



Chris Baker's Kokopu Dreams: A Prophetic View of a Disrupted Post-Pandemic World

by Paola Della Valle

ABSTRACT: The global pandemic, with its multiple and far-reaching disruptions, has forced us to rethink and rewrite the world we live in. Chris Baker's novel *Kokopu Dreams* (2000) sounds somehow prophetic today in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. His work could be labelled as "speculative fiction" and placed among the umbrella categories of magic realism, science fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction. Set in Aotearoa New Zealand, the story focuses on the life of the few human survivors of a rapidly-spreading deadly illness caused by the rabbit calicivirus, illegally introduced into the country. The calicivirus has mutated and killed almost all the human population, who is now living in a land controlled by animals and spirits. The novel is also a template of transcultural writing, mixing Māori creation stories, Christian and Celtic mythologies, scientific issues and aspects of everyday life. Having grown up in a contact zone of different cultures—Baker is of Polynesian (Samoan), Anglo-Saxon and Celtic origin, but regards himself as a "Pacific" person—he shares that multiplicity of belonging which is a typical condition in the Pacific region today. Baker deals with a physical and cultural collective trauma, and the process of re-signification of the ethos in a bi-cultural country made of people of mixed ancestry, European and Māori. The re-elaboration of the epidemic experience is therefore based on both a Western rational representation and an indigenous mythical one.

KEY WORDS: New Zealand literature; speculative fiction; Māori mythology; pandemic; trauma



This essay explores Chris Baker's far-seeing novel *Kokopu Dreams*, published in 2000 and set in Aotearoa New Zealand,¹ in the aftermath of a pernicious epidemic due to the mutation of the illegally imported rabbit calicivirus. Humans have become the privileged victims of the mutated virus that causes haemorrhagic fever and kills most of the population, all over the country. On the contrary, non-human animals—cats and dogs, cattle and sheep, horses, chickens and even the rabbits themselves—are basically untouched by the new variant. Baker's book can be included in the so-called speculative fiction, that is, in Marek Oziewicz's words:

a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating "consensus reality" of everyday experience. In this latter sense, speculative fiction includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, *post-apocalyptic fiction*, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales, and more. (Oziewicz, my emphasis)

Kokopu Dreams is indeed an example of post-apocalyptic fiction, which makes the reader reflect on the hiatus between everyday actions and their unpredictable consequences. It can also be included in the wide category of environmental literature, since the epidemic eventually turns out to be the result of an unbalanced relationship between humans and the natural world: a punishment due to their disrespect for the environment. My essay will analyse in particular the re-elaboration of collective and individual trauma in Baker's narrative and the way the author manages to find a re-signification of the characters' experience using a mix of rational and fantastic elements grounded both in Western thought and Māori mythology, which offers a bi-cultural framework to the book.

Kokopu Dreams mainly focuses on the consequences of the epidemic rather than its scientific reasons, which are briefly summarised in the first chapter. Throughout the novel Aotearoa New Zealand appears as a country where the social order has been completely disrupted. Entire families and communities have been swept away. The few survivors are now prey to packs of wild dogs and gangs of delinquents. Being alone, especially for women and children, equates to being constantly at risk of violence, sexual abuse and death. The capitalist economic system is dissolved. There is no electricity and no fuel for cars, heating or factories. The industrial productive process and commercial distribution have stopped working. Malls are dark deserted zones open to plundering. Money is practically useless and trading equates to bartering. General anarchy prevails in a lawless land, where human life has lost its intrinsic value and the human body is even used as food by cannibal rapists spreading terror all over the country.

¹ 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. See King (16) and Wilson (1).



In his essay "The Plague in Literature and Myth", Girard underlines that the theme of the plague spans the whole range of literary and non-literary genres and "is universally presented as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities. The destruction is often preceded by a reversal. The plague will turn the honest man into a thief, the virtuous man into a lecher, the prostitute into a saint" (Girard 833). The plague destroys all forms of distinctiveness because it leads to death, "the supreme undifferentiation" (Girard 834), and always brings about a social collapse, threatening the existence of social life. Girard continues by saying that, in the ancient Greek myth, the plague always causes sterility (Girard 834). These effects are also found in Baker's novel, in which the ethic categories of good and evil no longer exist, social conventions have been destroyed, couples are unable to conceive children, and humans struggle for survival among the rubble of their previous civilization, in a wasteland pervaded by the ubiquitous stench of rotten corpses. The resort to huge funeral pyres, including entire houses, their dead residents and all furniture, is a constant in the story: an image symbolizing the recourse to fire for material and spiritual purification (Baker 46, 93).

Horses and carriages become the main vehicles of transport. Firewood is burnt for cooking and heating. Food is provided by hunting, fishing and edible plant gathering as well as by shop pillaging. Eel catching in streams is also largely practiced. The capitalist productive system has turned into subsistence economy. Against a general background of desolation, threat and sorrow, some of the survivors start creating small communities, for cooperation and their own protection, and establish communal vegetable gardens. These collectives are run according to completely new principles. Being part of one of them is a necessary condition for survival in a lawless land. Foundlings and orphans are adopted by adults not only for compassion but also to fill the void of their own dead children. All preconceptions about age or ethnicity are overcome and the notion of family changes too, resembling the idea of a Māori extended family rather than the Western nuclear one. Interestingly, when the new communities are formed and the fight for mere survival is suspended, an outburst of sexual frenzy hits the adult members, who copulate anywhere and with anyone (apparently, without conceiving children): a way to assert life after having being surrounded by so much death (Baker 93). As Girard pinpoints "the plague makes all accumulated knowledge and all categories of judgment invalid" (Girard 833).

The new enlarged families arise from material and psychological needs. These collectives are also functional to share and re-elaborate trauma. A channel of communication is opened across categories that probably would not have previously mingled due to different ethnicity, social class and culture, but that are now willing to get together for re-elaborating their sorrowful experience. As Cathy Caruth argues:

This speaking and this listening—a speaking and a listening from the site of trauma—does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the past of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (Caruth 11)



Caruth underlines that dislocation and belatedness are the centre of trauma, which results from the relation between crisis and survival. The traumatic event is not really experienced when it is occurring, but becomes fully evident only in connection with another place and in another time. Trauma is characterised by latency. It is only when it seems forgotten that it is experienced, not in a symbolic but in a literal way (Caruth 5-9). This is why once the characters in the novel have realized they have (inexplicably) overcome the illness, they do not feel relieved but guilty and sorrowful. They keep on wondering why they survived while their families did not. The next step is to constitute new collectives and work through trauma, as shown in the following scene in the deserted mall, where the protagonist Sean encounters another survivor, Brian:

'My name's Brian,' he said. 'Everyone's dead.' They stood there in silence, too shocked for relief, able to do nothing more than stare. [...] 'I know you.' Brian said. 'My Sarah was in your Kiri's class at school.' His voice faded off.

'Where is your family now?' Sean remembered open days at the Ngahere Primary School.

'I buried them. I had them inside for a week but I couldn't take the smell anymore.'

'I burned my family,' Sean told him, and with nothing else to say they just sat side by side, staring into space. Eventually they moved, both at the same time. Sean shifted along the seat so their hips were touching and Brian put an arm around Sean's shoulder. They were both weeping silently.

'What are we going to do?' Brian asked.

'Stick together,' was all Sean could think to say. (Baker 21-22)

Working through trauma is a necessary condition for psychological survival. According to Kate Schick, trauma is "the silenced aftermath of violence" (Schick 1). She uses both Caruth's theory and Dominick La Capra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through" trauma in her advocacy of an alternative response to trauma in global politics. Schick underlines the personal and political dangers of "unmourned loss" (Schick 2), which leads to a sense of impotence and resentment, to retaliation and violence. Acting out is one's direct response to trauma and is effected by a process of adaptation or a search for compensation. It also leads to the "maladaptive meaning-making narratives that individuals and groups adopt in order to make sense of their traumatic experiences: the heroic soldier, good and evil, and redemptive violence" (Schick 3). Acting out can be an immediate reaction, but it is also a repetitive and compulsive re-living of trauma. Unless trauma is worked through, there is no deep understanding of a complex reality and no re-engagement to change the status quo. Acting out is being stuck in the past. Working through helps people do something with the experience of suffering; it enables people to make distinctions between past, present and future (Schick 11):



Unless traumatic loss is worked through, it poses political dangers that operate not only in the immediate aftermath of trauma, but also decades and generations later. Approaches to security that adopt rational, forward-looking analyses can have only a limited understanding of violence and its fall out. In order to reach a deeper understanding of the cycles of violence and suffering, social and political analyses must also consider the emotional and psychological undercurrents operating in the lives of communities and the ways in which their histories influence their current realities. (Schick 1-2)

When referring to trauma, Schick does not only imply the aftermath of a single episode but also events that are “ongoing and structurally induced as, for example, in the case of extreme poverty or ongoing civil war, where day-to-day life is a struggle for security and survival” (Schick 4). The spread of an epidemic and its consequences can be certainly included among these structurally induced events.

In this traumatic context the protagonist Sean, who has lost his wife and four children, begins a journey in search of a meaning for the disaster, together with his faithful dog Hamu and his horse Bojay, two animals that have somehow chosen their “master”. He leaves from Northland and travels south on horseback as far as the Cook Strait. He crosses the stretch of sea between the North and South Islands on a boat and then heads to the southernmost part of the country, as far as Kokopu Waters. During his journey he meets ruthless criminals and decent people like him. He joins newly-formed communities, living with them for some time, working and helping, learning and teaching. Interestingly, there is a constant need to talk and share emotions, both with temporary travel mates and the residents that are hosting him. For example, when a man called Matapihi helps Sean to put the cannibal bandits that have attacked him to flight, they become friends and soon start talking : “‘You can tell me your story and I’ll tell you mine,’ Matapihi said” (Baker 83). In a previous episode, when Sean is at Ngahere, the Dalmatian-Māori Jim recounts to him how he was the only survivor in his village, and then they weep together:

‘I got sick, same as everyone around me. But I woke up. They didn’t. I nearly lost it then. I sat by the stream over the back for hours, and every time I went back, thinking maybe it had been an awful dream, they were still dead ... I lay in the stream for hours,’ he told Sean. ‘I got clean but I didn’t wake up.’ [...]

‘Thirty houses around Mira’s marae,² said Jim. ‘Nobody alive, only dogs.’ [...]

‘I checked all the houses then,’ he said. ‘I just wanted to hear somebody say “hey, bro!” But I didn’t hear a thing. So I set fire to every house.’

He wept. [...] Sean wept with him. He couldn’t help it. [...] The tears and snot could flow free. That night they slept on the concrete floor, passed out in front of the fire. Doug tossed a blanket over the two men and put pillows under their heads. (Baker 46)

² The *marae* is the open space in front of the ancestral house, where public meetings take place. It is the heart of a traditional Māori village. It still plays a significant role in modern Māori society, being considered a communal and sacred ground, used for cultural rituals, including birthdays, weddings and funerals.



In a situation where all conventions are erased and roles reversed, to follow Girard's thought, people also receive acts of tenderness and unexpected care, as can be seen in Douglas' maternal act of providing a blanket and pillows for the two men sleeping on the floor, in the previous quotation. In fact, in the Ngahere community "[t]o Sean's relief they didn't have to care about food or shelter. They cared for each other too, especially those that had never been cared about much before, and that was more people that you might have thought" (Baker 44). Sharing one's traumatic experience with others as well as giving and receiving affective care become ways to work through collective and individual trauma, from the epidemic but also from abusive family systems.

Sean finally establishes his own community of thirty-two people at Kokopu Waters, once he has found the answers to many questions. In his long journey he embarks on numerous adventures, confronts dangers and risks in a hostile nature, fights against human outlaws and monstrous creatures. In his review, John Connor states that Sean is "a man with a mission", whose quest is "to discover the secret that will save the human race". He also underlines how Sean's journey is close to that of a knight in an Arthurian legend searching for the Holy Grail (Connor). During his travelling he encounters seers whose visions guide him, Merlin-like wise old men, dragons and goblins. He attributes the resort to the fantastic mode in the novel to the fact that "With the disappearance of a materialistic society, magic has returned" (Connor).

Actually, Baker mixes Celtic and Māori myths in his work. The *topos* of the quest through a journey is recurrent in English medieval romances, mixing Christian and Celtic elements. However, the prevalent influence is certainly Māori. At the beginning of the story, Cally, a nine-year-old girl in a frilly dress, is adopted by the Ngahere community in which Sean is living. Although she has lost all her family, she looks apparently untouched by the events like her immaculate white frock (Baker 33). Cally is a young painter. Her artworks represent visions of a parallel world, which is real to her and where she has taken refuge. They illustrate creatures of Māori myths and folklore such as *taniwha*³ and *Maeroero*. The former are supernatural monsters, often serpents or dragons, generally acting as protectors of tribes or people; the latter are defined as spirits of the mountains in folklore studies (Grant 5),⁴ but in Baker's novel they are goblin-like figures that want to save nature from the devastation caused by humans. Cally can hear their voice enigmatically repeating "*kati ra, kati ra*", which means "that's enough, that's enough" (Baker 33).

³ *Taniwha* are supernatural creatures in Māori tradition, similar to serpents and dragons in other cultures. They were said to hide in the ocean, rivers, lakes or caves and could take the shape of reptile-like sea creatures, giant lizards, sometimes with wings, sharks or whales. Some *taniwha* would eat and kill people, or kidnap women. Others were believed to be guardians for a tribe, and people would offer them gifts and say a *karakia* (a prayer). See: Keane.

⁴ In his article on Māori folklore, "Tribes of the Mist", Cowan represents them as "wild men of the bush" and "fierce hairy giants" (89) and in "The Patu-Paiarehe" he defines them "wild men and giants of the mountains" (149).



Impressed by Cally's vivid pictures, Sean has the first of many dreams gradually revealing him his mission. It is midsummer and he is sunbathing near the Waitangi river, admiring its limpid green water. Cally's personal *taniwha*, whose name is Tinirau, appears in the water:

'I'm Tinirau. I've been swimming the waters of Kiwa's ocean⁵ since people lived in trees and ate raw fish. I'm older than Kiwa. [...] I watch and guard. I'll be here long after this place is nothing but damp ground. [...] You can't see me. The sight of me might kill you. But you can believe I'm all around you. I'm the water sparkling in the rapids. I'm the gentle grasses waving in the current. I'm the tuna watching from his hole in the bank. See them, you see me. Love them, you love me. [...] *Calliope* can see me whenever she wants. She understands. She respects and believes. She doesn't fear me. She even loves me.' (38-39, my emphasis)

From these words the readers realize that Cally is the abbreviation of Calliope, the Greek muse of epic poetry: a reference to the girl's inspirational role for Sean. Moreover, the *taniwha* appears as a spirit of nature and its guardian. Sean is dragged down to the riverbed by Tinirau and can see how humans have profaned his sanctuary,⁶ a sacred natural place, with their waste:

It was muddy, carpeted with bones, bits of wire, a set of rusted bedsprings, a car chassis, discarded machinery. [...] Sean looked around at the sheep skeletons, the corroding metal. He tasted chemicals in the water. What could he say? He couldn't think of a worse crime than turning the sparkling stream into this disgusting pit.

'I'm sorry' he said. He'd been fighting the ugliness for years, but he'd always felt he was still a part of it.

'So you should be. Did you imagine you were exempt from the workings of the law of cause and effect? Did you think your greed was without price? But most of you are gone now and, even if it's too late for this place, there are still streams where the *kokopu*⁷ does his nightly dance. You should go there. There is nothing for you here.'

Sean sank to the bottom, overcome with a dreadful despair. [...]

'Stop lying there feeling sorry for yourself. Get up. *Calliope* asked me to help you so I did, and I've given you all the help I feel like giving. You know what to do!'

Sean didn't know. (40, my emphasis)

Tinirau invites Sean to rise up against the ugliness and destruction in front of him, conveying a strong environmentalist message and prompting him to go on a mission in defence of the earth. The *taniwha* also introduces the image of the *kokopu* (freshwater fish), which is found in the novel's title and becomes the symbol of uncontaminated nature. The message is clear. Sean must go to a place where the *kokopu* is still living in clean streams and be its custodian. He should contribute to preserving endangered

⁵ Kiwa is one of several male divine guardians of the ocean.

⁶ The *taniwha* Tinirau is referred to as a masculine pronoun "he" in the novel.

⁷ Kokopu: small, blunt-nosed, endemic freshwater fish, widespread in forested areas. It is capable of climbing moist vertical faces. The juvenile form is called whitebait. See: "Kōkopu" in Works Cited.



species, that is, to protect the environment and its biodiversity. He must spread the environmental gospel that can save the earth. Tinirau also hints at the greed of humans and, indirectly, at the punishment they have had according to the law of cause and effect: the epidemic. The same message is also conveyed by the *Maeroero*, as Cally told him. Their exclamation “that’s enough, that’s enough” can be interpreted as an angry reaction to the pollution and devastation brought about by humans.

After this dream, Sean knows he has a mission and must hurry up, but he doesn’t exactly know where to go and what to do in point of fact: “He felt like Alice in Wonderland. ‘I’m late, I’m late,’ he muttered” (Baker 41). While he is working his way south he meets other seer-like figures that gradually help him to disclose the full meaning of the *taniwha*’s message. At Whangarei, for example, an old woman called Mihi welcomes him warmly. Like a prophetess she has predicted his arrival and is ready to provide useful information about his journey. She tells him that his work in the south is to find “somewhere to live and make a new start” (Baker 66). So he must establish a community of people like him and live a life based on ecological principles. Before that, however, he has “to make peace” with the *Maeroero* (67). She also gives him a *manaia*, a talisman in white bone representing Tinirau, that will become Sean’s protector. She finally indicates the route to follow in order to avoid a terrible bird-headed monster, Kurangaituku: a piece of advice that Sean will not be able to follow and will cause the loss of one of his eyes.

During his journey, Sean has to defend himself from gangs of bandits, confront magical creatures like Kurangaituku and the *Maeroero*, flee from free lions escaped from a safari park and face a profound sense of loneliness. He is helped on several occasions by the intervention of Tinirau (who beheads the ruthless cannibal-bandit Colin, when he falls into the river) or thanks to the power of the *manaia*. Sean learns from a Māori *kaumatua* (old man) that the fever has been caused by the *Maeroero* in retaliation for what was done to one of their sacred places:

‘Te Wai O Tinirau has always been a place of conservation, and especially a place of regeneration.’
‘Where do I fit in all this?’
‘There’s nothing left of Te Wai O Tinirau now. It all got quarried and crushed for road metal. That’s why the Maeroero are so annoyed. That’s why they caused the Fever.’ [...]
‘That’s a bit extreme,’ said Sean. ‘They must have been really pissed off.’
‘They were. Angry for many other things too.’ The old man gave him a puzzled look. ‘I’m not sure where you fit in. Nobody else knows either. Maybe you have to work it out for yourself.’
(Baker 124)

Sean realizes that he must go and meet the *Maeroero*, also called “reject fairies” (Baker 177) in the novel, and see how their exasperation can be placated. The *Maeroero* are described as over-sensitive children and guardians of the life principle by Fairgo, a man who has been kept prisoner by them. Fairgo knows that they love apples, but they would feel terribly upset if they killed a worm inside them:



They don't like hurting things. One of them was eating an apple when he found half a worm. When he realized he had eaten the other half he started crying. His mates had to help him away. [...] But they don't like humans much. They don't trust us." (Baker 210)

Fairgo also confirms that they are responsible for the epidemic:

'Those little buggers caused the Fever' Fairgo said. 'They got sick of waiting for people to get it right.' Sean looked at Fairgo, a sudden realisation rising in him. 'They don't want things to start up again,' he said. (Baker 209)

During the encounter with the *Maeroero* Sean understands they want his *manaia*. The talisman contains the spirit of Tinirau in it and they probably consider it a threat to them. The *taniwha* wants to help Sean start again on a new basis. In contrast, the *Maeroero* don't trust humans any more. Both Tinirau and the *Maeroero* act as preservers of the earth, but they follow different paths: the *taniwha* still believes in humans, the *Maeroero* don't. The implicit meaning of their behaviour is the conviction that the earth can go on without humans all the same. Since he does not want to lose Tinirau's protection, Sean doesn't give them the real talisman but a copy he makes on purpose. However, the *Maeroero* discover the trick and manage to grab the real one. Sean feels disconsolate without his talisman and the support of Tinirau, but the spirit of the *taniwha* is able to move into the copy of the talisman: Sean can feel it alive and kicking, and willing to help. So, he will reach Kokopu Waters and found a community with his new partner Alex, whom he meets on the way.

The story of Sean's quest, described as a flashback in the past, is framed by the first and last chapters. In Chapter 1, set in the present, Sean officiates the first wedding at Kokopu Waters in the role of a secular priest: a hybrid ceremony that takes into account the different persuasions or beliefs of the community members, be they Christian, Buddhist or Māori. He offers formal greetings to the sea, the land, the people but also to the *taniwha* Tinirau, invoking peace, love, warmth and good feeling (Baker 3-4). But there is an apple tree, called The Tree, that has been barren for ten years and never produces blossoms or fruit. The infertility of humans and The Tree appears as a malediction of the *Maeroero*, who unsurprisingly had a predilection for apples. Chapter 17, the final one, is set in the present again, two years after the wedding ceremony. The community is living a life in harmony with nature, respecting its gods and guardians. For this reason they are awarded with the blossoming of The Tree and the return of fertility among its members.

Interspersed with the romance-like adventures are realistic images of destruction and ugliness, in a land devastated by a short-sighted concept of 'progress'. While passing by a dairy factory notorious for "a regular discharge of protein-rich waste into the nearby stream" (Baker 61), Sean remembers that the eels caught in that area were monstrously huge due to a regular and unnatural dairy food diet. At Whangarei, next to a well-known beach resort, he sees the abandoned oil refinery and is reminded of the old people's advice not to eat fish out of the harbour.



He thought of the millions of litres of product, from crude oil to high-octane petrol, leaking into the harbour from the holes rumoured to be in the bottom of every tank in the refinery's 'farm'. So much for the shellfish beds. So much for all the fish that could now start multiplying without being netted to the very limit of their capacity to replenish themselves. The Whangarei area might have been beautiful, with its lush familiarity, but suddenly he was glad he was leaving. The destruction around him matched the ugliness that he knew, too well, lay close to the surface. (Baker 69-70)

The epidemic, by stopping the activity of the refinery, has helped the replenishment of fish population in the harbour, but the ugliness of the area persists. Finally, he comes across the Huntly Power Station, "Still lurking. Still looming too, with the same haunted quality of primitive and abandoned technology crumbling into ruin." (Baker 96). Sean is made to think that the "great grey-green greasy Waikato river" (Baker 96), once the sacred house of many taniwha at every bend, had been reduced into a series of "hydro-lakes" by a string of dams, now unattended and showing corroded turbines. He thought that the *Maeroero* must have been happy to see the giant machines of the power station quiescent: "No wonder the *Maeroero* had been upset, Sean thought. No wonder Cally had seen them stamping about like Rumpelstiltskin, crying despairingly 'That's enough, that's enough!'" (Baker 96).

The mix of myth and realistic details gives the story the quality of environmental parable, eco-fiction and magic realist novel. The inclusion of fantastic elements in a realistic story is actually justified according to Māori culture. Māori writers have always regarded magic realism as a foreign label, a sophisticated 'invention' and an aesthetic approach to writing that has nothing to do with the deep structure of Māori values and their metaphysical underpinnings. There is no separation for Māori between the factual and the 'fanciful', the real and the imagined, the rational and the irrational. This is not due to a poetic suspension of incredulity, as Coleridge would say for Romantic poetry, or an aesthetic change of optic, but to the firm belief in the principle of *whakapapa*, or genealogy, that makes humans the offspring of gods and mythical heroes.

In the introduction to a recent anthology, *Pūrākau: Māori Myths Retold by Māori Writers* (2019), the two editors Witi Ihimaera and Whiti Hereaka vocally explain this point. They affirm the reality of stories, myths and folklore, which may be fantastic but are also real:

Are the stories, myths and folklore imaginary? Not to Māori. The narratives that have come down—as Māori say, *i ngā wā o mua*, from the times in front of us—may be fabulous and fantastic but they are also real. They are so actual that today, although mostly Christianised now, Māori still ritually acknowledge sky and earth whenever in formal Māori settings:

Ko Ranginui kei runga—The Sky Father is above

Ko Papatūānuku kei raro—The Earth Mother is below.

In so doing, Māori affirm the first parents of most indigenous civilisations and our kinship with all native peoples. (Ihimaera and Hereaka 12-13)



According to Māori *mātauranga* (wisdom, understanding), the supernatural and the mythical are naturally part of everyday life. History and myth overlap in the literary genre of *whakapapa* (genealogy), which is recited in public events and underlines the centrality of ancestry in Māori culture. Traditional oral literature features mythical heroes/heroines and fantastic beings, acknowledging them as ancestors of today's tribes and offspring of the primeval gods of Māori cosmogony. The dichotomy real-imagined is dissolved in the belief that:

It's all history, fluid, holistic, inclusive—not necessarily linear—and it may be told backwards, which is why, to orient ourselves, we always place our origin stories in front. The stories are actually the beginning of a whakapapa, a genealogy. And what they establish is the beginning of a distinctive world view. (Ihimaera and Hereaka 13)

Starting from a scientific basis, Baker's novel delves deep into Māori principles. The story of an epidemic, reconfigured and re-signified within a bi-cultural context, cuts across myth and science, turning into a powerful environmental parable and a template of transcultural writing. A further example is the explanation of the causes of the epidemic. It is due to the mutation of the calcivirus in the Western scientific perspective. It is also a matter of *utu*, a Polynesian and Māori concept that has often been superficially equated to "revenge", as underlined in a conversation between Sean and Matapihi, one of the many "seers" of the novel:

'What did they say about the Fever?'
'They said it was "utu",' Matapihi replied. 'I suppose you know what "utu" really means?'
'It means "price". It's got more to do with the law of cause and effect than revenge.'
'You got it. [...] It's karma, simple as that.' (Baker 85)

In fact, *utu* is neither good or bad, but just the re-establishment of balance after an offence, when something has been taken away or the *mana* (charisma, authority, and prestige, according to the Reed Dictionary) of a person or a tribe has been diminished. *Mana* is also translated as a supernatural force in a person, place or object (*Te Aka Māori Dictionary*). As Thompson pinpoints:

Utu refers to the repayment of a debt, either through positive acts like gift-giving or negative acts like murder, depending upon the nature of the obligation. It has frequently been misinterpreted as a form of revenge, but that is only part of its meaning. Utu, in its full significance, is neither good nor bad; it is simply necessary. It is not a concept which translates well, or perhaps at all, into Judeo-Christian terms. (Thompson 185-6)

In *Kokopu Dreams* nature's *mana* has been diminished or damaged by humans and the epidemic is the repayment of this debt: it is a way to restore the *mana* of nature. The gift-giving scene, with the *Maeroero* taking the talisman, also alludes to this concept.

To conclude, Chris Baker's *Kokopu Dreams* can be considered a far-seeing book, almost prophetic in predicting the possibility of a global deadly epidemic due to the



mutation of a virus, twenty years before the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The mix of realism and myth, the insight into the survivors' response to trauma and, finally, the re-signification of that experience against different cultural, environmental and even ontological backgrounds offer a multi-faceted perspective on the pandemic that is worthwhile reading.

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Paola Della Valle is Associate Professor at the University of Turin (Italy). She specializes in New Zealand and Pacific literature, postcolonial and gender studies. Her articles appeared in, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Textus*, *NZSA Bulletin of New Zealand Studies*, *Le Simplegadi*, *Il Castello di Elsinore*, *RiCognizioni*, *English Studies*, *Semicerchio* and *Loxias*. She has published the monographs *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Māori Literature* (Auckland, 2010), *Stevenson nel Pacifico: una lettura postcoloniale* (Roma, 2013) and *Priestley e il tempo, il tempo di Priestley* (Torino, 2016).

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6484-9674>

paola.dellavalle@unito.it