

ACTING OUT FOR SURVIVAL

Environmental Performance Poetry in the Pacific

PAOLA DELLA VALLE
UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO

Abstract – Climate change is the most urgent issue of the present. The countries of the Pacific Rim seem to be particularly vulnerable to its effects, as shown by the growing intensity and magnitude of extreme weather events like typhoons, cyclones, and floods. In the Southern Hemisphere, atolls are in danger due to the rise of global sea levels. Archipelagic countries like Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands are already experiencing the migration of their citizens from the outer islands to the main islands, and from the main ones to Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the West coast of the USA. Poets and artists in this area have been engaged for some time in public performances to denounce the environmental emergency and sensitise global public opinion. Oral poetry is performed in public events and international official venues but is also recorded in videos, which are then uploaded to the poets' websites. Words, acting, music, and images of the natural landscape that is at risk are turned into dramatic pieces that could be defined as a form of 'environmental activism'. After poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's performance at the 2014 UN Climate Summit in New York, four Pacific Islander spoken word artists were selected from an international contest to perform at the 2015 UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris. My article will illustrate how Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry led the way in this form of artistic activism and will then analyse some works of two of the contest-winners: Terisa Siagatonu, a Samoan American poet from the Bay Area, and Eunice Andrada, a Filipina poet, educator, and social worker living in Australia. These three poets exemplify a type of artist/poet/performer who believes that art creates and inspires change.

Key Words: performance poetry; transpacific ecopoetics; Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner; Terisa Siagatonu; Eunice Andrada.

1. The climate crisis in the Pacific Rim

The climate emergency is certainly the most urgent issue of our time. The word *unprecedented* has become a constant in the media with reference to unusual weather conditions occurring on our planet on a regular basis. The countries of the Pacific Rim¹ seem to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate

¹ The term *Pacific Rim* refers to the geographic area surrounding the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific Rim covers the western shores of North and South America, the shores of eastern Asia, Aotearoa New

change. Six South-Asian countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam – are among the world’s twenty countries most vulnerable to climate (NTS-Asia 2023) due to the growing intensity and magnitude of extreme weather events like typhoons, cyclones, and floods. As to the Southern Hemisphere, during the 2019-2020 summer extreme drought caused several mega-bushfires of unprecedented intensity in Australia, which expanded the ozone hole, ultimately contributing to global warming (Coleman 2022). The smoke was visible even from Aotearoa New Zealand,² another country now affected by regular cycles of droughts and floods. Moreover, the emergency of the so-called ‘sinking islands’ is no longer a threat but a reality. Coral atolls in the Pacific are being constantly flooded by the ocean due to sea-level rise caused by the melting of continental ice sheets and the expansion of sea water as ocean temperatures slowly increase. The consequences of this phenomenon are coastal and land erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources, degradation of ecosystems, and lack of food security. Many outer low-lying islands in archipelagos, such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands, are no more liveable – a fact that, in turn, results in internal migration toward the main islands and external migration to Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and the western coast of the USA. Climate-induced migration equates to loss of identity and threats to sovereignty (Kempf, Hermann 2014; Mcleod *et al.* 2019; Smith 2013).

Political leaders and environmental activists from the region’s most affected areas have been denouncing the hazards their countries are exposed to for a long time in formal meetings and forums at all levels, locally and internationally. Notably, the United Nations Climate Change conference – the so-called COP, that is, Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC³ – stands out as a paramount platform for the highest-level discourse on this matter. Its aim is to prevent “‘dangerous’ human interference with the climate system [and] stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations ‘at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system’” (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-a).⁴ The concern of the Convention seems, however, to have moved from actions of *prevention* to measures of *mitigation* and *adaptation* in the course of time. COP 27, which

Zealand, and Australia, and the islands of the Pacific (roughly corresponding to the whole Oceania).

² Aotearoa is the Māori name of New Zealand. It means ‘the land of the long white cloud’, which is the image seen by the Polynesian explorers when they arrived, presumably in the late 13th century (King 2003, p. 16; Te Ara 2020).

³ UNFCCC stands for United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The 198 countries that have ratified the Convention are called Parties to the Convention. The Conference takes place every year and involves an increasing number of government officials from all over the world as well as representatives from civil society and the global news media.

⁴ For further details on the COP, see United Nations Climate Change (n.d.-b); for the complete list of COP sessions, see United Nations Climate Change (n.d.-c).

took place in Sharm el-Sheikh (Egypt) in November 2022, was in fact about mitigation, adaptation, and finance (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-d).⁵

2. The rise of Pacific environmental performance poetry: Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner

Environmental poetry has had a role in some of the most recent UN conferences. A new generation of ‘spoken word artists’ or ‘poet-performers’ has in fact risen in the Pacific Rim countries as militant figures that compose environmental poetry and act it out on websites, during public performances, and in important political venues such as the COP. Unlike textual poetry, which is written mainly to be published and read, spoken word poetry or performance poetry is meant to be acted aloud before an audience. The performer typically uses rhythm and emotion to try to draw in and connect with the listeners. Spoken word poetry often includes rhyme, repetition, play on words, and improvisation, and may incorporate such devices as music, dance, and sound. Its themes usually cover such issues as current events, politics, social justice, or race. Examples of spoken word include rap, hip-hop, and slam poetry: genres that are now widespread all over the world.

Pacific environmental performance poetry can be described as a form of activism, a portmanteau word combining *art* and *activism* which was first used with reference to the Chicano Art Movement’s struggle for political and social justice in the USA from the late 1960s (Gunckel 2015; Panda 2021). Environmentally motivated art, environmental activism, or creative environmentalism has become a rising object of interest in academic literature, and the increasing number of related publications situates it as a stimulating constituent of action towards sustainability (Rodriguez-Labajos 2022, p. 2). Environmental activism, which includes paintings, sculptures, dramatic performances, bioart, dance, choreographies, films, visual media, but also decolonial or Indigenous narratives, aims at achieving three major goals:

The first one is the education of audiences through performative expressions of today’s global environmental crises, especially climate change. The second one involves ecocritical reflections of environmental controversies and conflicts towards creative emancipatory practices. The third one positions art practice as an avenue for environmental improvement across different sectors (e.g. water, mining, urban) with involvement of citizens, governments, and corporate actors. (Rodriguez-Labajos 2022, p. 1)

⁵ The latest Conference convened from 30 November to 12 December 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-e). The next Conference will convene in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November 2024.

Environmental poet-performers in the Pacific pursue all of these aims, conjugating tradition and modernity. On one hand, they continue the tradition of Indigenous oral poetry engaging directly with their audience in public readings, dramatisations of poems, or slam sessions⁶. On the other, technological progress allows them to transform an ancient genre into a multimodal expression that can reach very large audiences through the World Wide Web. Poetry, accompanied by film images or pictures, sounds, music, and improvisation, is recorded in videos and uploaded to YouTube (or other platforms) and to the authors' websites (if they have one). Some of the poets have also printed collections, like Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Eunice Andrada, providing written texts that are however subject to change in the oral or video performances.⁷

It should be now considered why performance poetry seems to be more effective than textual poetry in conveying environmental issues. In her essay about slam poetry, Susan B.A. Somers-Willett investigates the reasons for the success of slam poetry as a means to affirm identity and identity politics, especially of marginalised gender, class, sexual, and racial identities (Somers-Willett 2005, pp. 53-54). Quoting Damon (1998, pp. 329-330), she underlines that, “the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of ‘realness’-authenticity [...] that effects a ‘felt change of consciousness’ on the part of the listener” (Somers-Willett 2005, p. 53). Somers-Willett also agrees with Silliman (1998, p. 362) on the fact that, although this result may be found in any kind of poetry, textual or performed, “it is most amplified ‘through the poem as confession of lived experience’, [...] ‘not in print but *in person*’”, since the live performance maximises “‘the authenticity and sincerity’” (Somers-Willett 2005, p. 53). Moreover, Rodriguez-Labajos includes dramatic performances among the embodied and sensorial expressions (like dance and bioart), underlining that “through sensorial experiences, performative practices problematize the need of urgent action” (Rodrigues-Labajos 2022, p. 4) and have a unique “transformative capacity” (Rodrigues-Labajos 2022, p. 5).

An example of spoken word poetry as confession of lived experience and embodied expression applying to the five senses, which proved effective in involving an entire assembly, is the performance of Marshallese poet and activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner at the opening ceremony of the 2014 United Nations Climate Summit in New York, during which she described, first-hand, the disastrous consequences of climate change on the Marshall Islands. After an introduction of herself and her country, including references to myth drawn from traditional oral literature, she turned to a passionate speech about the dangers of climate change in her region, followed by a performance of “Dear

⁶ Competitive versions of poetry readings usually staged in bars, bookstores, coffeehouses, universities, and theatres.

⁷ See Andrada's collections *Take Care* (2021) and *Flood Damages* (2018), and Jetñil-Kijiner's collection *Iep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter* (2017).

Matafele Peinam”, a poem addressed to her baby daughter and a manifesto of the creative activism that is animating the poets of the Pacific Rim. The text describes the catastrophic consequences of global warming for many low-lying islands in the Pacific, which risk being submersed by the ocean if global temperatures rise.⁸ The poet’s aim, however, was not only to denounce the gravity of the situation, shake the world’s indifference to the imminent disaster and call for support. Jetñil-Kijiner also wanted to look authentic, prompting a process of identification between the audience and Marshallese people.

Her poem is indeed a mix of material facts and lyricism, real events and intense emotions, scientific/formal language and the intimate/colloquial words of a mother talking to her little daughter, showing Pacific islanders as living human beings whose home and culture are at risk. Technically a dramatic monologue, it also describes the chubby body of the baby addressee, mixing natural (“sunrise”) and religious (“buddha”) references to highlight the sacred value of any life that generates from her endangered country and must be saved:

you are a seven month old *sunrise* of gummy smiles
 you are bald as an egg and bald as the *buddha*”
 (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, p. 70, emphases added)

The list of the hazards that the child might have to face in the future (i.e. being devoured by the beautiful lagoon or wandering as a rootless migrant without a home) is followed by the promise that her mother, relatives, politicians, and all Marshallese people will fight to avoid the disaster. After the confessional tone of the beginning, the poem becomes militant: it attacks climate negationism and scepticism, laments the status of non-existence of the Marshall Islands for most people of the ‘First World’, and connects their condition to that of other countries suffering from global warming effects like sea-level rise (Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Maldives), typhoons (the Philippines), and floods (Pakistan, Algeria, and Colombia). The appearance of her husband and daughter near her at the end of the performance, dressed in their traditional attire, offered a concrete picture of a family in the flesh rather than a vague idea of unknown ‘others’ in a faraway land or figures in an academic or scientific essay, and prompted the assembly’s standing ovation (Jetñil-Kijiner 2014). The physical image of the pretty chubby little girl, in presence as well as in the video performance of the poem on Jetñil-Kijiner’s website, leads the public through the above-mentioned sensorial experience and change of consciousness described by Rodriguez-Labajos and Somers-Willet.

⁸ Keeping the global temperature rise well below 2 degrees Celsius by 2100 is in fact the international climate policy goal, officially set in the Paris agreement of COP 21 signed in 2015 (United Nations Climate Change n.d.-f).

3. Contesting the western view of the Pacific

The need to make the voice of Pacific islanders heard and their territories visible to the ‘First-World’ powers is longstanding. Modern cartography has helped obliterate the Pacific region by re-conceptualising space and re-naming places. Otto Heim calls these two acts erasure and (re)inscription (Heim 2015, p. 181), underlining how they were the constitutive operations of European cartography. Maps and atlases were functional to imperial powers: first Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands throughout the 16th century, then Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the USA in the 19th century. Maps and atlases represented the Pacific as a lost sea, *terra nullius*, thereby justifying its colonisation and the plundering of its resources. They reproduced a vision of the ocean “clear of data irrelevant to navigational purposes” (Heim 2015, p. 183) and depicted the islands as mere anchoring points in an ocean which becomes the natural space for free trade. Therefore, “they foster[ed] the notion of a socially empty space” and contributed to forming the idea of the Pacific “not as a place to live but an expanse to cross, a void to be filled with lines of transit” (Heim 2015, p. 184).

In his seminal essay “Our Sea of Islands” (1993), the sociologist of Tongan origin Epeli Hau‘ofa counterargued that Oceania was based on a dense network of relationships and that its inhabitants considered the sea their home. They were skilled navigators and sailed long distances to trade, marry, visit relatives, and expand their knowledge or wealth. The boundaries erected by imperial powers did not exist for Pacific islanders, who shared blood and culture, and were connected, rather than divided, by the sea. So much so that Hau‘ofa rejects the western vision of Oceania as small “islands in a far sea” and suggests the holistic image of “a sea of islands” (Hau‘ofa 2008, p. 37).

The western idea of the Pacific as an empty space justified the division of the region into island states in the course of time, according to the economic needs of imperial powers, disrupting local economies and self-sufficiency, and creating forms of neo-colonialism after the collapse of the European empires. It also encouraged the destruction of entire territories to extract mineral resources. An example is the island of Banaba after its annexation to the British Gilbert and Ellice Island Group in 1901. Banaba was transformed into a major phosphate-mining settlement and exploited by Australian, New Zealand, and British companies. When it became apparent that it would, in time, become uninhabitable, the residents were relocated to Rabi Island in northern Fiji (Edwards 2014, pp. 123-124).

The image of the Pacific as ‘terra nullius’ finally allowed the French and American governments to use the atolls as sites for nuclear testing. Nearly two hundred nuclear experiments were conducted on Fangataufa and Moruroa

atolls, in French Polynesia, between 1966 and 1996. France has consistently underestimated their devastating impact. The explosions severely contaminated the environment of the archipelago and exposed its population to dangerous radiation levels. In 1998, the French defence minister finally admitted that the population of the islands of Tureia, Reao, Pukarua, Mangareva and Tahiti were affected by radioactive fallout (Henley 2021; see also Nuclear Risks n.d.).

Bomb testing was also conducted by the US in the Marshall Islands between the mid-1940s and early 1960s. More than 20 nuclear devices were tested at Bikini Atoll and nearby Enewetak Atoll. The atoll residents were evacuated and relocated to other atolls. Little thought was given by the US Atomic Energy Commission to the potential impact of the widespread fallout contamination and to the health and ecological impacts beyond the formally designated boundary of the test. Residual radioactivity remains today in the area of the explosions. Populations of the Marshall Islands that received significant exposure to radionuclides have a much greater risk of developing cancer, especially leukaemia and thyroid cancer. The male population's lung cancer mortality on the Marshall Islands is four times higher than the overall United States rates, and the oral cancer rates are ten times higher. For decades after the testing, Marshallese women had miscarriages, giving birth to "jelly-babies", as Jetñil-Kijiner calls them in one of her poems, "History project":

I read first-hand accounts
of what we call
jelly-babies
tiny beings with no bones
skin-red as tomatoes
the miscarriages gone unspoken
the broken translations
 I never told my husband
 I thought it was my fault
(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, p. 20)

The indentation of the two lines in italics marks the passage from the poet's narrative to the confessed fears of the women she is narrating about, in free direct speech.

As Jetñil-Kijiner's experience shows, poetry has entered the world of environmental global politics and is used in the Pacific area as an instrument to make environmental issues authentic, visible, and tangible through the power of imagination. As Martha Nussbaum explains in *Poetic Justice*,

[t]he literary imagination is a part of public rationality [...]. In fact, I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own. (Nussbaum 1995, p. xvi)

Nussbaum is inspired by “a Kantianism modified so as to give the emotions a carefully demarcated cognitive role” (Nussbaum 1995, p. xvi). Hence, to her

[g]ood literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one’s own thoughts and intentions. One may be told many things about one’s own society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance. Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront – and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation. (Nussbaum 1995, pp. 5-6)

The performance poetry of Jetñil-Kijiner and the other Pacific Islander poets that will be presented in the next section is, in fact, aimed to promote identification in politicians and in the global community as a whole, to share an experience that hit them or their families personally, and to claim their existence as Pacific Islanders in their own terms.

4. From Pacific environmental performance poetry to transpacific ecopoetics

As Sahra Vang Nguyen explains, after Jetñil-Kijiner’s successful experience it became clear that spoken word poetry could have a big emotional impact on climate change conferences and should be included in subsequent events. This type of performances had the power to “foster cognitive processes that trigger relational and behavioural changes towards sustainability”—(Rodriguez-Labajos 2022, p. 1). An international contest for environmental poets was therefore set up with the help of the Marshallese poet and an organisation called Global Call for Climate Action (GCCA) “to uncover some of the world’s most passionate Spoken Word artists who want to create poetry that aims to change the world” (Vang Nguyen 2015). Four Pacific Islanders and spoken word poets were selected from the contest to perform at COP 21 in Paris in 2015. The aim of their performances was to make Pacific Islands visible and tangible, transform their inhabitants from abstractions into real people who are experiencing the effects of climate change first-hand, and remind everybody that what is happening in the Pacific is just the first step of a global disaster that sooner or later will affect the whole world if measures are not taken.

After being announced in November, the four winners of the contest – Terisa Siagatonu, Meta Sarmiento, Isabella Avila Borgeson, and Eunice Andrada – performed at the Paris United Nations conference that took place

between 30 November and 11 December 2015. They not only attended the official sessions of the convention, but were also involved in numerous events, meetings, ceremonies, parties, and gatherings. Their reactions were collected by Sahra Vang Nguyen for NBC News. Siagatonu, a Samoan American poet, educator, and community leader⁹ now living in the Bay Area, said she was disheartened by the reality that the countries most impacted by climate change were often invisible in political spaces, and advocated the active participation of the global community in facing the climate crisis (Vang Nguyen 2015). Siagatonu had already performed in many important venues, including the White House, and received President Obama's Champion of Change Award in 2012 for her activism as a "spoken word poet/organizer in her Pacific Islander community" (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.).

Sarmiento, a Guam-born Filipino rapper, poet, speaker, and educator living in Denver, Colorado, underlined the spoken word artists' capacity to convey complex phenomena in a direct, engaging, and understandable way: "Many people are uninspired by political rhetoric, numb to all the scientific or political jargon [...]. I think spoken word artists have the ability to take ideas that are difficult to understand and present them in compelling rhetoric" (Vang Nguyen 2015). He also recounted how climate change is having an adverse effect on people's physical, mental, emotional, and social health.

Filipina-American Isabella Avila Borgeson drew a picture of the consequences of Typhoon Haiyan, one of the strongest storms recorded in history, which hit her mother's hometown, Tanauan, in the Philippines (Vang Nguyen 2015). Finally, the youngest contest winner, eighteen-year-old Filipina poet, educator, and cultural worker Eunice Andrada, who now lives in Australia, praised the resilience of the Filipino spirit in facing Typhoon Haiyan and underlined that their presence at the conference was aimed "to bridge the gap between climate experts and the rest of us, who experience the effects of climate change in our daily lives" (Vang Nguyen 2015). The four poets claimed their belief in spoken word poetry as a powerful tool in the conversations around climate change.

Indeed, the choice of four poets with a "multiplicity of belonging" – to use a definition coined by Kempf, van Meijl and Hermann (2014, p. 14) – seems to represent the current condition of most Pacific islanders characterised by movement in any possible meaning (mobility, travel, migration, diaspora, transnationalism) and by a web of multiple spatial/social relationships and cultural identifications. Even though it is particularly common in this region, such situation is also connected to the contemporary 'liquid' global world and has led many scholars to endorse a critique of static identity models in

⁹ This and the following descriptions of each poet are taken and adapted from the home page of their official websites (see *Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.; *Meta Sarmiento* n.d.; *Eunice Andrada* n.d.). This is how they introduce themselves to the public. Isabella Avila Borgeson does not have a website but is nevertheless active on social media.

anthropology (Kempf *et al.* 2014, p. 2). The four poets' origin from a region affected by serious ecological problems like the Pacific Rim (the Philippines, Samoa and Guam), their migration elsewhere (Andrada to Australia, the others to the USA), their environmental militancy, and their tight bond with the ocean despite its present dangers for humans like tsunamis or sea-level rise: all these factors seem to enact Rob Wilson's idea of a "transpacific ecopoetics" (Wilson 2019-2020), i.e. a vision of the ocean as a space of ecological solidarity (not of competition and geo-territorial struggle, as for western powers). Wilson reminds us that the ocean constitutes 97% of the earth's water and that "[e]very breath we take is possible because of the life-filled life-giving sea; oxygen is generated there, carbon dioxide absorbed" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 276). For this reason, he continues, humans should see themselves as "oceanic citizens as much as earth-dwellers connected in a Gaia-like wholeness" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 261) and create a planetary solidarity in a "global environment" or, borrowing the definition from Masao Miyoshi's *Trespases*, a "planet-based totality" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 262). In Wilson's view, the ocean needs to figure in a "more worlded vision" (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 262):

we 'surf' in a transoceanic cyberspace of global interconnection. Increasingly dematerialized as such cyberspace beings, we exist on the verge of 'forgetting the [material] sea' as a site of co-belonging, resistance, and co-history. (Wilson 2019-2020, p. 263)

The above-mentioned poets' lives and activist engagement, therefore, represent not only an emblem of connectivity between all the people of the Pacific Rim who were once united rather than separated by the ocean and share a past of colonialism and exploitation by the western imperial powers; their commitment to the environment through artistic expressions made available to a large global public thanks to digital multimodality is also a work that is carried out for the earth and its inhabitants, an example to be followed outside the Pacific context. As Otto Heim remarks, we should all start "imagining and concretising new modes of connectivity and ways of being and working together at a time when our planetary interconnectedness becomes more obvious every day" (Heim 2010-2011, p. 145). To do this, it is also necessary to reconceptualise public institutional spaces so as to make them "answearable to the places they represent and open to cross-cultural engagement" (Heim 2010-2011, p. 143). Referring to Teresia Teaiwa's analysis of literary engagement in patriotic literature from post-coup(s) Fiji, Heim underlines the necessity to open institutional spaces to "creative disturbance" (Heim 2010-2011, p. 145), the same disturbance Nussbaum (1995) considers as an attribute of good literature. Creative disturbance is exactly what these poets bring into the major institutional venues to urge their environmental engagement.

5. Terisa Siagatonu's and Eunice Andrada's Pacific environmental performance poetry

This section will analyse some poems of two of the above-mentioned contest-winning poet-performers: Terisa Siagatonu and Eunice Andrada. The reason for this choice is this article's main concern with the poetic text as an oral or written literary and activist expression. Isabella Avila Borgeson is mostly active only as a performer (in presence or video) and Meta Sarmiento as a musician and rapper, so their (basically oral) texts pertain more to performative arts than literature and would require a different critical approach. Siagatonu's and Andrada's poems, on the contrary, have been included in online poetry archives such as Poetry Foundation and Red Room Poetry,¹⁰ and some of them have been uploaded to their websites. Andrada has also published two printed collections of poetry, *Flood Damages* (2018) and *Take Care* (2021). Their production is therefore aligned with that of Kathy Jetñil Kijiner, the first poet-performer discussed in this article and pioneer of this kind of 'hybrid' genre.

One of the best-known poems of Terisa Siagatonu, "Atlas", expresses the forceful will to change perspective on the Pacific: from the western external viewpoint to a Pacific internal one. Siagatonu denounces the butchering of the ocean made by western imperial powers, describes the misleading representation of the Pacific in cartography (past and present), and underlines the strong spiritual and material bond of Pacific islanders with the ocean and water, indirectly conveying Hau'ofa's vision of Oceania:

To the human eye,
 every map centers all the land masses on Earth
 creating the illusion
 that water can handle the butchering
 and be pushed to the edges
 of the world.
 As if the Pacific Ocean isn't the largest body
 living today, beating the loudest heart,
 the reason why land has a pulse in the first place.
 [...]
 When people ask me where I'm from,
 they don't believe me when I say water.
 (Siagatonu 2023)

Siagatonu stresses the function of the ocean as a major source of oxygen for the earth and, consequently, fundamental for the existence of all living beings, equating the destiny of western people with that of non-western people, humans with non-humans. She highlights the interconnectedness of life on our

¹⁰ For Siagatonu's poems, see Poetry Foundation (2023); for Andrada's poetry, see Red Room Poetry (2023).

planet, promoting the values advocated in Wilson (2019-2020): a planetary solidarity in a “global environment” and a “more worlded” vision of the ocean.

However, humans must live on the land, and the Samoan soil is being taken away by the sea-level rise resulting from global warming caused by the ‘First-World’ industrial countries, the same imperial powers that once colonised and exploited the Pacific islands. Siagatonu vocally laments her ambiguous position of Samoan and American (she belongs to Eastern Samoa, an unincorporated territory of the US, like Guam), defining herself “blade and blood”, executioner and victim at the same time:

a hyphen of a woman:
 a Samoan-American that carries the weight of both
 colonizer and colonized,
 both blade and blood.
 (Siagatonu 2023)

The poet criticises the representation of American Samoa on the official maps, which seem to emphasise its geo-political irrelevance apart from being a tourist attraction and a US military basis. She recalls the image of the archipelago as a projection of western desires: the site of “exotic women, exotic fruit and exotic beaches” (Siagatonu 20023). She also compares the destiny of colonisers and colonised in the ‘global environment’, both bound to a fatal end caused by the environmental crisis that is affecting the ecosystem of the whole planet: drought in California and sea level rise in Samoa, with the consequent threat of migration:

California, a state of emergency away from having the drought
 rid it of all its water.
 Samoa, a state of emergency away from becoming a saltwater cemetery
 if the sea level doesn’t stop rising.
 [...]

 What does it mean to belong to something that isn’t sinking?
 What does it mean to belong to what is causing the flood?
 (Siagatonu 2023)

The same concerns appear in “For Us”, where Siagatonu attacks the marginality imposed on the Pacific Ocean by western rhetoric and imperialism, and, again, underlines its vital importance for the entire planet. In the first stanza, she affirms: “upon the survival of the Pacific / depends the survival of the world” (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.).

The poem is a long list of claims and requests for reclamation and compensation. The preposition *for* in the title “For Us” means ‘in favour of us’ and indicates the beneficiary of the requests: Samoans or Pacific islanders in general. Throughout the poem, however, the repetition of *for* illustrates the causes and justifies the reasons for the demands. It is a sheet of charges, particularly effective when acted orally and aiming at obtaining: “nothing less

/ than our due” (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.). Images of violence are associated with colonialism: Oceania was “sliced in half” and “fractured”, and the Samoan islands were “severed”. The evils that affected the Pacific islands throughout history are enlisted, as if the author wished to exorcise them and auspicated a different future in which Samoa is united again, Guam and Hawai’i are demilitarised, the Marshall Islands are “nuclear waste free”, the names of Pacific islanders are not misspelt, and the right pronunciation is learnt in respect for their ancestors.

For my severed island,
 once belonging to itself
 for my chest, where Samoa is whole always
 where Guahan¹¹ is demilitarized finally
 Hawai’i too. Northern Mariana Islands too
 where the Marshall Islands is nuclear waste free.
 [...]
 For every misspelled / mispronounced attempt
 at our family heirlooms.
 (*Terisa Siagatonu* n.d.)

The poem is accompanied by a colourful picture, a collage of photographs, drawings, and paintings showing Siagatonu proudly sitting in the middle, on a mat floating on the sea. She is dressed in traditional Indigenous attire, like a goddess, with sparks coming out of her head: a figure of agency and power. In the background, the symbols of her culture: a stylised Indigenous sailing boat surrounded by traditional designs, the lavish nature of a tropical island, and a native hut. Altogether, it appears as a post-modern reversal of the typical representation of the newly discovered continent (America) in official cartography, where the image of a sleepy, defenceless, naked woman is generally ‘woken up’ by the arrival of a male western explorer, who seems to bring her to life by possessing and dominating her (a good example is Johannes Stradanus’ *The Discovery of America*, c. 1587-1589).

Eunice Andrada has also performed her works on diverse international stages, including the Sydney Opera House and the Parliament House of New South Wales. She has been awarded numerous prizes, including the Australian Poetry and NAHR Eco-Poetry Fellowship (2018) for her work in eco-poetics. In 2020, she served as editor of *Writing Water: Rain, River, Reef*, an anthology released through the Red Room Poetry archive. Her poems revolve around themes such as dispossession, trauma, gender inequality and abuse, racial discrimination, and the violated female body. Andrada describes her work as “writing from the body”, i.e. seeing things from her own point of view: that of a coloured woman, an immigrant, and a victim of violence. “Writing from the body” also means using her writing to gain an understanding of her experiences

¹¹ One of the possible spellings of Guam.

and how these have influenced her life and her gender. In an interview, she affirmed:

One of the urgent reasons I write is to reclaim the power from which people like me – women of colour, survivors of violence, immigrants, fetishised bodies, etc. – have been dispossessed. When I write from the body, I try to hold a mirror not only to myself, but to the reader and the world, too. (Tan 2020)

Andrada's environmental poetry is connected to and interwoven with the other threads of her poetics for her equation between human and non-human exploited categories (women and the earth) and the exploration of trauma resulting from violence and dispossession (of colonised, immigrants, coloured women, natural resources). Her work could be seen as an example of ecofeminism in her stigmatisation of a male-dominated, androcentric, and sexist society that has developed an anthropocentric relationship with nature. However, Andrada's belonging to a gendered, racialised, colonised 'otherness', complicates and amplifies trauma, inflecting ecofeminism – which was originally deeply ingrained in western feminism and in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, as Carolyn Merchant's seminal volume *The Death of Nature* (1983) explains – according to a postcolonial and decolonial perspective.

In "first creation",¹² two major threads intertwine: domestic violence and environmental issues. During an ordinary breakfast at home, her mother mispronounces the word *tsunami* she has heard from the news: "her mongrel tongue / birthing the word / in a new body" (Andrada 2018, p. 11). The emendation of her irritated father – "it's an alien climate" (Andrada 2018, p. 11) – is followed by a violent reaction: "when the bottom of the pan / cracks against my mother's head / [...] the steel pan connects to my father's hand" (Andrada 2018, p. 12). The episode is reported in fragments from the viewpoint of a child who does not fully understand the scene in front of her but feels she is safer at school, just ten minutes away. The same struggling with words is described in "(because I am a daughter) of diaspora". Her mother, again, is not at ease with unknown terms to express out-of-ordinary phenomena, although learning a new language seems necessary to her and part of a tentative emancipation from traditional female roles:

They convince my mother
her voice is a selfish tide,
claiming words that are not meant
for her
(Andrada 2018, p. 9)

¹² The titles of the poems in *Flood Damages* (2018) are always lowercased.

The daughter and narrating voice, on the other hand, feels she is losing her own mother tongue while living abroad:

In the end
our brown skin
married to seabed.

When I return to the storm
of my islands
with a belly full of first world
I wrangle the language I grew up with
[...]

I am above water, holding
onto a country that drowns
with or without me
(Andrada 2018, p. 9)

Her inability to properly express herself at home is the first sign of alienation and dislocation, a state of ‘in-betweeness’ accompanied by a sense of impotence towards the climate emergency of her country. The poem is full of water-connected images – the “selfish tide” of her mother’s voice, the “storm of [her] islands”, a “country that drowns”, and “[their] brown skin / married to seabed” – as to underline their close bond with the ocean, which is being disrupted by the climate crisis. The creative and vital power of water is turned into a destructive force.

This idea is also forcefully expressed in “Pacific Salt”, where the smallness and irrelevance of her islands in the maps and geopolitical agenda are highlighted and the ocean, once the origin of life, has turned into a monster devouring civilizations and spitting out their remains (“baby teeth”). The style of Andrada in describing death by sea is crude (“there is no grace in sinking”). The poem finishes with a call for action, a plea for shaking off indifference and hypocrisy:

perhaps the further you are
the smaller we become
in this spectacle of drowning
as you watch baby teeth float to shore
after the ocean spits out another hometown
[...]
our pulses know the rhythm of emergencies
just like our islands know the pacific salt
that cradles them
there was a time it could
preserve us
[...]
collect the stones from your mouth

there is no grace in sinking
 [...]

let us not say there's nothing
 we could have done
 let this be the beginning of us
 rising
 (Andrada n.d.)

The unprecedented extremes of drought (lack of water) and typhoons (excess of water and wind) are described in “answer”, in which the deluge of rain is transformed into a deluge of questions on climate change no one is willing to listen to:

during the crescendo of the blaze
 the sky is a memory of water

elsewhere a country of rain
 where water visits without
 invitation

its deluge of questions
 flowing back to the sea
 after finding no one
 who would listen

[...]
 night upon night
 the storm batters
 the ground in demand.
 (Andrada 2023a)

The verses, scattered in irregular stanzas, leave blank spaces on the page that are like suspensions slowing the rhythm down. They seem to represent the unanswered questions the poem is about.

A further ecological disaster is illustrated in “the poem begins with a breathing reef”, an elegy about the dying coral reefs, which are now colourless “ivory skeletons”, suffocated by plastic, unusually warm water, and the acidification of the sea. As in the previous poem, empty white spaces, here in the same line, slow the rhythm down, reproducing a breathless voice: that of the poet personifying the dying reef. The descendants of the reef (and of us humans) will not be organic but made of plastic. Again, the poet poses a question with no answer about how to undo the destructive work of humans against nature:

New cemetery blooms in the heat [...]
beyond us our plastic descendants
float further than we ever
could
[...]
how to undo our industries
of
unmaking?
(Andrada 2023b)

To conclude, the rise of spoken word artists in the Pacific Rim, one of the most troubled areas of the world due to the climate emergency, is an expression of a novel faith in art and literature as effective weapons to shake public opinion and world leaders. The aim of performance poetry (in both live performances and videos on these artists’ websites) is to involve – and not just instruct – politicians and civil society, an effect that underlines the contribution literary imagination can give to public rationality and the cognitive role of emotions theorised by Nussbaum (1995). Indeed, as claimed by Terisa Siagatonu, “[a]rt creates change, or at the very least, it inspires it. I think artists can teach those in power a thing or two about love, justice, and peace” (Vang Nguyen 2015).

Bionote: Paola Della Valle is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Turin, Italy. She specialises in New Zealand and Pacific literature, postcolonial criticism, and gender studies. She is the author of three monographs: *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Maori Literature* (Auckland, 2010), *Stevenson nel Pacifico: una lettura postcoloniale* (Roma, 2013), and *Priestley e il tempo, il tempo di Priestley* (Torino, 2016). She has written on British and Postcolonial authors (especially from New Zealand and the Pacific), including O. Wilde, W.S. Maugham, R.L. Stevenson, J.B. Priestley, J.G. Ballard, W. Ihimaera, P. Grace, F. Sargeson, N. Hilliard, R. Finlayson, J. Frame, R. Hyde, H. Tuwhare, S. Figiel, C. Santos Perez, K. Jetnñil-Kijiner, T. Makereti, M. Ali, M. Hamid, and C. Phillips. She is a member of the Advisory Board of the *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies*.

Author’s address: paola.dellavalle@unito.it

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