

Ko rua ngā kōwhiringa toikupu

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Towards the end of 2019 I attended and participated in two international poetry events: World Poetry Recital Night in Kuala Lumpur and Poetry International at the Southbank Centre in London. Both occasions celebrated performance poetry, as well as work written and performed in indigenous tongues and forms.

World Poetry Recital Night, September 2019

This was a special evening promoted by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture as part of a wider endeavour to install Kuala Lumpur as World Book Capital 2020, a status accorded in 2018 by the Director-General of UNESCO Audrey Azoulay. Kuala Lumpur was selected on the recommendation of the World Book Capital Advisory Committee, comprising representatives of the International Publishers Association (IPA), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and UNESCO based on applications received from cities all over the world. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture was given the responsibility to organise and oversee this event, one among several events during 2019, ‘to promote not only reading among society through literary and cultural platforms’¹ but also to ‘further enliven the Visit Malaysia Year 2020 promotion’.² There was, then, a twin agenda: to promote Malaysia as a centre of literary accomplishment and at the same time to encourage overseas visitors to the country. Accordingly, there was considerable planning for the two poetry-related activities on the Saturday. Moreover, the Ministry worked alongside the National Library of Malaysia – the venue for World Poetry Recital Night – to ‘promote art and literary works to a higher level’³ and to produce a book compiling the poems read and titled *Puisi Dalam Zaman Tidak Puitis, Poetry in a Non-Poetic Era*.

I was especially grateful to meet up with Muhammad Haji Salleh, one of Malaysia’s most well-regarded poets, and one of the Malaysian literary laureates reading at this event. He – as I soon found out – was the spur to issue the invitation to me to perform. We had been communicating since the

1990s, when I was working in Brunei Darussalam and had included his fine poetry in the first-ever collection of Bruneian poets writing in English, *Under the Canopy* (1998), which I instigated and co-edited with Dr Alan Chamberlain, an Australian academic. ‘Under the Canopy’, by the way, was the title of one of the poems in this anthology, written by a leading Bruneian poet, Irwan Haji Abdul Rahman. The Centre for British Teachers, The British Council and HSBC were the conjoint publishers of the anthology, for which Alan and I also prepared separate teaching notes for local secondary schools.

During World Poetry Recital Night, several leading poets representing Thailand, France, Singapore, Viet Nam, Bangladesh, Japan, Iran, Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and – naturally – Malaysia, read in their own first languages, in most cases the dominant national tongue of their respective home countries, such as Japanese, French and Farsi or Persian. However, I read in te reo Māori and one of the Malaysian poets, Oneh @ Latifah Bte Osman from Sabah read in her own indigenous tongue, namely Kimaragang. The poets from Malaysia who read included several other of their National Literary Laureates, namely A. Samad Said, Anwar Ridhwan and Zurinah Hassan.

Interestingly, none of the Malaysian poets read the traditional four-line Malay verse form, the *pantun* (a form later commandeered by the French and thus becoming the *pantoum*). The irony here was that the French poet, Jerome Bouchaud, who is also a long-term resident of Malaysia, did read his own *pantun*. Moreover, he explained the historical momentum whereby the *pantun* became the *pantoum*. Apparently, Victor Hugo first publicised the *pantoum* after he encountered a fellow French poet, Ernest Fouinet, who had been studying ‘exotic’ verse, as in Asian poetry. Hugo called the *pantun* the *pantoum* instead of *pantuon*. From that typo onwards, there was no turning back and *pantoum* began spreading quickly among poetry circles around the Western world.

All poems were presented in front of large colourful screens displaying the original language alongside a translation into Bahasa Malaysia. The entire event revolved around several mighty poetic displays; the *pidato* of the Bruneian poet Zefri Ariff being outstanding, because he also incorporated epic sound effects, music and many gesticulations, all against the vibrant backdrop. ‘Epic’ and ‘vibrant’ because several stage loudspeakers boomed out the sounds of thunder and cascading water, while the flashing strobe lights representing lightning further embellished his lively performance.

Pidato is a form of oratory or public speaking and has strong parallels to Māori *mōteatea* whereby oral performance and expressive delivery to an audience is paramount.

My own multilingual poem [tongues](#) – which encapsulates the theme of indigenous language sublimation – was included in the anthology and I performed it on the night. I learned a lot from

Zefri's performance, and I vowed to regularly incorporate traditional Māori instruments in my own readings from then onward. Indeed, I did so in London the following month, which I refer to later.

A further event as part of Malaysia as World Book Capital was the Saturday afternoon's panel discussion *Poetry in a Non-Poetic Era*, in the room adjacent to the evening readings. In the panel, Md. Salleh, Jerome Bouchaud and the Filipina academic-poet Rebecca T. Anonuevo took questions from both an interviewer and then a sizeable audience. During their discussion, there was an awareness and agreement that perhaps globally we do live in a non-poetic era, although all three concurred that poetry was an important ingredient in their own respective cultures. However, the entire evening event belied a non-poetic ambience and was a celebration of World Poetry, albeit largely not written – or read – in English, the dominant global language. Only one poet had written their poem in English: the Singaporean Kerpal Singh.

Indeed, the English tongue did not dominate the proceedings of Recital Night. Accordingly, the anthology – which also included work by several other Malaysian poets who were not present on the evening – included a poem in the poet's main or indigenous language first, then a translation into Bahasa Malaysia, if required, and only lastly a translation into English. It was also made even more apparent on the night that Māori and Malaysian – and indeed the Filipino national language Tagalog – share not only vowel pronunciation, but also several words, such as *mata* or eye. I am fortunate to be able to speak in all three of these historically interlinked Austronesian languages and did so during the time in Kuala Lumpur. The lack of emphasis on the English tongue in such a non-dominant multilingual context certainly made me feel very much at home as an Indigenous, yet global poet and performer.

And the sumptuous *makan* or feast was also marvellous. Among the splendid array of foods – eaten while the poets read in turn, and as local music assemblages played and dance troupes performed – were traditional Malay delights such as nasi dagang, mee goreng, nasi lemak, roti, rendang, satay and more. The sharing of food between us all in this buffet-like setting, further emphasised the congeniality and the relaxed ambience of the entire evening.

Poetry International October 2019

In October I was invited to London for Poetry International, Southbank Centre's longest-running festival, founded in 1967 by former Poet Laureate Ted Hughes and running biennially since then, featuring many of the world's acclaimed poets, as well as a wide array of newer and often innovative poets. Events are spread over several weekday evenings and weekend days and each time there is a

different underlying theme. For 2019's incarnation the overall theme was alternative poetry, most especially [disruptive](#) and [experimental](#) performance work - which certainly struck several chords with me, in that I have always sought an alternative to so-called mainstream English language poetry, whereby much of the time poets write purely for the printed page and then all too often read their work with little further elaboration or movement. In other words, I do construct my work with a view to deconstruct.

In London I first went to a presentation in the early afternoon of the Saturday titled 'Exploring Poetry as Disruption' and I found the three discursive presentations there fascinating. This was experimental poetry from a younger generation of women poets: Iris Colomb, J. R. Carpenter and Nisha Ramayya. Audience participation and escape from the printed word page characterised many of these performances. For example, Iris Colomb drew out a very long and thin tape with words printed on it from a small container on the floor and spread the tape through her fingers as she read from it, before discarding it after several minutes. She also drew in previously arranged members of the audience to read a brief passage interspersed during the performance of her own next extended piece. Hers was not a static reading, in that she also moved around the room. J. R. Carpenter read computer generated texts, which were variable in that every time she read one, the next time she read it, the vocabulary and word order had changed somewhat. She displayed the moving and colourful digital texts on a screen alongside her at the front of the room. Nisha Ramayya read from her mobile phone, emphasising her descriptions of prejudice against minority peoples, with considerable gusto. All three 'disruptive' poets can be sighted on You Tube, by the way.

Interestingly enough – given the overall theme – almost all such performance by these three poets was in some form of English language medium. I pondered how poetry could be 'disruptive' while still rooted and read in the dominant global language with its concomitant inherent dominant cultural tropes, and was going to ask about this during question time at the end of this event, but time counted against my chance to do so!

The key event in London for me was the launch of the 50-poem anthology [Poems from the Edge of Extinction](#), in which my te reo Māori poem (with an English language title) *britain in the south seas* is included. This launch was the prime rationale for my being invited to participate in Poetry International, given that I was also asked to take part in other events during the weekend. This compilation collated poems written in endangered or severely threatened tongues and ranged from Rotuman to Navajo. The anthology stemmed from the sterling work of its editor Chris McCabe and the [Endangered Poetry Project](#). This project was inaugurated in 2017 by the National Poetry Library in London, where McCabe is National Librarian, and seeks to capture poetic activity written in endangered languages for future generations. In *Poems from the Edge of Extinction* (Chambers,

London, 2019) McCabe is determined to provide much-needed exposure to such threatened tongues and at the same time to seek not only support for their survival, but plead for their survival *per se*. McCabe notes in his introduction that the languages were, ‘identified by UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger.’⁴

It is important to note that some languages as represented in the anthology, and on the Endangered Poetry Project website, are ‘more’ endangered than others. Indeed, there is a continuum of endangered tongues at play here, with te reo Māori certainly under threat and some other languages struggling to survive at all. For example, McCabe included work by the last speaker of Patua in Macau, Miguel S. Fernandes.

It is also important to point out that even a language which would seem ‘less threatened’ (that is not critically endangered) is still listed by UNESCO as vulnerable. For example, given that Belarussian nowadays is called their native language by 43% of Belarussians, ‘only a fraction of this group uses Belarussian daily.’⁵ Why? Because of russification – the process from 1995 onwards whereby Russian language proficiency and the associated cultural integration is mandated in schools and the wider community. Now only 5% of Belarussians read literature in their ‘native’ tongue.

A further key point McCabe makes is that poetry written in endangered languages actually thrives because the language is under threat and poets express this aspect in their work. Accordingly, ‘through the active display of language use as an art...the younger generations first listen to their indigenous languages with interest, then begin to activate that language for themselves.’⁶ Poetry, then, ‘acts-against-extinction’.⁷

In the collection, there are fifty endangered languages featured and therefore fifty poems representing all continents, as well as translations into English on the facing pages, similar in arrangement to the anthology *Puisi Dalam Zaman Tidak Puitis, Poetry in a Non-Poetic Era*, published in Malaysia. The poets include Valzhyna Mort (Belarussian), Laura Tohe (Navajo), Hawad (Tamajaght), Nineb Lamassu and Stephen Watts (Assyrian), Shehzar Doja and James Byrne (Rohingya) and me – all of whom performed vibrantly on the Saturday evening launch of the compilation. None of the other contributors participated in the launch event.

During my own performance I ensured the stage crew showed a movie directed by Joanne Marras Tate, a Brazilian studying in Colorado, concerning the Te Awa Tupua Act (2017) whereby the Whanganui River has been accorded human rights and which included me reciting one of my poems, *te taiao o Aotearoa*. I had been invited by Tate to contribute to the film, as well as to an accompanying academic paper. The video was particularly well-received by the sizeable audience.

Further, as part of my own performance in London, there was a background kōauau (wind instruments) soundtrack while I read several poems, including the one represented in the anthology, *britain in the south seas*. I also had, prior to going to London, liaised with Chris McCabe about ensuring our launch poems were displayed in backdrops showing our indigenous version and the English language version alongside this – something I had been impressed with in Kuala Lumpur. This was done and further added to the presentations, for the audience could then see exactly what was being read on the stage.

On the Sunday afternoon in London was a reading titled ‘Incendiary Art, the Power of Disruptive Poetry’, with myself and renowned poets Patricia Smith and Chen Chen, which I gleefully also participated in. We had been grouped together and invited by Chris McCabe on behalf of the Southbank Centre. We formed a most provocative trio intent on expanding the perimeters of what poetry essentially ‘is’, most particularly as regards the themes contained in a piece, and the potent delivery of it. For example, I am committed to a seismic detonation of comfortably bland poetic content; to delivery away from printed page/microphone stasis; and to a disavowal of ‘standardised’ forms (thus intertwining languages, playing around with fonts and so on), so this event was a perfect opportunity to attempt to combine all three aspects. This time around, there was a pulsating haka and waiata soundtrack underpinning my work.

My fellow poets were outstanding as they also stretched out the global status of poetry. Patricia Smith is a powerful and emotionally searing Chicago-based slam poetry master; Chen Chen a younger gay Chinese American poet from New York, who is wryly and slyly surreal and comic all at once. Both are performance artists as opposed to stationary readers of text from a page. Smith raved with rage from her seminal collection *Incendiary Art* about the murder of Emmett Till and the ongoing effects of this on Black Americans, while Chen selected poems from his award-winning collection *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities*, concerning a new immigrant’s struggles to fit in the USA. I felt privileged to be with them on the stage, electric in the intensity of the performances.

Finally, in London, we were well catered for also: there was copious delicious food and beverages available for the poets throughout, while the festival culminated with an invitation-only party late on the Sunday night. The generosity provided by the Southbank Centre emphasised their commitment to all forms of global poetry, from so-called ‘mainstream’ through to ‘resistant’ artists. The Centre certainly made all of us participants feel comfortable and appreciated.

During the visit to London, I was co-interviewed about the London compilation by [The Guardian](#) for a podcast, along with Valzhyna Mort, the fine Belarussian poet, and we spoke passionately about

striving to retain our respective indigenous languages. I was also fortunate to record my poem *mō Ōtautahi* for the BBC, for a further podcast which featured Laura Tohe, the Navajo laureate. Moreover, an issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (#3, 2019) included a lengthy virtual roundtable discussion titled *We Have Words Like Everyone*, where six poets included in *Poems from the Edge of Extinction* responded to Chris McCabe's earlier emailed questions. Three of the contributors had not attended the London launch, so it was good to also see their responses. They were Recaredo Boturu (Bubi language), Joy Harjo (Mvskoke) and Zubair Torwali (Torwali.) Back in Aotearoa New Zealand I was later co-interviewed along with McCabe about the anthology he edited, by Kim Hill on [Radio NZ](#)

Afterword

The occasions in Kuala Lumpur and London, while pertaining to poetry, were also very much involved with different languages and how some languages not only affect others, but also the ways in which a language can be expressed. In both places the accent was on vibrant delivery of the poetry, often accompanied by audio-visual effects to augment this aspect. Yet there was a marked contrast between the two occasions: several languages were being celebrated as swimming strongly in Kuala Lumpur, while in London several indigenous languages were being featured as struggling to even keep above water. My participation in both these events brought home to me more strongly the fact that while a minority of first tongues prevail resolutely, too many others struggle for air. Of course, Bahasa Malaysia is manifestly not under threat and is the lingua franca of that country. Malaysia managed to maintain its literary and indeed cultural authenticity because it has held fast to its language (primarily as means to attain/maintain unity as a nation.) The same can be said for most of the other tongues represented at World Poetry Recital Night. Yet, oppositely, the poems represented at the launch of *Poems from the Edge of Extinction* were predominantly under threat from several dominant tongues. Indeed, 'Languages are dying at the rate of every two weeks. Of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world over half of these are endangered. By the end of the century half the world's current languages will be lost.'⁸ Interestingly also, neither anthology launch featured the English language as its focus.

I asked myself, 'What did I learn from this contrast between dominant and threatened language poetry in both capital cities, and the delivery of them?' It caused me to reflect further that if only I could be more confident in the strong revival and survival of te reo Māori after decades of its deliberate suppression and the contemporary monolingual ignorance – about which I have written copiously, including in [Ka Mate Ka Ora](#). I believe that Aotearoa New Zealand as a nation still must take more steps toward a greater appreciation of Māori language and the distinct poetic heritage contained in it.

Poetry is often the crux of a culture, originating as it did from oral traditions: in cherishing poetry written in different tongues, we are ensuring our own existential diversities. But without recognition of the inherent epistemological nuances embedded in them, indigenous languages and therefore cultures continue to struggle to survive. In short, poetry is our ontology. Musing on this, as well as the significance of vital oral presentation as a key to maintain a language, I wrote a poem in response to Chris McCabe's cogent statement, 'As speakers of a language in decline, the poets in that language have a tendency to rise up.'⁹

kōrero tonu i tāu reo

kōrero tonu i tāu reo ko tāu ahurea tēnā

tuhia tonu i tāu reo ko tāu ahurea tēnā

kāore e wareware ki te pono o te reo māori ko te ngākau o tāu koiora

ki te kāore tāu reo

kāore e taea e koe te māori

'Translation' from te reo Māori to the English language always speak your language

always speak your language it is your culture

always write your language it is your culture

don't forget the truth of the Māori language it is the heart of your life

without your language you cannot be Māori.

Tēnā koe mō ngā kōwhiringa toikupu. Thank you for the poetry opportunities.

Endnotes

¹ Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (2019.) Foreword. *Puisi Dalam Zaman Tidak Puitis, Poetry in a Non-Poetic Era*. Kuala Lumpur: ITBM, p. xiv.

² *ibid.* p. xiv.

³ *ibid.* Preface, p. xx.

⁴ McCabe, Chris (Ed.) (2019.) Introduction. *Poems from the Edge of Extinction, An anthology of Poetry in Endangered Languages*. London: Chambers, p. 4.

⁵ *ibid.* p. 182.

⁶ *ibid.* Introduction, p 3.

⁷ *ibid.* p. 3.

⁸ Endangered Poetry Project. <https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/blog/endangered-poetry-project> Accessed April 25, 2020.

⁹ McCabe, Introduction, p. 4.