressions I've faced along the way.' *Samoan Observer* 25 October 2016: 12–13. Print.

Shepherd, Nicola. 'A little lippy: Author, poet and playwright Courtney Sina Meredith.' *Noted*. N. p. 17 November 2015. Web. 03 January 2017. <<http://www.noted.co.nz/archive/listener-nz-2015/a-little-lippy-author-poet-and-playwright-courtney-sina-meredith>>.

Sibley, Chris G., et al. 'Ethnic Group Stereotypes in New Zealand.' *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 40. 2 (2011): 25–36. Print.

- ‘Spoken word.’ *Oxford Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 06 December 2016. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/spoken_word>.
- ‘The Third Industrial Revolution.’ *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*. N. p., ed. 20 April 2017. Web. 02 January 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Third_Industrial_Revolution.

Further Reading

- Evans, Patrick. *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*. Auckland etc.: Penguin Books/Viking Penguin, 1990. Print.
- Marsden, Peter H. “‘But Maoris Don’t Read Books’”: Mündliche Überlieferung und Rhetorik der Maori-Dichtung.’ *‘First Peoples, First Voices’: Indigene Völker zwischen Fremdbestimmung und Selbstbehauptung*. Ed. Werner Kreisel and Peter H. Marsden. Aachen: Augustinus, 1995. 23–48. Print.
- . ‘Reading the Oral: Approaching Aboriginal and Maori Poetry.’ *Defining New Idioms and Alternative Forms of Expression*. Ed. Eckhard Breitinger. Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996. 15–26. Print.
- . ‘From waka to whakapapa, Or: Carving your own canoe. The verse of Robert Sullivan.’ *New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre*. N. pag. 2001. Web. 14 September 2016. <<http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/sullivan/marsden.asp>>.
- . “‘Er war ein Berliner!’” Hone Tuwhare in Germany.’ *ka mate ka ora: a new Zealand journal of poetry and poetics* 6 (2008): n. pag. Web. 14 September 2016. <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/kmko/06/ka_mate06_marsden.asp>.
- . ‘A Poetics of Political Commitment: Robert Sullivan and Human Rights.’ *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*. Ed. Annalisa Oboe and Shaul Bassi. London, New York: Routledge, 2011. 328–408. Print.
- Sullivan, Robert. ‘A Poetics of Culture: Others’ and Ours, Separate and Commingled.’ *Landfall* 211 (Autumn 2006): 9–18. Print.
- Whaitiri, Reina and Robert Sullivan, eds. *Puna Wai Kōrero: An Anthology of Māori Poetry in English*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014. Print.