Three Pacific writers from Aotearoa discuss Indigenous languages and visual poetry

Marama Salsano, Mere Taito and Ammon Hāwea Apiata

Introduction

This article draws on several months of conversations, creative workshopping, and writing sessions between Māori writers Ammon Hāwea Apiata and Marama Salsano, and Rotuman writer Mere Taito. Here, we contemplate the presence of Māori and Rotuman languages in our visual poetry. For too long, critical work about English language writing by Indigenous writers from the Pacific has been Eurocentric. Papua New Guinean writer-scholar Steven Winduo suggests the need to unwrite this "imagined Oceania," while Māori author Keri Hulme writes disparagingly of the lower-cased 'gods of literature', and in her ReadNZ lecture, Sāmoan-Māori fantasy writer Lani Wendt Young describes traditional publishing as the "white castle of literature." While white castled gods of literature have historically ignored the everyday vibrancy of Pacific voices, Indigenous writers from the Pacific continue to unapologetically write, read, experiment, critique, and play with words. Into this complexity, we acknowledge that for many Indigenous writers from the Pacific, English language Eurocentric thought and texts dominate our lives; many of us are second language learners of our languages.

Proximity to Indigenous languages on the page, screen, or tongue thus becomes a soothing medicine. And yet, when white castled gods of literature do publish Indigenous writers, further issues seem to arise for them: what to do with these 'foreign' languages? In her poem 'Kupu rere kē,' Māori (Te Āti Awa, Taranaki) writer-scholar Alice Te Punga Somerville whose poetry collection is aptly titled *Always Italicise: How to Write While Colonised* considers the impact of italicising Indigenous words: "*when the foreign words are camouflaged in plain type / you can forget how they came to be there, out of place, in the first place*" (5). The format of this article is shaped as a wānanga

or talanoa or traditional conversation that focuses on our relationships with words and writing and Indigenous languages that are 'in place' in the Pacific.

How would you describe your relationship with language, words, reading and writing?

Mere: Where shall I start? (*A loud hysterical laugh follows.) I am a language returnee. I learnt Rotuman first before I learnt English thanks to my amazing late grandmother Mapiga Lily, but over the years while growing up in Fiji, the language wobbled and like an old boat hull, it needed some patching and welding here and there. I am functional in many communicative situations but when it comes to Rotuman oratory, formal public address, and idiomatic translations, I shield myself behind highly functional and competent users. Being a 'returnee', I am in a position to engage in many contrasting ways with the Rotuman language. I can recall, remember, rediscover and yet, at the same time, meet and encounter language usage and features that are totally new to me. I still have not decided what is more exhilarating – remembering my 'language past' or discovering my 'language present and future'. Either way, both offer up a relationship that is highly complex, especially when I think about the role of English in these acts of remembering and discovering. Yep, I often use my stronger language English to retrieve and discover Rotuman particularly while reading. I sometimes think of English as the 'scullery maid', the language that 'fetches' meaning so that I can make sense of the difficult Rotuman text I am trying to unravel. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. Ammon will speak to this complicated process of reading-writing between two unrelated languages through his writing practice below. For me, when one language cannot speak for the other, I seek out the big guns – elders, and advanced learners who know where the 'wild meanings are'. With my creative writing, I have no set rules. I write where my language heart takes me. On some days, I emerge firing with Rotuman language bullets and refuse to offer translations; on other days, I weave both English and Rotuman as if they were mutually intelligible languages and hopefully, piss-off all the language purists in the world.

Marama: I love how Mere draws attention to the morpheme 're' as she recalls, remembers and rediscovers the Rotuman language; this reminds me of Tūhoe educator Taiarahia Melbourne's explanations of the word 'whare'.

Whare is often translated as 'house', but it has a more ancient translation, "longevity of vision", whereby "wha translates as 'distance' of time, while re means to 'watch or 'observe'" (12). I too find it exhilarating to 're' or observe how our relationship with language evolves over time, and in particular, how threads of resistance, clarification and connection are made possible through Indigenous word use. I begin, therefore, with reading.

My mother was a voracious reader. She read to us often and never passed judgement on what my brothers and I read – as long as we read! As a child, I read *Strawberry Shortcake* books, *Archie* comics, Trixie Beldon and Nancy Drew books, and as a teen, the *Earth's Children* series. At some point in the 80s, my aunt and uncle sold encyclopaedias as a side-hustle, so of course my parents spent years paying off a set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* books for us. In hindsight, this delights and saddens me equally. How I wish my childhood reading had been saturated with te reo Māori / Māori language, rather than stories that were so out of place on our islands.

Because of this colonial out-of-placeness created by Empire, I am a life-long second language learner, and while I often struggle to speak and think in te reo Māori, I persevere. I write for eight year old Marama who stole a book from school about Princess Diana, oblivious to most stories about Māori women from our islands. I write for seventeen year old Marama who wrote a poem about her grandparents' relationship with te reo Māori, which wasn't deemed 'good enough' to publish in the school magazine. I write for adult Marama who remains unsatisfied with the status quo of western publishing 'castles' and their 'gods of literature' writing conventions.

Ammon: As the only Māori speaker in my household, I sometimes get scared that my language is slipping away. While I am fortunate to have some friends and family with whom I can speak te reo Māori, the reality is that although I have proficiency in my Indigenous language, I have to try really hard to create opportunities for myself to use it. I often jokingly say 'he kaha ake te reo o taku pene i te reo o taku waha'—the language of my pen is stronger than the language of my mouth. Some days when I am working in te reo it feels like it flows so much more easily from the pen in my hand than from my tongue. And so, reading and writing in te reo has become a comfortable space for me to sit in my Indigenous language—to

think and create. It is from this space that I have been able to safely explore the written worlds of wordsmiths and innovators like Kāterina Te Heikōkō Mataira and Hirini Melbourne, two of many who have championed contemporary Māori language writing and who have had a profound impact on my own approach to literary production. It is also from this space that I have felt inspired to experiment with and test the boundaries of my own reo Māori through short fiction, poetry, and scholarly writing. There is often so much emphasis (and understandably so!) on both the oral-ness and aural-ness of te reo Māori that I think the value of our written literary heritage sometimes gets overlooked, especially in regard to language revitalisation efforts. When I worked for a short time as a Māori language teacher I would often tell my students (who were all adult learners) about the vast collection of Māori language children's books available in our university library and encourage them to start there. I knew firsthand the effectiveness of seeing words, phrasing and structures in context on the page in consolidating language learning, especially for those who may not have had others around with whom they could practise speaking.

Using te reo in my creative work has helped me keep kupu Māori swirling around in my mouth and pouring from my fingertips. And with the ever-increasing audacity of our settler-colonial government who are actively trying to make our language less visible and accessible, it feels like such an important time to be writing and producing more work in te reo Māori. Colonisers want to relegate Indigenous languages (and Indigenous people for that matter) to a bygone era. But my language is alive. I have the poems to prove it.

In what ways do you weave Indigenous languages into your visual poetry?

Ammon: While I often produce poetry bilingually, my Māori-English poems are not always simply translations of themselves. A poem that I write in te reo Māori is not just what I would have written in English, presented in Māori (and vice versa). The ideas that come to mind when thinking and writing in te reo are not always thoughts I would have had in English. The imagery, metaphors, phrasing, wordplay, and other language features I use in te reo tap into intellectual traditions that ground the poem in a particular cultural and linguistic universe and there are references that I

think might only be caught and appreciated when read in Māori (I have to signal here to Māori scholar-composer, Hirini Melbourne and his 1991 essay, 'Whare Whakairo: Māori 'Literary' Traditions' for my thinking around this). Then, if I choose to produce an English rendering of that original idea, rather than directly translate, I will often rewrite or reimagine the poem, drawing on the same themes and thoughts but conjuring something new, still writing as myself and as a Māori person but, in a way, using different materials. The end result is often two distinct poems about the same topic.

While I find this approach to be a satisfying creative exercise in and of itself, it is not the only reason I began producing work bilingually. The unfortunate reality is that there are still relatively few places one can publish solely in te reo Māori. Even in Aotearoa, most literary journals will not accept Māori language submissions without an English translation. The understanding part of me acknowledges that not all editorial teams have Māori language proficiency and that editing lit journals is often a labour of love (read: unpaid) and so it can be difficult to source that expertise in the process of putting a collection together. A more cynical part of me thinks it perhaps indicates that reo Māori readers are not an intended audience for that particular journal or collection. And I am unsatisfied with the argument of 'making the writing more widely accessible' because the fact of the matter is, even with an English translation provided, you are not getting the same experience as reading the original in te reo anyway. And so, feeling discontent with the idea of 'simple' translations, I realised I could use this as an opportunity to rethink the way I produce my writing, at least when it comes to writing for publication. In the previous section, Mere described putting English to use as the 'scullery maid', while in some ways for me, English has become my 'trojan horse', ironically facilitating a pathway to publication for some of my Māori language writing.

Adding a visual layer to my Māori language poetry is exciting new territory for me. My visual poem included in this anthology, for example, gave me space to think about and illustrate the ways in which our language is derived from the natural world and how different parts of the environment hold our language and stories. By making the conscious decision to use te reo Māori in my poetry, a part of me hopes that anyone who reads it (but particularly other Māori) will see whakapapa in my writing, or the layers of

connections to other stories, eras, and people. And also perhaps have an access point to even more Māori perspectives, experiences, and knowledges.

Mere: Like Ammon, I recently started tinkering and taking visual multilingual poetry seriously when I began experimenting with digital applications such as Canva, Camtasia, and Articulate Storyline in my doctoral research. I saw their enormous potential for creative writing that was particularly geared towards Rotuman or any language regeneration. With these digital authoring tools, text, sound, and image can be arranged in so many ways and therefore influence the numerous ways the Rotuman language can 'be seen and heard' in relation to English on a page. I can control and shift the 'power' and 'presence' of either language on a page through typeface play, font play, audio, text placement, or image insertion. It is addictive, this thing called control. It makes you feel like you are 'playing God' at the keyboard.

Working with typeface and text effects (shadowing, lifting, splicing etc. in Canva) is particularly interesting for me, especially its overlooked semantic value as opposed to its graphic value. Johanna Drucker has researched extensively in this area. Type effect brings a kind of 'personality' and 'character' to Rotuman language text which allows the reader (hopefully!) a different kind of reading experience. Interestingly in my practice, I have found that 'plain typeface effects' in either Rotuman or English, is often needed to lift the 'game' of 'elaborate typeface effects'. Think David propping up Goliath's head. Sometimes, however, the relationship is symbiotic. All this talk of typeface and effects makes me think of other Indigenous Pacific writers who have worked with typeface to not only create stunning graphic effect but also meaning, namely Hawaiiian writers Wayne Westlake and Joseph Balaz.

Marama: Giving my poetry visual dimensions has been as thrilling for me as it has been for Mere and Ammon. Lately, I've been thinking about the texts we read, the ways texts are read, and how to visually express my thoughts about reading. 'Four ways to read an Indigenous text' is a blackout, visual essay-poem based on the transcript of a presentation I gave at the 2022 International Indigenous Research Conference called "Healing psychic self-mutilation: Reweaving taha tāne and taha wāhine through tā moko,

cyberspace and poetry." The visual essay-poem offers four possible methods to read an Indigenous text:

1) Read only the printed kupu (words) of the blackout essay.
2) Read the printed kupu as well as the 'glossed' words i.e. the italicised words that are stamped onto remnant fabric, woven into the paper, and reflect the ways in which glossed words pull you away from the original text and interrupt the reading flow.
3) Read the uppercased key ideas that have been stamped onto material and also woven into the paper, symbolising the obvious threads an Indigenous reader might weave out of the text, but a non-Indigenous reader may miss.
4) Take up one of the threads that emerge from the Māori kupu, and read/research/consider the pūrakau (traditional narratives) that are contained within each Indigenous word.

While I have used Māori language as an example here, issues related to the glossing and italicising of Indigenous words apply to the general treatment of Indigenous languages in Western publications. Why continue the colonial project with translations that can be subpar at best, eye-rolling and offensive at worst? Indigenous-languaged conversations in English might be difficult for some people to understand, but leaving Indigenous ontological thought to exist on its own terms opens up new universes, such as those contained within a single morpheme like 're'.

Conclusion

As Pacific writers, Indigenous languages tether our writing to our islands. We are descendants of highly skilled, prolific wayfinders who traversed the archipelagos of Kiwa's ocean long before Cook or Tasman or Magellan. We centre our oceans and islands in our poetry, art, critiques and lives, and however we return to our Indigenous languages, in our writing there will always be elements of play, resistance, and a good amount of pissing people off. More than this though, our work honours how we came to be here, in place, in the Pacific, in the first place.

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Mere Taito (Rotuma (Fiji): Malha'a and Noa'tau) is a creative writer based in Kirikiriroa, Hamilton in Aotearoa New Zealand. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Otago exploring the impacts of reading Rotuman archival multilingual texts on the writing of multilingual poetry. Her study positions digitally-authored multilingual poetry as an effective language-learning resource for Rotuman language regeneration in Aotearoa New Zealand.