

**No Whiteman's Burr(den):  
Vaughan Rapatahana and the Tale of the Piripiri**

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The flourishing 'weed' of civilisation, so far as the plants with which it comes into contact are concerned, is much the same as is civilised man in relation to the savage ... [the colonising plants], through their special favourable qualities and adaptability—in other words, through their power to make the best possible use of their circumstances—outdistance their fellows, and establish themselves far and wide, living in great security, and growing with a luxuriance...

- Leonard Cockayne, 1910 (130)

...write back and then through the episteme! Writing back to the Centre is to existentially de-centre so as to abnegate any peripheries whatsoever. Let's mutiny."

- Vaughan Rapatahana, 2016 ('Writing back (to the centre)' 100)

These opening lines from British botanist Leonard Cockayne betray a racist agenda to harness the work of the weed as a metaphor for the 'inevitable' and 'natural' thrust of European colonisation. However, rather than an image in support of the 'civilising' mission of colonisation, I take the image of the weed – in particular the *acaena inermis*, or piripiri burr – as a metaphor for the adaptable (and luxuriant) quality of Vaughan Rapatahana's poetry in English. Rather than finding himself locked into a hierarchical relationship with the English language Rapatahana, like the piripiri, creates space for indigenous expression through mischievous mutiny within the language of empire.

## Contested Tongues

The question of whether to write in one's own language or use the language of empire is still as potent a (post)colonial question as ever. In a May 2018 master class held at the University of Auckland, Kenyan novelist and theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o held fast to his thesis that the imposition of English was and is "crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (16). Thiong'o also holds that English can only ever take rather than give to indigenous language and expression (8). These backbone tenets of Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* were first tested in his 1984 Robb Lecture series in Auckland. What has changed for the state of Māori writing since this provocation? The very next year, in 1985, Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen took the editorial step, "in retrospect seemingly overdue, of including modern waiata and contemporary poetry in Māori as part of the national literary canon" (Edmond 38). A New Zealand Book Awards prize category now exists exclusively for works written in te reo Māori, though the award has not been given in every year since its inception. Another indigenous-supporting move in our publishing scene prioritises bilingual texts. A potent example from 2017 is Witi Ihimaera's *Sleeps Standing Moetu*, translated by Hēmi Kelly. Rather than sitting in a hierarchical relationship, the Māori and English texts can co-exist as companions. In the world of poetry, the 2018 bilingual collection *Tātai Whetū* features seven wāhine Māori poets with both Māori and English versions of each poem. Editor Vana Manasiadis spoke recently of the bilingual book's aim for "real partnership: two voices listening and responding." Like Thiong'o, the editors believe that "translation is really all about reclamation, freedom of movement, equality. It evens the territory and levels the hierarchies" (Manasiadis). However, is translation the only way to foster movement and level the hierarchies of coloniser and colonised? What of the writers that wish to maximise their syncretic, bicultural inheritances? Or those writers that enjoy the trickery of injecting English with a decidedly indigenous agenda? One poet that writes through these scenarios is Vaughan Rapatahana (Te Atiawa, Ngāti Te Whiti), who works as a translator – including work on the *Tātai Whetū* collection - and publishes poetry, at times, in te reo Māori. However, he also works in English. His most recent collections of poetry in English include *ternion* (2017), *Atonement* (2015) and *Schisms* (2013). Rather than a fatal compromise, these English-based works (writing of political, historical, and linguistic turmoil) offer fertile ground for trickery and complication of colonial hierarchies.

As well as a poet and translator, Rapatahana is an editor, educator, novelist, and theorist born in Pātea, raised in South Auckland, and resident of Hong Kong SAR, the Philippines, and Aotearoa. It is important that I start in this manner of acknowledging Rapatahana's many writerly hats and many locales. Rapatahana's dual positioning as writer of both poetry and theory allows him to know the critical through the creative, and the creative through the critical. This ambidextrous reversal of creative and critical

directions mirrors the ability of his poetry to prod and complicate the directions of colonial linguistic influence. Rapatahana simultaneously honours the painful colonising influence of the English language and also thrusts forth an indigenous aesthetic sovereignty, delivered in an English medium (Carroll, Brandy & Nordstrom 6). As well as mourning the legitimate losses wrought by colonisation, Rapatahana resists the illegitimate binary of coloniser-colonised. His poetry suggests that indigenous ways of knowing and being can provide nourishment *and* travel beyond their indigenous origin: a reversal of the usual direction of colonisation. Rapatahana's dual geographical positioning in Aotearoa and other regions in the Asia-Pacific region means that he has genealogical ties to the whenua of Aotearoa, but often writes and publishes from elsewhere. Like the self-preserving piripiri burr (a form of botanical *diaspore*), Rapatahana is part of a Māori *diaspora*, able to address his homeland and bring his brand of indigenous advocacy to a global audience. Where Haunani-Kay Trask has said that "I am a writer who has inherited two traditions, one colonial, and the other, resistant" (42), Rapatahana and the metaphor of the mischief piripiri plant show that there is something beyond the colonial-resistance binary: an indigenous episteme (way of knowing or understanding).

### **Radical Botanicals**

A fruitful metaphor for working through the theoretical, aesthetic, and hierarchy-toppling impulse of Rapatahana's poetry comes from the world of the poems and the world of botany: the acaena inermis, piripiri, or biddy-bid plant. The piripiri is a common creeping native New Zealand plant with toothed leaves that form a spiky ball or fruit of green burrs (Moorfield). Not only do Rapatahana's unapologetic sovereign poetic aims and methods align with the spiky, sticky, toothy nature of the piripiri, but so, too, does his penchant for reversing directions of dominance and making use of language as a surreptitious stowaway. Indigenous language, history and epistemology were interrupted and radically reformulated by physical, linguistic, and land-based colonisation (Makihara & Schieffelin 3). However, that interruption and reformation does not undermine claims to an independent, indigenous space. Colonisation continues to influence local language communities in predictable *and* unpredictable ways (Makihara & Schieffelin 3). The piripiri reflects the predictable and the unpredictable poetic patterns of border-crossing and the will to survive and flourish.



**Fig 1.** Piripiri burrs. *The plant's seeds spread by sticking to clothes and fur from Ministry for Culture and Heritage. "Piripiri or Biddybid."* Visualizing Māori Land - Tohunga Junction, [whenuaviz.landcareresearch.co.nz/Search/DigitalNZSearch?placeName=Piripiri](http://whenuaviz.landcareresearch.co.nz/Search/DigitalNZSearch?placeName=Piripiri).

With Rapatahana, it appears that poetry can be prophetic. Rather than a case of including Māori words to be looked up in a glossary by outsider eyes, Rapatahana privileges indigenous language by using te reo Māori in his English medium poems without fanfare or explanation. The iconic work *The Empire Writes Back* has influenced Rapatahana's thinking (with such titles as "Writing back (to the Centre)"), establishing that "the choice of leaving words untranslated ... is a political act" (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 66). Not only does this move advocate for the contemporary flourishing of te reo Māori, but also assumes a readerly dexterity. His is a high trust model of writing, if you will. Another layer of complexity comes from his tendency to include obscure, antiquated, technical, or just plain *difficult* English words. Words such as *variegate*, *caroming*, *ululating*, *manque* sit, or spit, heavy on the reader's tongue (*Schisms*). Rapatahana claims that one approach to fighting the stranglehold of an imposed language is "to write so well in English so that readers really have to take note" ("Writing back (to the centre)" 96). His use of spiky, curly English words provokes both awe and irritation. These spiky words are able to 'make strange' the often unquestioned role (and roll) of English on the tongue. Through this barbed use of English, Rapatahana is able to write back to the Centre so as to de-centre dominant language and identities. His poetry provides a burr: it clings and catches on the ankles of the coloniser, it

travels far and wide, and it provides an irritant or splinter in the too-easily accepted surface of life and language in a settler-colonial nation like Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Kindred Burrs**

I was born and raised for the first part of my life in the lowlands of Scotland. I now teach and study in Aotearoa New Zealand: a land inhabited by tangata whenua, peoples of the Pacific, descendants of the European settler-colonisers, and more recent migrants. In this land discussions of postcoloniality are fraught because, unlike colonial places, a settler-colony status means that the coloniser never leaves but instead works toward a state of “irreversible transformation” (Veracini 99). For the multi-generational settler there is no home to go back to, but there is also no legitimate way to call New Zealand home without appropriating indigeneity. It is perhaps because of my ‘newcomer’ status that I can face up to addressing issues of settler-colonialism in this land. I have my own identity ‘back home’ to which I am connected and strengthened. While I do not occupy an indigenous identity in Aotearoa, I do live with a lesser but kindred concern with the colonising force of the English language. I also feel emboldened to speak about Rapatahana’s poetry because he has provided so much of his own theory to sit alongside the poetic work. He is a peoples’ poet, appearing at public readings; putting his work out into the world for the burrs of his words to stick and carry. He is also, however, an academics’ poet, appearing in journals and monographs; putting his work out into the world for global scholars to come to a more nuanced understanding of the dominance of English in the struggle for self-determination (Hingangaroa Smith & Rapatahana).

Growing up on the east coast of Scotland, I often walked through sand dunes populated by biddy-bid burrs. These biddy-bid burrs were persistent, clinging, and sticky: adhering to my ankles and the legs of my dog. I came to know well the Sisyphean task of picking burrs from my dog’s fur for hours at night by the fireside. I never questioned where this plant had come from, assuming it to be native to the British Isles. That’s the thing about living in the seat of an ‘empire’ - I never thought that I had to address the place of outside influences or debate the authenticity of the ground on which I stood. You can imagine my surprise when I found out, in the process of researching the nature of burrs, that the biddy-bid is in fact native to Aotearoa New Zealand rather than Britain. Animal husbandry practises of colonial settlers in New Zealand led to the introduction of sheep to the Aotearoa ecosystem. When the settler capitalist system encouraged the export of live sheep, the piripiri plants were able to travel as stowaways on the legs and fleeces of these colonially-introduced creatures (Royal). The biddy-bids were carried to rural and coastal areas like my home in Scotland, where their sticky barbed burrs set down root systems and became ‘invasive’. In a reversal of ecological influence, the biddy-bid found a new home in a most

unpredictable and mischievous manner. The themes of unpredictability, colonising reversal, and mischief speak to Rapatahana's modes as a poet and critic.

Not only was I wrong about the geographic origin of the biddy-bid plant, I was also mistaken about my seemingly inert relationship to questions of authenticity and influence in my use of the English language. The ground beneath my feet in Scotland was so long-colonised that I had suppressed the loss and anger of my ancestors; relinquished the rage that was mine for the uptake. I had forgotten that my tongue - as a speaker of Scots - deserved the status of language and not dismissal as dialect. I had been led to believe that Scots was not a language of its own, but an east-coast corruption of English. In primary school, our teachers sometimes let us write in Scots rather than in the Queen's English, but said that spelling did not matter, instructing us to "just write how it sounds". This non-rigorous instruction did not achieve its freeing intent, instead installing in me a brand of shame for this language that was framed as *less* than a language and more a parochial version of English spoken by errant Scottish tongues. Since that time I have come to treasure my 'errant' inheritance, reading agency and innovation where I once only saw dominance and outside control. Now that I see Scots as having an indigenously agentic relationship with English, I am sensitive and open to Rapatahana's claim that English can be purposefully 'corrupted' and owned by Māori. Linguistic patterns of corruption are also important to Rapatahana and the relevance of the piri-piri as a working metaphor. Rapatahana himself revels in his Indigenous 'corrupting' of the coloniser's language. Rather than rail against oppression via the enforcement of English, Rapatahana says that:

I have appropriated the conqueror's language, whereby English has become *an* english; another hydra head to flail against its big brother English. At the same time I am demanding through this written-back lingo, that our *mokomokai* be returned to their *tūrangawaewae*, Aotearoa, by the very Pākehā (Caucasian) conquistadores who wrenched them away in the first place ("Writing back (to the centre)" 97).

The biddy-bid's ability to 'appropriate' the coloniser's space by stowing away and taking root in Britain mirrors Rapatahana's hardiness and ability to make an Indigenous-inflected home in the coloniser's tongue. From this point forth, this essay's use of the lower case 'english' will reflect Rapatahana's poetic of indigenous epistemology. As Selina Tusitala Marsh has noted for other Pacific performers and writers in English, "the preferred strategy isn't so much to 'talk back' as to 'talk through'" the inherited medium (367). Not only was I wrong about the origin of the bidibid, I was also mistaken about the linguistic whakapapa of the plant's name. The te reo Māori word piri-piri was heard by European settlers and transliterated into the now widely-proliferated English word biddy-bid (Moorfield "Piri-piri"). Not only is

the British coast lined with piripiri burrs, but the English language now bears this trace of te reo Māori. The diaspora is rendered literal by the traveling seeds of the piripiri.

The final illuminating piece of the piripiri puzzle is the Indigenous sense-making and art-making associated with the plant. Hokowhitu challenges the trend toward decolonization discourse and instead suggests that “a more valuable project is one of Indigenous existentialism, and inherent to this project would be discussions surrounding the immediacy of Indigenous culture” (“Indigenous Existentialism and the Body” 104). One example of the immediacy of culture surrounding the piripiri is the inclusion in lullabies, such as ‘Taku hei piripiri’ which was sung over infants (Royal 63). The song had a double association with the piripiri plant itself (often worn around the throat in a small satchel) and the secondary meaning of the word piripiri: to keep close, to stick, cling, adhere (Moorfield “Piripiri”). The stickability of the piripiri therefore carries a connotation of protection, persistence, and affection. These combined associations are captured in the oriori:

Taku hei piripiri  
Taku hei mokimoki  
Taku hei tāwhiri  
Taku kati taramea  
(Royal 63)

### **Piripiri’s Pedigree and the Ecstasy of Influence**

Like Rapatahana, previous Māori Language Commissioner Timoti Kāretu advocates for a selective, accretive mode of hybridised indigenous expression. He treats the hybrid mode of waiata-a-ringā as an example of a critical appropriation of popular western songs. “From World War Two onwards popular tunes have been borrowed, adapted and used as vehicles of expression for the Māori composer” (11). Murray Edmond has identified this form as an early expression of Modernism in Aotearoa New Zealand that engaged in “both the creation of difference and absorption” (47). Kāretu sees hybridity as enabling (12). He indexes an example of waiata-a-ringā which uses a well-known Western tune alongside original Māori writing on the subject of colonial violence and loss. Importantly, the waiata features the beloved sticky piripiri:

Hutia ana te hei kaka piripiri,  
te hei mokimoki  
I te kakī o te motu  
Tēnei ka tu tahanga.

Korangirangi ana a manawa, nawe ana a ngākau

I te haehaenga a mate.

*Sachets of piripiri and mokimoki*

*Have been torn from the throat of the people*

*Now bare.*

*The heart is saddened, the soul scarred*

*From death's assault.*

(11)

Like the sadness and scarring acknowledged in the waiata-a-ringā, Rapatahana also mourns the diminishment of te reo Māori, the economically forced urbanisation, and the top-down ‘civilising’ enforcement of English language on Māori (“Māori poetry in English” 23). In fact, he takes up the ongoing risk of the English language in the poem ‘linguistic imperialism continued’ (*Schisms* 69), analysed later in this essay. However, Rapatahana notes that Indigenous use of English is not simply a product of one-way power. Settlers’ social and legal enforcement of English is undeniable and painful. However, Rapatahana acknowledges that some leading Māori figures such as Sir Apirana Ngata also had a hand in guiding traditional Māori mōteatea toward hybridised forms. This not only involved an agentic move to forms such as waiata-ā-ringā but also toward Māori poetry written in English (“Māori poetry in English” 23). Another important nuance in Rapatahana’s use of English to advance an Indigenous episteme is his wariness of committing yet another act of erasure. To advocate for purity of language expression would be to disavow layers of fertile influence and inheritance. Irish playwright Brian Friel points out that if the history of an area involves the hybridization or even the partial erasure of its language then the policing of an official version of the indigenous language in the present - however well-meaning - can act as a further erasure of the “linguistic contour” of the layered “landscape of ... fact” (52). This also ties in with Albert Wendt’s point that to focus on cultural purity is spurious (qtd. in Keown 225). Both pain and agency can sit side by side; the coloniser’s English can become a vital Māori ‘english’.

Figures like Ngata, Wendt, Kāretu, and Rapatahana play with syncretism and the ecstasy of strategically owned influence. Rapatahana’s work stands for embracing anger about assimilation without denying the legitimacy of a tongue that has experienced assimilation. Just as the piripiri plant has made the coloniser’s coast its own, the ‘english’ language can become a potent identity marker for indigenous people who make it their own. Rapatahana honours this new ‘english’ by using lower case letters for his titles throughout the *Schisms* collection. Just as a new coast brings new space for piripiri flourishing, Rapatahana points out that with Indigenous appropriation of English “there is the prospect of utu and



more freedom from the new tongue” (“Māori poetry in English” 28). English is not just a pollutant, but a potential; the piripiri is not only an invasive weed, but a host for indigenous knowledge. As for the coloniser’s attempt to render Māori art and expression ‘less threatening’? They did not see Rapatahana’s lower-case ‘english’ poetry coming.

### **The Personal is Political**

#### **breakup**

when we last kissed  
your lips were wooden;

The splinters now

Track thin burrs

t

h

r

o

my u bleeding beard

g

h

(Rapatahana *Schisms* 81)

The poem ‘breakup’ is where the burr image explicitly arises. A romantically connotative title marks a shift in tone in the collection. Before page 81, the poems have been more pointedly political and more jarringly jabbing. This poem shifts both the subject matter and the tone. It is this more tender poem which acts as an important retrospective foil for the preceding ‘polemical’ poems. This retrospective impulse is performed by the tense in the poem. Upon first reading this poem enacts a forlorn or wistful ‘looking back’ (“when we...”) at the last moment of physical connection between lovers: a kiss with unrequited (“wooden”) passion. With a tone understandably characterised by nostalgia and loss, the speaker makes associative links from the wood of the lover’s lips to the image of a splinter to the movement of burrs through his beard. Everything around the speaker seems to be read through the totalising experience of the lover’s cold, wooden act of rejection. However, the trajectory of the woody images implies not a downward despair but an upward possibility. While the splinter represents a breakage or fragmentary process (like the romantic breakup), the burr represents something whole and independently fit for

purpose. While splinters and burrs are physically alike in their habitual interference with surfaces, the burr is no unintentional fracturing but an environmentally-adapted survival design. The nature of the surface interference is different, too. While splinters often pierce flesh or bodies, drawing blood, the burr operates with static hooking motion, favouring fabric and fur over skin and bone. In other words, the burr might be irritating or uncomfortable but provides no physical harm to human subjects, instead operating on the adaptive technology of ‘stowing away’ with a mobile agent. The speaker transitions to present tense (“now”) to reveal that the initial grief has shifted from piercing pain of a splinter, to the tickling sensation of “thin burrs”. Blood is still present from the wound of separation (“my bleeding beard”), but the burrs themselves are distributed, or stowed away, in the beard rather than the skin. The beard might be a part of the speaker’s aesthetic or even identity, but the beard cannot bleed in a literal sense. The speaker moves from being pricked by loss to letting the loss be worn like a talisman. A talisman of burrs carried on the beard (close to the throat) calls to mind the earlier outlined traditional practice of maternal affection: the neck satchel of piripiri and other scented plants. The lines of the twentieth century hybrid waiata-a-ringā mourned for the “Sachets of piripiri and mokimoki ... torn from the throat of the people” (Kāretu 11). Rapatahana’s poem places the piripiri burrs in that sacred place on the body: the throat. Not blindly attempting to restore a pre-contact past, Rapatahana instead attempts to honour the affectionate cultural history of the piripiri. This plant is not only a spiky stowaway, but a fragrant bauble of inter-personal, inter-generational tenderness.

The *pièce de résistance* of the poem is the formal arrangement of the word “through”. Not only does the arrangement mimic the shape and thrust of a piripiri burr, but also serves to sever the line, “my bleeding beard”. This severance mimics the romantic separation of the subjects of the poem, but also suggests a separation of ego from pain. The personal pronoun “my” is formally separated from the bleeding. This separation suggests a maturity or growth; an ability to sit with the discomfort of loss with the knowledge that subjectivity and survival are not threatened by grief (or grievance). This personal growth is where the seed (or the burr) of the political creeps in. Knowing Rapatahana’s radical approach to poetics, readers realise that the separation of subjectivity from loss is at the heart of the kaupapa. Anger, resentment, and grief are all natural and welcome reactions to loss, but indigenous existence survives and thrives outside of the dialectic of resistance. In line with the piripiri’s symmetrical syllabic promise of equality and balance, the wooden lips of the beloved in this poem also telegraph to the rigid, unfaithful lips of the Crown. The Crown’s lips uttered Treaty promises to signing iwi – a political partnership. These promises (the articles) turned to ‘dead wood’, just like the implied bad faith of the romantic partner. Both the personal and the political losses imply a splintering and fracturing of good faith.

Some might see a reading of a break in romantic relations as speaking to breaks in Māori - Pākehā politico-legal relations as overly allegorical. However, Rapataha-as-theorist claims that a work of poetry should be “assessed by how much it throws light on questions pertaining to epistemology and ontology” (“Toward an Aotearoa poetic” 7). Assessing Rapatahana-as-poet by his own theoretical metric seems reasonable. Ontologies consider the nature of existence and relations. Rapatahana’s romantic relational subject in ‘breakup’ reminds us of the relational nature of politics and domination. Similarly, the reference to the body (the burrs through the bleeding beard), reminds us of the embodied nature of existence. This reminder aligns with the growth away from crippling loss toward an affirmation of indigenous survivance and vitality outside that pain of loss. According to Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor, survivance hybridises survival and thriving in order to get at an “active sense of presence” and a renunciation “of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (vii). Brendan Hokowhitu urges Indigenous writers to move beyond the search for a pure pre-colonial space, and suggests instead that writers need not be “lost between the pure past and the impure present; racked by tears over the actions of others upon us,” instead learning to “‘jump for joy’ in the knowledge that regardless of our facticity, we have choice, responsibility and freedom” (“Indigenous Existentialism and the Body” 116).

Hokowhitu’s summons to learn to ‘jump for joy’ and embrace freedom links to Rapatahana’s poem, ‘lines on loss’ (*Schisms* 80). Here the speaker is located once again in an ambiguous romantic-political state and speaks of learning to “disown” tears that “are not mine,/I disown them;/only borrowed/for a while/to reveal/raging/sorrow”. The choice of the word “disown” conjures an association of rejection *and* a reminder that an original state of ownership must have existed (before the poet’s addition of the negating prefix ‘dis’). The lines at once affirm the place of tears as rightful response to loss, and also spur commitment to disowning the disabling state of personal and cultural grief. Elsewhere in the *Schisms* collection, in the poem ‘who are these whitemen?’ Rapatahana’s poetic voice rails against the strictures of European poetic form. He asks “who are these whitemen / telling me just how to write? ... / constricting my poems to predeterminate rows” (61). The answer to this question is delivered in ‘breakup’ via mischievous row-defying. In this poem the spur comes from the burr. With the insertion of the irritating (but not debilitating) pipiripi burr via the diagonally-arranged word “through”, Rapatahana urges a personal and collective indigenous existence that lives and thrives

t  
h  
r  
l o s s e s  
u  
g  
h

### **Finding the gaps**

#### **linguistic imperialism continued**

who is this english?

who t e s s e l l a t e s himself,

titilatingly,

into sanctimonious pose,

when 'actually' -

whatever that clasp of syllable might 'mean' -

he's an epigone gone waaaaay wrong:

an impramatur imposter

fly-dropping a c r o s s our every page

in kleptomantic *frenzy*;

a bogey-man dressed to kill,

insinuating the world/the word

he's here to serve us,

as

he gluts his stylish

Stylus

us  
through  
all

*for Robert Phillipson*  
(Rapatahana *Schisms* 69)

The title of this poem takes a more overtly political position than ‘breakup’. The title means business, taking no prisoners, and leaving nothing to chance. The title itself embodies the spikiness of the piri-piri burr: its twelve syllables imitating a ball of burrs, a tightly grouped concentration of anger. The important inclusion of the word ‘continued’ not only continues the episodic ‘english’ argument, but also asserts the here-and-now of imperialism. Rapatahana reminds us that colonialism is not an historical event but a structure (Veracini). This poem serves as a warning or corrective to the other instances of exuberance about the possibilities of intentional appropriation, such as waiata-a-ringa or a Māori ‘english’. This poem provides the poking burr of warning that those who seek control might still be being controlled. The speaker warns of the lure of cosmopolitan English, with its showy ‘titillation’ and “stylish / stylus”. It seems that Rapatahana has learned his ‘take no prisoners’ approach from the English language itself, which insinuates to “the world/the word / he's here to serve us”. Here the spectre of the civilising mission that rationalised colonisation is present, with its “sanctimonious pose”. The language makes a show of moral superiority, yet the poet knows that it is a smokescreen: “he’s an epigone gone waaaay wrong” decries the gleeful speaker. An epigone is a poorly distinguished follower or imitator, reinforced with the following line “an imprimatur imposter”. Not only are these admonishments fierce in content, but they are fierce in delivery. The aggressive use of alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme simultaneously perform rage, and also rage to be performed. These words are *sensational* in their political claims, and in their employment of the *senses*. Sound devices find their full elevation when read aloud. Many Māori poets “writing in English, incorporate aspects of oral literature into our texts” (Rika-Heke 155). Thus, the voice urges the lines to be spoken, summoning the ancestral strength of oral storytelling.

The guttural word choice “glut” connotes the greed of English (and its first speakers: the colonisers) as it borrows and steals from other peoples and languages in “kleptomaniac *frenzy*”. The poem ends on the seemingly ominous line that the language of the coloniser runs “through us all”. Colonisation feels deterministic here; that we are bound to live in this greedy foreign tongue. However, two can play at that game. If the English language is a chronic conniving thief, then Māori speakers of English can also be

calculating and shrewd in their uptake of tongues. Elsewhere, Rapatahana has spoken of Māori being “willing and able to have feet in both hot pools (their own language and English/english) – if and when they choose to” (“Writing back (to the centre)” 97). The formal arrangement of the word *t e s s e l l a t e s* drags the letters across the page, behaving like a stubborn piripiri, needing force to be peeled back. Tessellation’s denotation implies a perfect covering of a surface by a repeating shape, without gaps. However, the model of the piripiri’s friction and drag creates gaps on the page, effectively putting formal lie to the meaning of the English word. This is one way that Rapatahana’s ‘english’ (as opposed to English) works on the granular level: by serving back English words in a way that cheekily undermines their authority. Physically making gaps in a word that denies gaps matches Rapatahana’s aim “not to narrow the stream of poetry in Aotearoa but to *w i d e n* it so that ALL forms have a part to play and an equal standing ground of opportunity and publication. I’m an inclusive, not exclusive, equalizer, eh.” (“Toward an Aotearoa poetic” 8). Rapatahana’s grace as a critic is to widen rather than narrow, allowing for multiple conceptions of indigenous expression. The barbing thrust of the piripiri burr is present in the final stanza, too. Syntactically, the lines scan as “he gluts his stylish / stylus / through us all”. This scan implies that the English language puts its own dominant burrs and barbs through all indigenous subjects; a fatalistic and inescapable state of affairs. However, the formal arrangement is utterly non-linear:

us  
through  
all

For the line to make sense, one has to read the word “through” as literally piercing *through* the words “us” and “all”. However, this spiky insertion also creates a new possibility: a vertical rather than horizontal reading. This new order creates the sequence, “us through all”, as though to say that ‘we [indigenous subjects] remain *us* through *all* [pain, loss, trauma, and - not least - linguistic imperialism].’ The fact that this poem is dedicated to Robert Phillipson supports this reading. Phillipson is a contributing writer in Rapatahana and Bunce’s edited collection *English Language as Hydra: Its impacts on non-English language cultures*. In his foreword to the book, Phillipson makes a case for flax-roots Te Reo Māori language nests such as *kura kaupapa*. He also speaks of the potential in locally-reworked configurations of English (xxiii). Rika-Heke also points out that “Māori writers writing in the dominant language English use literary strategies which ensure that our texts are transmitted in the way we want them to be” (155). Enter my own positioning, again: while I may be sensitive to the legitimacy of ‘other Englishes’ with my Scots background, I do not have the insider access to the lilts, rolls, and nuances of te reo Māori that would allow me full access to the cross-pollination into english. To know that there is a world in these poems that I cannot see or hear provides another tickling burr. Rapatahana provides

enough of a hook to understand the re-worlding implications of his lines but the insider's message is clear: as an outsider you can visit but you cannot occupy these poems.



**Fig 2.** *The piripiri burrs look straight from a distance, but actually end in tiny hooks.* From Seabrooke Leckie. "Hooking a Free Ride." Seabrooke Leckie, 2 Feb. 2008, [seabrookeleckie.com/2008/02/01/hooking-a-free-ride/](http://seabrookeleckie.com/2008/02/01/hooking-a-free-ride/).

The poem's word "through" is a tickling burr that flickers between meanings in its mark-making. Does the burr belong to the coloniser or is it of the Indigenous episteme? The answer is that there is no answer: the poem locks us into a contradictory state that is both violent and salvific. English will always bear the lineage of colonisation, but it will also always bear the potential for a uniquely Indigenous expression. Though the sticky word "through" parts the wholeness of the page, the virtuosic utterance seeks to restore wholeness to its subject and its speaker. The piripiri is, in botanical terms, a 'prostrate plant', growing close to the ground and unable to grow tall. However, this prostrate, vulnerable state does not preclude flourishing. With ingenious trickery, the piripiri latches itself to travellers in order to continue its roaming survival. The piripiri as a tight ball of contradictory burrs allows a grace-filled understanding that those rendered prostrate and vulnerable by colonisation can, in this space of poetic mark-making, make their move.

## A Tender Barb

Let us return to Cockayne's claim that civilisation is a "weed" that establishes the superiority of the "civilised man in relation to the savage," learning to live "in great security" and grow with "luxuriance" (130). These racist, colonialist claims are appalling to the twenty first century ear. However, the joke is on Cockayne. It is not the colonisers that need lauding for their adaptability, but the piripiri plant's own ruthless drive to survive (and 'grow with luxuriance'). This drive to survive is in line with cultural and artistic products such as Rapatahana's schismatic poetry, too. Franz Fanon posits that a "national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (qtd. in Hall 237). Both Rapatahana and the relentless piripiri burrs are interested in this quest to keep themselves in existence. They are not satisfied to exist only in relation to an oppressor, nor only in the mental state of resistance. Their existence comes from a new episteme: a new space to tumble and stick on the coloniser's shoreline; a new lower-case english in which to barb, play, and dance with the coloniser's upper-case English.

Rapatahana makes clear that existence is not predicated on resistance; that the project of making an indigenous-inflected home in the coloniser's language is mischievous, liberating, and performative. Works published exclusively in te reo Māori or in translation of te reo Māori satisfy Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's desire to shrug off the hegemony of English. However, in the space of Rapatahana's 'english' episteme, the burr disrupts hegemony by serving as prod, irritant, travel technology, protector, sticky frictional thinking, and directional dexterity. Rapatahana's work might make use of the thorny, tickling, and hooking mechanisms of the piripiri, but he also rehabilitates the loving affection associated with the plant's cultural history: oriori, waiata-a-ringa, and whānau talisman, worn for protection (Landcare Research Manaaki Whenua). The English phrase, 'to have a burr in one's throat' means to be tickled and irritated (Harper). However, Rapatahana's poetic 'english' reinstates the tender, potent power of the piripiri worn at that seat of speech in the body: the throat. With Rapatahana's poems we see a simultaneously pragmatic and highly playful investment in the cultural capital of a syncretic inheritance. I think it only fair that Rapatahana has the last word, for this is no whiteman's burr(den):

"It is time for the regnant episteme of middle-class, usually Pākehā, poetics vested in the seawrack of years of internecine poetic squabbles, to shift tectonically – and I sense that in a very real sense this is currently happening in Aotearoa-New Zealand" ("Toward an Aotearoa poetic" 2).



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