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Sources of hope: Nadine Anne Hura's poem "For Papatūānuku"

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Abstract

Nature has been a vital element of Māori culture since its very beginning. Māori understanding of the world around depends on natural references; nature is present as embedded in both time and space. Māori mythology acknowledges the Earth Mother and Sky Father as the first parents who gave life to the many Māori gods, but the figure of Mother Earth, or Papatūānuku, marks its presence far beyond the myth of creation: it is part of the worldview, spirituality and even daily life. Nadine Anne Hura's poem was first published on *The Spinoff* platform on March 3, 2020 and has gained recognition due to its reposting by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. Hura's poem provides a compelling example of hope that can be found in the rhythms of a poem, and, in a wider context, through the way in which the poem underlines the importance of reestablishing a connection with nature and spiritual growth.

Keywords

nature, rhythm, hope, Māori, Mother Earth

Źródła nadziei: Wiersz "Dla Papatūānuku" autorstwa Nadine Anne Hury

Abstrakt

Natura od samego początku stanowi istotny element kultury maoryskiej. Rozumienie otaczającego świata przez Maorysów opiera się na odniesienia do natury, dlatego też natura jest obecna jako część zarówno czasu, jak i miejsca. Mitologia maoryska uznaje Matkę Ziemię i Ojca Niebo jako pierwszych rodziców, którzy dali życie wielu maoryskim bogom, jednak postać Papatūānuku, Matki Ziemi, odznacza swą obecność dużo dalej niż sam mit o stworzeniu, jest ona częścią światopoglądu, religijności, a także życia codziennego. Wiersz autorstwa Nadine Anne Hury został po raz pierwszy opublikowany na platformie *The Spinoff* 3 marca 2020 r. i zyskał popularność dzięki temu, iż nowozelandzka premier Jacinda Ardern ponowiła jego publikację. Wiersz Hury stanowi niesamowity przykład nadziei, którą można zobaczyć w rytmie wiersza oraz, w szerszym kontekście, w sposobie, w jaki wiersz podkreśla istotę odnowienia więzi z naturą i rozwoju duchowego.

Słowa kluczowe

natura, rytm, nadzieja, Maorysi, Matka Ziemia

1. Introduction

The poem "For Papatūānuku" was first published by Nadine Anne Hura (2020), a New Zealand essayist and poet through one of the platforms she collaborates with, *The Spinoff*. As it seemed to provide consolation during the time of isolation, the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern decided to share the poem with her followers via a social platform during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper sets out to present the image of Mother Earth as an embodiment of the land, so precious to Māori culture, and to examine how Hura's text brings together two distant timeframes

through the figure of Papatūānuku. On the one hand, the poem recalls the wounds of the colonial past; on the other, it reflects on contemporary global crises, including the pandemic and the devastation of the natural world. By situating ecological harm within the longer history of colonisation, the text highlights the inseparable connection between the plight of the land and that of its people.

The poem's appeal lies in offering hope through images of stillness, care, and renewal, weaving Māori cosmology into contemporary experience and turning to the figure of Papatūānuku, Mother Earth, as a source of both comfort and instruction. Yet, this article aims to demonstrate how consolation arises not only from imagery and the overall message, but also from the poem's distinctive rhythmic structure.

2. Māori spirituality and colonial background

Māori people have always cultivated a special, almost organic relationship with their land. As Paola Della Valle notices in *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Māori Literature*: "[…] in Māori culture land does not belong to the people, rather people belong to the land" (2010: 7). Māori identity is thus directly connected to the land they belong to.

An important marker of people's close ties with the land is the ritual performed after the birth of a baby. Ngahuia Te Awekotuku (1996: 33) explains this practice in "Māori: People and Culture":

> Papatūānuku is the Earth Mother, combining all elements of the planet; her immediate form is *whenua*, the land. Continuing the organic metaphor, *whenua* is also the Māori word for the placenta, which is promptly buried with simple ritual after birth. This practice is still observed today, even is cities, thus the word itself reflects the relationship between people and the land […].

The people and their land thus become forever bonded in the process. Their lives seem to be also devoted to nature, as in the ritual the burying of the placenta seems like a gift or sacrifice to the land. According to Dianne Wepa and Jean Te Huia (2006: 26), "[t]he philosophy here is that through this process Papatūānuku will continue to feed and sustain the life of all humanity". The process may be seen as an exchange: a part of a human being is given up for the sake of being able to use natural resources, as the lives of the Māori people have always depended on the cultivation of the land. The fruits of their own soil provided their basic provisions, so they learnt to appreciate the soil and its produce, treating it with due respect.

The image of Mother Earth thus endows her with certain attributes. She provides shelter, nourishment but also enables her children to find consolation in times of sorrow. As Arapata Tamati Hakiwai (1996: 62) asserts,

> [t]o Māori people the whenua or land is a treasure handed down by our ancestors to be held in trust for future generations […]. The land is held sacred and is seen as the sustainer of life, precious because it is life. It is Papatūānuku or Mother Earth, who resembles the human mother […]. The spirit of the land lives in the person […].

Both Mother Earth and Father Sky are sacred figures. This idea of sacredness is in the Māori language referred to as "tapu" (Henare 2001: 207). It seems only natural, then, that the image of Mother Earth reappears in Māori writing, especially in the literary contributions of the so-called Māori Renaissance, a cultural movement aimed at reviving Indigenous literature in postcolonial New Zealand. Janet Wilson (2008: 267) claims that the aim of contemporary New Zealand literature is, among others, "to affirm the interconnectedness between members of the community and the common identity between the individual, *whanau* and the land. This is central to Māori identity as *tangata*

whenua (people of the land)". Powhiri Wharemarama Rika-Heke (1996: 156) confirms this point of view:

> Another underlying theme of much Māori writing is the concept of land as home and place of one's origin. To be deprived of this place is a painful and emotionally shattering experience. Land is sacred, essential to tribal histories and the people's sense of "belonging." Our identity is linked to the land: we are *tangata whenua*.

New Zealand fiction is abundant in the examples of land cultivation as ways to survive, but also of the images of land as a site of suffering and resistance. During the colonial period land became a commodity, a particularly valuable asset for the colonisers. The settlers bought the land, overtook it, overpassing Māori ideas of land as a cultural site. As Chris Prentice (2009) asserts, "[l]and and bodies figure as sites of colonial expropriation, exploitation, and violence" (322). The expansion and abuse related to the process is done not only at the expense of the people and their bodies, but to a great extent, the land.

The colonisers brought with them a utilitarian vision of the landscape. As Allan Hanson (1989) observes, "Pakeha [European settlers'] culture is out of step with nature – it pollutes the environment and lacks a close tie with the land" (894). And indeed, the effects of the colonisation do not include only the appropriation of land but also rapid industrialization and urbanization that led to irreversible changes and damage to the environment.

Witi Ihimaera's novel *The Matriarch* (1986: 238–239) offers a further and more politically involved commentary upon the dispossession of land, blaming the Pakeha people for the humiliation of Māori people. The overtone of the excerpt is bitter regret about the past:

> The land, always the land. The Māori people possessed it, but the white man has always lusted for it. From the very beginning of organised Pakeha colonisation in 1840, many Māori tribes had opposed the sale of land. There were rumours that the government

> intended to confiscate all Māori land. Let's admit it: the Land Wars began when the Māori lost the upper hand in Aotearoa, and particularly around 1858 when the census revealed that in a small space of thirty years there were already more white settlers than indigenous dwellers. The views of Māori and Pakeha about the future of the country were absolutely incompatible. The government attempted to buy more and more land, urgently needed by the Pakeha settlers; the Māori people considered these attempts to be against their express wish to retain the land. So the long wearying war began, which the Māori people appropriately called "the white man's quarrel". [...] But the war was lost, the war over the body of Papatūānuku, and the Māorithroughout the land tasted bitterness. He had to endure confiscation and to become no more than a black slave in the new antipodean white South. Altogether 3,215,172 acres of Māori land were confiscated in the Waikato, Taranaki and the Bay of Plenty to pay for Māori insurgency.

This excerpt draws attention not only to the immense scale of the land appropriation, but also to the loss of Māori spiritual connections in the process. The striking image of "the body of Papatūānuku" implies the death of the Mother Earth, both as a symbol of culture and as a mother figure, protector of the Māori Indigenous values.

Because of the deprivation of land, Māori people lost their spiritual bond with nature. Henare (2001: 212) implies that the process of healing and the renewal of the bond between people and their land is necessary for the Earth Mother to thrive again, and, by extension, for the environment to cleanse itself:

> Alienation and disconnection from land, forest, rivers, stream, tributaries, pools, and seas had distanced people from Earth Mother and nature. Denial of the responsibilities of guardianship over creation, and being unable to nurture and need both the life forces (*mauri* and *hau*) of the diverse substances and forms of creation, has profound implication for humans and nature. The obligatory reciprocity between humanity and the natural world has not occurred and the spirit, *wairua*, of the region is sick – an

> illness which manifests itself in poor production, high unemployment, and other social ills of the century just past.

With each human mistake the Earth becomes weaker and requires further attention. The colonial period and the atrocities of the settlers destroyed the natural environment, yet, the post-colonial era brought a number of changes to the way that people perceive and treat the land.

3. Nadine Anne Hura's poem "For Papatūānuku"

Nadine Anne Hura's poem seems to be embedded in two timeframes, as it evokes the colonial exploitation of the Mother Earth, but also reflects the current environmental and humanitarian problems, the most urgent one being the COVID-19 pandemic.

The poem starts with a direct address to Mother Earth, which might resemble a prayer. The speaking persona attempts to establish a connection, even if her words are just a monologue to which a response is not provided. Historically, within literary discourse, Mother Earth has been silent, and this silence continues in the poem.

The speaking persona asks Papatūānuku to rest, urging her to pause for a moment. This may seem like a reference to her maternal duties, which she does not stop to perform despite her tiredness. Mother Earth is thus treated as any mother whose responsibilities hardly ever allow her a moment to stop and reflect. The image of the mother is then changed for the image of the land on which the speaking persona promises not to move. This promise is collective, showing the indebtedness of all the Māori people and/or humanity to the process of trampling, stamping or simply walking.

Here, the speaking persona makes a direct reference at the difficult times that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to humanity. The future tense seems not to provide a promise, rather a compromise is suggested. The two lines: "We'll stop, we'll cease

|| We'll slow down and stay home" (lines 6-7) provide a reference to the isolation and necessity being home-bound during the pandemic period. Yet the image of isolation is not a negative one. It carries positive connotations, as it becomes a time for "draw[ing] each other close and be[ing] kind" (line 8). The moment of cessation thus becomes a moment of reflection, of rebuilding bonds, of reaching out to family and friends, of reminding oneself what it truly means to be human.

The speaker then goes on to reflect on the reasons for this abrupt pause in living. The real reason behind not moving upon the back of the earth is not environmental concern or humanistic awakening, it is the pandemic that forced the people to stop for a moment, to stay at home, to refrain from further exploitation. Yet, as the line "It's right. It's time" (line 14) suggests, this side effect of the global pandemic reveals the need for the earth to renew, to both literally and metaphorically, take a breath.

The following lines seem to evoke both the colonial and precolonial times, taking the speaker on a reflexive journey. The repetitions used in the poem create a list of things that can and should be done during the period of isolation. The first idea is "to return" (line 15), provided as a very vague concept. One can imagine that by returning, the speaking persona means going back to the roots of Māori culture, or perhaps reestablishing the initial function of the landscape, letting it grow without the human intervention. The next suggestion is "to remember" (line 16), which can be understood again in a number of ways. The speaker may refer to remembering about the Indigenous values, Māori mythology, but it may also be seen as a reference to recollections about the colonial pasts. In this manner, the words may sound as a warning to the younger generation not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The third line within the list enumerates listening and forgiving which may refer to the voices of the past that should be reconciled with. At the same time, the speaker calls it "Time to withhold judgment" (line 18), so that the process of forgiving should be parallel to understanding. Yet, it is also "Time to cry" (line 19), which might suggest emotional

cleansing, perhaps even weeping for the ancestors who died fighting for their land.

It seems though that here the speaking persona returns from the journey into the historical circumstances and the process of crying and, as it follows, thinking, may refer to the present timescape. Also, the lines do not seem to be limited to Māori people but can be understood in more global terms, as the speaker urges the intended readers of the poem to "remove our shoes || Press hands to soil" (lines 22-3). Traditionally, Māori people (even today) go barefoot, so the idea seems to be aimed at a variety of cultures who should follow the idea of touching the earth. The speaking persona also calls the readers to enter a very bodily, organic relationship with the land through the process of touching, "sift[ing] grains between fingers" (line 24), in a way intermingling the body of land with the human body.

The call for forming the relationship is followed by an urge "to plant", "wait" and "notice" (lines 26-8). What is meant here is reversing the damage done to the environment through establishing a spiritual connection, but also helping the earth in a very practical way, by enabling it to grow new plants. Planting has both literal and symbolic dimension: it is a sign of future growth and healing. The speaker asks the reader to notice that they belong to land, a concept rooted in Māori tradition, but at the same time one that can be understood in a global manner.

The aforementioned isolation is perceived as replete with positive images and opportunities to reconcile with nature, embodied in the wind, forests, oceans and sky. The isolation is thus not from humans, but with nature, allowing human beings to reestablish a different relationship, more spiritual and transcendent. This excerpt also seems to be addressed to other human beings, as the use of "you" clearly changes its meaning.

The exclamation "Finally, it's raining!" (line 33) is the ultimate expression of hope through the poem. The speaking persona does not seem to focus on the difficulties of the circumstances relating to the sickness and death. Instead, attention is

brought to the possibility of renewal, both in terms of spiritual growth, but also physical cleansing of the earth's surface.

The next line is provided in Māori, which shifts the attention particularly to the realm of New Zealand, but addresses the experience of the pandemic shared by people all over the world. The author herself explains this connotation in the notes under the poem republished on one of websites:

> Ka turuturu te wai kamo o Rangi ki runga i a koe - means something like, "tears from the eyes of Ranginui drip down on you" (Ranginui is our sky father, it is common to refer to rain as the tears of Rangi for his beloved, from whom he was separated at the beginning of time in order that there could be light in the world). Not long after the announcement we were moving to level 3, it poured with rain in Porirua after many months of hot and dry weather. I could feel my garden rejoicing. (Hura, qtd in *Green Sabbath Project*)

The explanation establishes a connection between physical rain, spiritual healing of the body and the renewal of natural resources. Rain is here perceived as blessing, a gift endowed with cleansing and life-giving qualities.

The speaker continues to address the intended reader of the poem, asking him or her to "embrace it" (line 35), to learn a lesson from the time of isolation and to use the time given to really reflect upon the state of nature. Yet, one can see this as a shift in the object addressed. If the line is read together with the next one: "This sacrifice of solitude we have carved out for you" (line 36), then this part of the poem may be invoked at the Earth Mother and the sacrifice of time and isolation made by human can be treated as *taonga*, or treasures gifted by the (Māori) people to nature.

The voice of the speaking persona now changes as the poem reaches its conclusion. The image evoked is the one of grounded planes, people home-bound, consumption stopped. The situation presented seems to connote such feelings as sadness, yet, paradoxically, it becomes a moment of joy for the Mother Earth.

As the speaking persona underlines, the isolation is painful and causes fear, yet, for the environment it becomes an opportunity to relax, "be still". The metaphor of "wrap[ping] […] hills around our absence" (line 46) evokes an image of embracing the stillness, and brings forward the idea of enjoying true freedom. The second metaphor provided here of "loosen[ing] the concrete belt" (line 47) draws a picture of the urbanized landscape that becomes a burden upon the environment. The speaking persona here likens the city dwellings and buildings to a piece of garment constricting the movements and liberty and preventing nature from breathing freely. The image of Earth being bound or restricted evokes urbanization, industrialization, and environmental exploitation – all legacies of colonial expansion. The poem also paints a picture of the damage done to the natural world, comparing the suffering of the people in the isolation to the consequences of colonisation. It is visible in the line "but not as much as you have been hurt" (line 44). This line suggests deep, long-term wounds to the Earth, which, in a Māori context, can be linked not only to ecological damage but also to cultural and spiritual disconnection brought about by colonisation.

The speaking persona suggests that people should have undertaken certain environmental actions before, but the fear of pain it would cause has stopped them. Now the pause is forced, and it allows the Mother Earth to retrieve its proper shape. The four lines that follow seem to provide a recipe for the environmental renewal: "Rest. || Breathe. || Recover. || Heal – || And we will do the same" (lines 48-52). The moment of the Earth's renewal thus becomes beneficial also for the humanity, as the moment of reflection is necessary for the retrieval of the humanistic values. The convalescence of nature is here shown as parallel with the human healing: when nature is restored to its original shape, human beings will also benefit from their renewed perspectives and relationships.

The poem thus offers an image abundant with hope. The difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have inspired the poet to reflect not only on the situation of humanity,

but also the natural environment. Yet, consolation is not only to be drawn from the optimistic message of the poem, which focuses on the possibility of healing and renewal of life energy. Even though the poem is written in free verse, it does offer certain regularity. This is visible through the consistent use of anaphora, as in lines starting with "Time to…" (lines 15-20, 26-28), "and the…" (lines 31-32), but also within the finishing predicates in the form of imperatives. Nature is given certain guidelines and so are the readers. Still, the structure is very calming. The poem does not follow a strictly regular form, as it is based on no fixed rhyme scheme, stanza length, or consistent meter. Instead, it reads like a free verse meditation or chant. The lines vary from very short imperatives ("Rest." || "Heal –" in lines 48 and 51) to longer reflective lines ("And the forests and the oceans and the sky full of rain" – line 32). The repetitions of words like *time, rest and breathe* create a rhythmic and incantatory quality. The text itself moves in waves; it is pausing (with short, clipped lines) and expanding (with longer descriptive lines), mirroring the natural rhythms of breathing or the ebb and flow of the environment.

As it is very spiritual in matter and contains invocations, the poem may be understood as an expression of a prayer, reflection or meditation upon the situation of humanity and the natural environment. It blends personal reflection, collective voice ("we"), and a prayer-like address to Papatūānuku. The effect of the poem as incantation is also further strengthened by the direct address to the Mother Earth. Moreover, the punctuation suggests that there are parts of the poem that would be recited using just one breath, as if in a passionate prayer or psalm. When the speaking persona is more adamant in their ideas and reflections full stops and exclamations appear. Also, the oral quality of this poem is underlined through the use of emphasis, as in the excerpt "as it IS hurting" (line 43).

The poet herself underlines the temporality of the poem, showcasing it as an example of a journey that each of the people

have undertaken, but also of the temporality of the critical condition of nature:

> […] I wanted to clarify that I wrote this poem on the train home after the announcement of total lockdown was made here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. I felt like I could hear Papatūānuku exhaling in relief as we all began our journeys home. In truth, one month of lockdown is not enough. Even six months would not be enough! We need a total and sustained change of habit, globally and within our own communities. I hope so much we take our time to reflect on the fact that if we can do it to save ourselves for a month, we ought to be able to make similar habit changes for Mother Earth for the long term. The most telling thing for me was how empty our veggie plant aisles were after lockdown was announced – in a crisis, we will turn back to our mother to provide (and of course she will!). (Hura, qtd in *Green Sabbath Project*)

The poem then serves as both providing reassurance to the people, showing that the COVID-19 pandemic might also have some positive effects, but also as an example of how much still needs to be done to save both humanity and the natural environment.

4. Conclusions

Nadine Anne Hura's poem "For Papatūānuku" serves as an interesting example of a poem, whose functions are not only poetic, but also very much expressive and even conative. Hura focuses not on the human beings that suffer throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but sees the time as a moment of reflection on the state of nature. Interestingly, the poet seems to make yet another reference, paralleling the experience of the present (at the time of publishing the text of the poem) to the past exploitation of the land.

Through creating a poem that is rhythmic, similar to chants or Māori prayers, full of repetitions and containing invocations to Mother Earth, Hura provides comfort to the poem's readers, no matter where they are located, as the experience is shared

by people all over the world. The poet draws attention to a difficult period of isolation, which paradoxically connects people. The use of Māori language seemingly makes the poem more local, yet, if the message of the lines written in Māori is understood, the point of the poem can be treated in more global terms, as the image of the weeping Father Sky need not be restricted by geographical boundaries.

The poem can be understood within the framework of ecocritical writing, underlining the connection between human beings and the natural world. This is a concept embedded in New Zealand culture, yet issues related to land conservation are important worldwide. The poem thus serves as both an example of Indigenous writing and a text whose meaning is undoubtedly universal.

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