

**'I COME GOING FROM PLACE TO PLACE FROM THE ORIGIN'
NOTES TOWARD A TRADITION OF FAST MOVING POEMS**

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Walking, wandering, driving, flying, cycling, travelling. Movement is crucial to the inspiration for and ongoing creation of Anne Waldman's signature poem 'Fast Speaking Woman' (1975). Waldman has called it 'a road piece' (2004, 270). She recollects how she was travelling through Mexico when she first came across the chants of María Sabina, and it was Sabina's transcribed and translated words which inspired a poem that began in Colombia then grew in Ecuador, Machu Picchu, New York City (Waldman 2003, 176) and India (Waldman 1975, inset). 'Fast Speaking Woman' has remained current for over 30 years in published form and in performance. It keeps appearing in classroom curricula and Waldman continues to morph it whenever she performs.

I'm a book woman
I'm a devilish clown woman
I'm a holy clown woman
I'm a whirling dervish woman
I'm a whirling foam woman
I'm a playful light woman
I'm a tidal pool woman
I'm a fast speaking woman

(Waldman 1975, 12)

In 2007 Waldman's words found me on Waiheke Island, off the coast of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, and inspired the performance poem 'Fast Talking PI.' I saw the opportunity to make something that could act as a mouthpiece for a community defined by travel, dispersal and boundary-lessness – the Pacific diaspora. The new poem I made was born of the older poem and has already done its share of travelling: through New Zealand in performance; on radio, television and the internet; across the Tasman to Queensland; most recently to Somalia through the voices of a refugee community. It also became the title of my first collection of poetry.

I'm a fast talking PI

I'm a power walking PI

I'm a demographic, hieroglyphic, fact-sheetin' PI ...

I'm a fale PI

I'm a marae PI

I'm a living breathing dwelling of my ancestors PI ...

I'm a movin' PI

I'm a groovin' PI

I'm a Nesian Mystik, stratospheric, whippin' it PI ...

(Marsh 2009, 58, 60)

This essay examines what 'Fast Talking PI' contributes to a palimpsestic mode, and how roots in Mexico, permutations in North America and recent manifestations in Aotearoa New Zealand demonstrate an evolution that is enriched by the braiding together of oral and written traditions. I want to suggest that such a dynamic reflects the experience of certain diasporic communities who arrive, influence and eventually transform their host societies, taking as my example the impact that Pacific peoples are making on the poetic imaginaries of Aotearoa New Zealand.

María Sabina (1888 - 1985)

I am the woman Book that is beneath the water, says
I am the woman of the populous town, says
I am the shepherdess who is beneath the water, says
I am the woman who shepherds the immense, says
I am a shepherdess and I come with my shepherd, says

Because everything has its origin
And I come going from place to place from the origin...

(Estrada and Wasson, 18)

María Sabina, Mazatec shaman, never travelled. She lived her entire 97 years in the Sierra Mazateca of Southern Mexico. She often said that she didn't need to travel physically because her mind and spirit had already gone many places. People came to her. Descended from a line of traditional healers, she was a highly respected 'curandera' and cured physical, emotional, spiritual and mental illnesses. As part of her practice she used sacred mushrooms (*Psilocybe*) that she referred to as 'the children' in acts of medicinal divination for the sick. The children conveyed messages of healing, sacred revelations, prayers, incantations and chants which she spoke over the ill during 'veladas' (curing sessions).

In 1955 Sabina came to the attention of American amateur ethnographer Gordon Wasson, who cast her as a modern-day seer in 'Seeking the Magic Mushroom,' the article he wrote for *Life* magazine two years later. Sabina claimed to have foreseen the coming of white foreigners to her remote village in a dream and had resigned herself to the inevitable intrusion. Wasson's account of his psychedelic experience with Sabina and her 'magic mushrooms' inflamed North American imagination in the era of 1960s and early 1970s counter-culture. Visitors began arriving in

Oaxaca in ever-increasing numbers and practices surrounding the picking of the freely available mushrooms were profaned by non-contextualised use. Sabina lost her treasured anonymity and although she formed a life-long friendship with Wasson, she became disillusioned by the foreigners and their disregard for what had been a sacred healing practice.

Sabina did not call herself a poet. But Wasson's article, followed by the ethnopoetic essays of Jerome Rothenberg and others, the writing down of Sabina's chants and prayers by fellow Mazatec Àlvaro Estrada, and their translation into English by Henry Munn – all of these things fixed the fluidity of Sabina's words even as they enabled study of them. The vibrant, liturgical language that the illiterate Sabina claims to have 'read' from a mystical 'Book of Language' seen in visions supplied profound metaphors in its chanting, accretive frameworks. These were things that also interested American poets tuned since the 1920s into a high modernism that liked to 'Make it New' (Ezra Pound) by retrieving and reinventing the past as a kind of postbag full of important messages. María Sabina was an exciting find for Rothenberg, who recollects his first encounter with her in the mid 1960s in his essay 'The Little Saint of Huautla' (also the title of his poem to her). Trying to engage her by reciting a Native American Indian chant with a rattle, he held her attention for less than a minute before she rose without explanation and walked outside to attend to some grandchildren (Rothenberg 183). The recital was pointless to Sabina because it was devoid of practical efficacy, the healing of bodies and spirits. And this is the problem any recontextualisation of a sacred practice must face: where is the line between 'cultural borrowing and appropriation' (Tarn) and the desire of language anywhere to morph and mutate what it finds in its path?

Enter Anne Waldman, whose involvement with Rothenberg and ethnopoetics led her to Mexico, translations of María Sabina and 'Fast Speaking Woman,' the composition that has done more than any other to bring the sound and texture of Sabina's chants, mediated by Estrada and Munn, to the ears and eyes of American poetry in the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the new millennium.

Anne Waldman (1945 -)

Anne Waldman is a second-generation New York Beat diva of St Mark's in the Square activism, and a co-founder of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa in Colorado. She has been at the forefront of many poetry projects and with over 40 collections of poetry and essays, she is one of the defining voices of contemporary American poetry. She is also a committed feminist.

When the 30-page 'Fast Speaking Woman' was published in book form, Waldman noted an important characteristic of her poem: 'It keeps growing' (1975, flyleaf). Transnational in reach and eclectic in manner, the poem speaks to and about all women. Indeed, Waldman says she set out with the intention to write 'the poem of every woman' (1994) in what Grace and Johnson call the 'ultimate feminist or woman-centred innovation.' They continue enthusiastically: 'Waldman's collage of Sabina into her Beat poem accomplishes the transfiguration of Beat aesthetics by the infusion of a woman's material discourse that integrates women into the male-exclusive Beat mythoi' (258). A journey with no arrival point, its various printed versions capture it at certain moments in its performance history. Like a 'whirling dervish woman,' the poem's weaving of image and adjective collects sights, sounds, language and action as it circles fast and sometimes furiously between material and immaterial worlds.

The language of 'Fast Speaking Woman' is endlessly fertile. Its Sabina-inspired chant recalls the power of mantra with its roots in prayer, curing chants and other aural healing aids. From Waldman's background in Tibetan Buddhism, experimental poetics and performance, words breed words in free association, sometimes according to meaning, often according to sound. Root words spring dissonant branches. Assonance and consonance seed new words. Nouns become adjectives which become verbs. Everything moves, but it moves around a core of respect for its huge subject: the saying (fluid, various) of every woman.

I'm an abalone woman

I'm the abandoned woman

I'm the woman abashed, the gibberish woman
the aborigine woman, the woman absconding

(Waldman 1975, 3)

Visually, the poem's short lines (averaging four or five words per line or phrase) race across and fall down the page in stanzas ranging from two lines to entire pages. Single, double and triple line spacing scores the pace for a reading eye. Aurally, Waldman's raw, energetic performances are full of urgent ululations and soundings that range from high pitched squeals to back of the throat gutturals, earning Allen Ginsberg's description of her entire body as an 'instrument for vocalisation' (cited in Knight 287). The patient, joyful focus on orality delivers the poem differently for every audience; its written form is part (by no means all) of its evolving history. As author, Waldman is free to go on changing her words (as was Sabina before her). The difference is that Sabina's written words, transcribed, translated and published by others, cannot be changed. But they may offer important paradigms for the poet who is both writer and performer of her own work.

Waldman defines her debt to Sabina as the 'reworking' of a selection of her chants (Waldman 1975, inset). But she also suggests that her reworking is less an imitation of poetic style and substance and more a matter of her voice synchronising with Sabina's (Waldman 1994). The overwriting (overspeaking) of lines has a number of mutual layers: their shared gender; their shared purpose as movers in (and of) mind, spirit and body; their shared roles as oral and aurally driven word-seers. For Waldman 'Fast Speaking Woman' was 'a coincidence of all the same for all wandering spirits' (1975, inset). She claims to be a poet 'driven by sound' (Waldman 2009); Sabina is a healer manifesting through sound. For Waldman, poetry has a 'magical efficacy which is supposed to literally protect the mind' (1994). For Sabina, words heal. This is a symbiosis of language and healing in which I am very interested.

My poem 'Fast Talking PI' is driven both by sound and the desire to heal in a way that seems to produce a kind of poetic 'magical efficacy' for communities defined by movement, performance

and some difficult identity politics. If the temperature of the heterogeneous Pacific community in Aotearoa New Zealand were to be taken from major Pacific Island poetry anthologies from the last decade, it would still indicate fever and ferment. *Whetu Moana* (Wendt et al 2003), *Niu Voices* (Marsh 2006), *Writing the Pacific* (Webb and Nandan 2008) and *Mauri Ola* (Wendt et al 2010) are full of themes that characterised earlier Pacific anthologies responding to colonisation in its overt and covert forms. Alienation, disenfranchisement, racism and turmoil over identity continue to mirror a demographic occupying the highest rates for educational underachievement, incarceration, health-related mortality and predictably the lowest socio-economic position in our society. There are poems of celebration and pride too, and it is to the capacity of poetry to move and heal a constantly moving community that we now turn.

Fast Talking PI

‘Fast Talking PI’ was conceived on the move. Driving home late one winter night on Waiheke Island in my venerable people-mover (no stereo, heating or power steering), a beat stirred under the churning motor, a rhythm pulsed out of the dark. I was remembering Waldman’s globally roaming marathon of a poem. A week earlier I had listened to a live recording from 1974 now uploaded at [PennSound](#). I was spellbound by Waldman’s spell-casting five minute and 43 second rant.

But something else was churning away that night. The barrage of one-sided media coverage concerning an apparently undifferentiated group called ‘Pacific Islanders’ was getting on my nerves. ‘Pacific Islanders’ in the news are relentlessly cast as rapists, pillagers and murderers, and stand accused of dragging New Zealand’s good name (and the economy) through the mud. Among the worst examples of relayed stereotyping are Prime Minister Jenny Shipley’s remarks to Parliament in 2000 about ‘Pacific Islanders’ climbing in the windows of other New Zealanders at night: ‘It is not only Maori,’ she said (Gosche). In the decade since then we’ve had the Clydesdale report of 2008 accusing ‘Pacific Islanders’ of being a ‘drain on the economy’ (‘Review’) – a report intended to influence government policy that became the subject of an investigation by the Human Rights Commissioner. And last year there was National Party

candidate Melissa Lee's call for a more direct motorway route from South Auckland to West Auckland so that criminals from South Auckland could bypass her electorate ('Lee steps into another controversy'). On that winter night in 2007 I had had enough. What would Waldman's edgy, provocative chant sound like, I wondered, with race instead of gender as its driving force? What would a fast talking Pacific Islander sound like?

I was born and raised in Aotearoa, like many of my peers who are part of the Pacific diaspora. I have a rewarding career and a passion for seeing others in my community succeed. I am disturbed by the disproportionate representation of Pacific peoples in the lowest and highest of dire statistics which is why 'Fast Talking PI' pulses with the politics of Pacific Island identity in all its forms. Critic Paula Green notes that the poem responds to the idea that 'a Pacific Islander is not a singular, stereotypical entity but a figure in motion' (Green and Ricketts, 475). It is unapologetically committed to acts of naming and claiming on behalf of a largely disenfranchised community, so that 'reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership' can take place right here and right now ('Identity Politics'). Self-representation, resistance, and personal and community consciousness-raising remain central in much Pacific political, educational and creative activity; my poem takes its place among those efforts.

As it did for Waldman, the list form offers a powerful counter to the constant bombardment of negative, disempowering stereotypes in the public arena. The phrase 'I am,' claimed by ancient deities, drives individuated power but doesn't preclude speaking in a community voice that rejects societal impositions of 'you are.'

'Fast Talking PI' was first performed at Translate Café in 2007 as part of a series of campus readings at the University of Auckland. It went for 14 minutes, and when a lone Australian voice asked forlornly 'What's a PI?', I translated the acronym so commonplace in the largest Polynesian city in the world amid gales of laughter. But the question led me to include a single-line preface for non-local audiences: 'Not Magnum PI, *Pacific Islander* PI!'

Later that year the poem acquired music. Its rhythms had caught the ear of Tim Page, sound technician at the Translate reading and a singer songwriter himself. On his way home, riding an aged 12-speed Avanti, the first beats of a soundtrack for 'Fast Talking PI' kept time with the pedals. The loop for bass guitar and drum that Tim devised and recorded took its lead from the poem's vocal rhythms and became a regular accompaniment to performances, morphing alongside the words, adding hand clapping, ukulele, mandolin and acoustic guitar. Our flexible, all-singing, all-dancing road poem was ready to roll.

Like Waldman's poem, 'Fast Talking PI' took on a life of its own, travelling through communities, across class, gender and cultural borders, and becoming a vehicle for other voices. At first, this was most evident in performances for Pacific Island audiences.

In November 2008 I was keynote speaker for the senior prizegiving at Southern Cross Campus in Mangere, South Auckland, a decile one school with a Maori language immersion programme for Years 1-13. Most of its students are of Maori and/or Pacific Island descent. I sat on stage in the front row between the Director and an MP. On my left sat the students, on the right sat their families. The pride was palpable and throughout the prizegiving each achiever met with shouts of encouragement and support from the floor. Several Maori achievers were honoured with impromptu haka. It was enthralling to watch these students accept their awards and to hear the response they got from their demonstrative, smart and sassy peers. But I began worrying. Would they be able to relate to me? A PI, yes – but a Westie (from West as opposed to South Auckland). A PI, yes – but after years of acculturation in the rarefied air of university, would they see me as one of them? able to represent them?

Such marathon evenings take their toll. The hall had grown restless and murmurings about supper were beginning to rise. I put on the music track for 'Fast Talking PI' and launched into the first stanza. Shoulders straightened and a vibe rippled through the hall. There was no misunderstanding about acronyms here. Each line was met with laughter, calls, shout-outs, and an echo formed as people began repeating 'PI' at the end of each line. The volume increased so that I could no longer be heard. I had to stop after each stanza to let the response die down, and

the poem took twice as long to get through.

One of the freedoms offered by the poem's patterned structure and predictable rhyming is that it lends itself to improvisation. This is something I have learned to take advantage of, as Waldman did before me, and Sabina before her. At Southern Cross I imported each of the school's house syndicate names: 'I'm a Totara PI / I'm a Karaka PI / I'm a Pohutukawa and Rimu PI.' Entire rows shouted their identification. The belly-busting screams along with the clapping, stomping and krump-like competitive gesturing, demonstrated the students' strength and allegiance to each other. And what were their parents doing? They were beaming. Such levels of call and response are common in oral-based, performance-oriented Pacific Island cultures.

A performance at Glen Taylor Primary School in Glendowie offered another kind of response. Although Glendowie is an affluent suburb, on arrival I realised that this school was socio-economically aligned with the poor next-door suburb of Glen Innes (the crossing of a road marks the boundary between decile one and decile ten schools). Glen Taylor Primary is nestled in a thicket of state housing. The senior syndicate was a sea of brown faces numbering over a hundred. Facilities and resources were sparse, but these 10 to 12 year olds were the most engaged students I have encountered on my school-speaking circuit to date. It was Careers Day and I was there as 'University Lecturer.' I finished by performing 'Fast Talking PI.' The hall bristled with questions about being a poet: 'Who said you could be a poet?' 'Is your mum happy about it?' 'Who said you are allowed to write about stuff like that?' 'How much training do you need to write poetry?' 'How much money does a poem make?'

Glen Taylor Primary's response highlighted the importance of role modelling empowering vehicles for voice to communities who have numerous limitations to overcome. These pre-teens are a crucial part of my target community. They brim with possibility and are still open to multiple life options. Poetry's potential for the kind of 'magical efficacy' Waldman talks about might offer not just protection for the mind but tools for young people to stake out their own place in a society used to imposing stereotypes on the socio-economically disadvantaged.

What about older, less malleable students, who are unenthusiastic, disillusioned with education, cynical about a society they feel has rejected them? In 2008 I was invited by the Reverend Mua Strickson-Pua to be part of the Tagata Pasifika Alternative Education Programme, a 'last chance' net for students suspended from school, on probation or under court orders for misdemeanours from tagging and truancy to physical assault. I performed 'Fast Talking PI' and they rose to the occasion. Music helped open the door but these kids were already fluent in its accretive language. They were already attuned to its rhythms and disrupted timings. They were familiar with the vernacular of free-styling, hip-hop, impromptu verbal battling, rap, and word slamming from American-inspired rap and hip-hop culture which is increasingly infused with local flavours and styles. These 'social reprobates' were sophisticated, critical listeners. A few months later they invited me back and responded in kind with their own distinctive version of the poem. Many of them were beginning to heal in this environment, and they were already writing poetry. I just showed them another kind of word sparring.

'Fast Talking PI' passed the road-test in classrooms, including students expelled from school. But would it be able to hook into the Pacific community beyond the classroom, across diverse cultures and ages? How would it move at Pasifika, the largest Polynesian festival in the world, held annually at Auckland's open-air Western Springs? Pasifika presents the harshest reading conditions imaginable: a movable feast of colour and sound in a 200,000-plus crowd swirling around food, clothing, art, music and performance stalls. Every year Auckland University's Faculty of Arts stand finds itself in direct competition with loud, vibrant performance stages. In 2009 the stand was positioned opposite the Niu FM Radio stage. At the time of my scheduled poetry reading the internationally celebrated dance group 'Sweet and Sour' were performing, popping and grinding to full-on krumping music. My poetry reading was going to die a slow muffled death in its single-mic tent. As a fast talking PI I introduced myself to Niu FM and with Tim Page's CD as backing track, 'Fast Talking PI' went on stage and was broadcast on live radio in front of a massive audience. Some of them were beginning to jam, waving their hands in the air and calling out the end-line 'PI'. That day poetry went out to a big slice of the Pasifika demographic.

What about those Pacific Islanders in their home islands and those who have left their home islands and settled elsewhere in the Pacific? Would they find the poem as representative and/or entertaining? In 2008 I was invited to be guest poet at a reading hosted by the English Department of the National University of Samoa. Pacific literary notables Subramani and Sina Va'ai were present; I was nervous and I wasn't intending to read 'Fast Talking PI'. But at the end of my set someone called out: 'Can you do that Fast Talking PI one please?' My question was answered by the sustained volume of response in the hall as the poem proceeded.

'Fast Talking PI' has also travelled well among non-PI audiences. In 2008 it was performed for Titirangi's annual Going West Literary Festival. After rehearsal, festival organiser Murray Gray bounded down the hall, mic in hand, with his own version: 'I'm a slow speaking Palagi, all the way from Titirangi!' His improvisation was the first of many that evening. After the show many distinctly non-PIs came up with their versions, toe-tapping, finger-clicking, hearing themselves in its 'every person' voice. The festival-goers were taken by the catchy beat, but I think they also saw themselves for the moment as honorary PIs, relating to the politics of the poem as well as its aesthetic. At least, that's what their comments to me that evening indicated.

Responses to the poem have gone beyond the Pacific. In April 2010 'Fast Talking PI' mutated into 'Fast Talking AS' (African Somalis). I worked with a group of Somali refugee youth who took the poem's rhythmic frame back to Africa and used it to speak about their Somali roots and their transplantation in Aotearoa. 'Fast Talking AS' is now part of ['The Mixing Room: Stories from Young Refugees in New Zealand.'](#) an exhibition at Te Papa Tongarewa / The Museum of New Zealand with digital as well as physical outreach. The poem has been posted as text and audio files and will be viewed and heard by an estimated 1.4 million visitors each year over its three year exhibition life. A total of over 4 million visitors will hear the rhythms and incantations of 'Fast Talking PI' Somali-style.

'Because I have a tongue, I have a mouth'

'Fast Talking PI' keeps moving. It embodies and moves among culturally specific Pacific

identities, and it moves beyond them. It moves people individually and communally. It appeals across demographics and generations, engaging five year olds and 93 year olds; PI hip-hoppers and white punk chic chicks; students from decile one to decile ten schools; refugees and street-kids exiled from our school system. People have performed, produced and published their own versions after hearing mine. The poem facilitates its own movement and further authoring, both as performance and in written form.

So ...

There is a term for what I am describing here: orature. The concept has been formulated in studies on African oral traditions since at least the mid 1980s (Ngugi 1986; Ntuli; Zirimu). Orature is the way in which language transmits culture through ‘the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression’ (Ngugi 2007). One of its features is that it fuses art forms (from poetry to song to dance to proverb to story to drama) offering healing and wholeness. South African poet, artist and academic, Pitika Ntuli, defines orature as a holistic ‘flow of a creative spirit’ (215). Kenyan novelist and academic Ngugi wa Thiong’o, observes that orature is a ‘kind of *Gestalt*, the wholeness of all being bigger than the parts that contributed to it’ (Ngugi 2007). Its interconnectivity, its role in capturing and preserving the collective histories and aspirations, wisdoms and faiths of communities (Kiarie), culminates in performance requiring a participatory audience and a performance space. Orature brings together Sabina, Waldman and myself into its open, healing, flowing spaces through and across aesthetically different, enduring and pleasing utterances where we not only capture and preserve, but simultaneously move and grow the words and worlds of our people.

I am going there, says

I am arriving there, says

Because I have my palms, I have my hands, says

Because I have a tongue, I have a mouth, says ...

so so so

so so so

so so so

Whirling woman of colors

Whirling woman of colors

Big town woman

Big town woman

Lord eagle woman

Lord eagle woman

Clock woman

Clock woman

ha ha ha

so so so

so so so

so so so ...

(Sabina, 90, 96)

In view of all this travelling, Oaxaca and Aotearoa no longer seem so far apart. The link between ‘the woman with words’ (Sabina), the ‘Fast Speaking Woman’ (Waldman) and the ‘Fast Talking PI’ (myself) is a model for language moving between cultures and traditions, between purposes and performances. Poems with a strong history of public performance mutate and adapt themselves as a matter of course. In doing so they provide spaces for the kinds of redescription and transformation crucial to ongoing debates about identity and important for a people’s healing. Such poems operate between borders and boundaries, in the liminal spaces where movement is the point of the journey rather than arrival. Like identity, gendered or diasporic, poems can move and *move*.

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