Journal of Postcolonial Writing

ISSN: 1744-9855 (Print) 1744-9863 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpw20

Contemporary Pasifika Poetry in Aotearoa New Zealand: An interview with Selina Tusitala Marsh

Paloma Fresno-Calleja & Janet M. Wilson

To cite this article: Paloma Fresno-Calleja & Janet M. Wilson (2020) Contemporary Pasifika Poetry in Aotearoa New Zealand: An interview with Selina Tusitala Marsh, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 56:2, 271-282, DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2020.1728117

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1728117

Published online: 02 Mar 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 291

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rjpw20

JOURNAL OF POSTCOLONIAL WRITING
2020, VOL. 56, NO. 2, 271–282
https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1728117

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTERVIEW

Check for updates

Contemporary Pasifika Poetry in Aotearoa New Zealand: An interview with Selina Tusitala Marsh

Paloma Fresno-Calleja and Janet M. Wilson

University of the Balearic Islands, Majorca, Spain; University of Northampton, UK

ABSTRACT

In this interview conducted in the English Department at the University of Auckland in July 2019, the poet-scholar Selina Tusitala Marsh touches on many aspects of her pioneering role as the pre-eminent woman poet writing about the Pacific in Aotearoa New Zealand. She discusses the responsibilities associated with being the country's Poet Laureate (2017–19), as the first Pasifika person to be awarded this office; the symbolic nature of her *tokotoko*, the Māori ceremonial carved walking-stick granted to Poets Laureate; the Pacific traditions and hybrid heritage that informs her poetry and her teaching of creative writing and Pacific literature at the University of Auckland. The interview also covers her current academic and creative projects focused on Pacific women poets, her work with local communities and school children, her views on the lack of role models for the teaching and writing of Pacific poetry, and her strategies to balance her many public and private roles.

KEYWORDS

Selina Tusitala Marsh; Pacific literature; Pasifika identities; New Zealand Poet Laureate; representation

Selina Tusitala Marsh is associate professor of English at the University of Auckland, where she teaches Pacific literature and creative writing, and one of New Zealand's most acclaimed poets. Of Samoan, Tuvaluan, English, and French descent, Marsh grew up in the Auckland suburb of Avondale, as the daughter of a Kiwi father and a Samoan mother, who arrived in New Zealand in the 1960s at the peak of Pacific migration. Marsh's academic and artistic achievements are numerous and groundbreaking: she was the first Pacific Island woman to obtain a PhD in English from the University of Auckland with her thesis "Ancient Banyans, Flying Foxes and White Ginger: Five Pacific Women Writers" (Marsh 2004) devoted to the works of the first Pacific female poets published in English. In 2012 Marsh was chosen to represent Tuvalu at the London Olympics Poetry Parnassus event; in 2016 she was named Commonwealth Poet and asked to compose and perform a poem ("Unity") for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey on Commonwealth Day. In 2017 Marsh was made Honorary Literary Fellow in the New Zealand Society of Authors'

CONTACT Paloma Fresno-Calleja paloma.fresno@uib.es University of the Balearic Islands, Majorca, Spain
© 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

annual Waitangi Day Honours and in that same year she became the first Pasifika person to be awarded the New Zealand Poet Laureateship. Marsh became the 2019 Arts Queensland International Poet in Residence and was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2019 for services to poetry, literature and the Pacific community. In 2020 she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand.

Marsh's poetic oeuvre, which has appeared in numerous anthologies and in print and online journals, includes her hugely acclaimed and bestselling first collection, *Fast Talking PI* (Marsh 2009), recipient of the New Zealand Society of Authors' Jessie Mackay Award for Best First Book of Poetry in 2010. Marsh reflects on Pasifika identity politics, the struggle against old and new forms of colonialism and her ability to play multiple roles as she talks back to the damaging stereotypes still applied to Pacific Islanders in Aotearoa New Zealand and embraces the "PI" acronym to smash those stale images. Albert Wendt talked of this collection as "a challenging new fusion" representative of "a new generation of poets" emerging in the Pacific; Sia Figiel praised her ability to put into words "the urban realities of the Pacific diaspora"; and Karlo Mila highlighted her ability to combine "the Western English literary tradition [and] the flowing oratory of Polynesia" (cover blurb).

After her dynamic arrival on the New Zealand poetry scene, and her subsequent collections, *Dark Sparring* (Marsh 2013) and *Tightrope* (Marsh 2017), Marsh has become established as one of the most vibrant, energetic, and original poetic voices of the region. *Dark Sparring* (Marsh 2013) explores the interrelations between body, movement, and identity, and describes her grief following the diagnosis of her mother's illness and her subsequent death. The central metaphor of sparring comes from Marsh's taking up Muai Thai kick-boxing which, together with dance and other ritual movements, allows her to illustrate the negotiation of the personal and the public:

> In sparring, my body learned to swing, pivot, move with a raw instinct in defence and in attack. My mind began following my body, and the ropes inside the ring grew to become a stage that became a classroom that became a dining room that became a nation. (cover blurb)

Her third collection, *Tightrope* (Marsh 2017), longlisted for the 2018 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards for Best Book of Poetry, opens with a quotation by the father of Pacific literature, Albert Wendt, Marsh's friend and mentor: "history is the remembered tightrope that stretches across the abyss of all that we have forgotten". *Tightrope* reflects on memory, loss, and the handling of in-between and abysmal spaces through the central metaphor of the tightrope. One of the poems included in the collection, "Unity", was composed and performed by Marsh in front of Queen Elizabeth II. In an interview with New Zealand poet Paula Green, Marsh explains that

> [u]nity is an underlying theme in the collection, [what's] needed in "the struggle" [and] what my poetry seeks to create. Unity of the multitudinous stories that constitute our memory, which in turn, form our history, "the remembered tightrope", to quote Albert Wendt. (Green 2017)

As an academic, Marsh's research has centred on Pasifika literature, with a focus on the work on the pioneer Pacific female poets, on which she is currently writing a monograph. In her article "'Nafanua and the New World': Pasifika's Writing of Niu Zealand", included in the Cambridge University Press volume, *History of New Zealand*

Literature, Marsh (2016a) traces the development of Pasifika literature from Albert Wendt to the present, with a focus on the new generation of young Pasifika poets, playwrights and film-makers who are contributing to expand and redefine the limits of national literature and respond both to western literary traditions and to their Pacific forefathers and foremothers.

Marsh explains her double role, as storyteller and teacher, through the symbolism of her middle name "Tusitala", inherited from her maternal Tuvaluan grandfather and translated as "teller of tales":

> I tell tales often ignored, marginalised and footnoted in critical canons. I have to tell these tales in books to ensure that erasure is not an option; to ensure that engagement with these kinds of cultural conversations continues to happen in the context of New Zealand, Pacific and global literatures. As a teacher of creative writing, it's also my job to enable others to tell their tales, and in the most effective ways possible. (2016b, 13)

To accomplish such a task, Marsh has performed her poetry at hundreds of national and international events and venues, conducted many workshops for various organizations, and mentored children at numerous schools as part of her involvement with the New Zealand Book Council's Writers in Communities project. She is also responsible for the Pasifika Poetry site, part of the New Zealand electronic poetry centre, which features a range of Pacific poets.

In a review of her work, David Eggleton, the current New Zealand Poet Laureate, aptly summarizes the aesthetics, politics, and effects of Marsh's poetry:

> Marsh is a poet of ambiguities and crossovers, of margins, of borders and borderlines. Her borrowings [...] slippery and shifting, are a means of undermining certainties. Quoting texts from disparate sources, she makes them oracular. Throwing out her lines as if to cross the Void, the Polynesian va, the ocean, she establishes connections. In this way she is a spell-caster, potentially able to drag everything into her vatic utterances, which name the world into existence. (2014)

This interview was conducted in July 2019 after Marsh had successfully co-hosted the Triennial Conference of the Association for the Study of Commonwealth Literatures and Languages (ACLALS) at the University of Auckland, and it was subsequently completed via email.

Janet Mary Wilson (JMW): In 2017 you were chosen as New Zealand Poet Laureate.[1] Could you tell us about what it has meant for you to represent Aotearoa New Zealand to the rest of the world during this period [2017–19]?

Selina Tusitala Marsh (STM): Last week the National Library in Wellington hosted a farewell for me because I am at the end of my two-year tenure. My *koha* (gift) back to them was a 122-slide power point put to rhyming couplets of these two years, where we – myself and my *tokotoko* – have been and what we have done. The 3 former Poets Laureate (there are 11 in total) were all Pākehā, all males, all in their late seventies or eighties,[2] all occupying a particular kind of literary space in the New Zealand psyche. The majority of the community that I reach out to are not even aware that New Zealand has had a Poet Laureate since 1996. It's been a very outreaching two years.

I have travelled to 11 countries and 35 towns and cities, spreading the word about the Laureateship. Primarily this has entailed taking this *tokotoko*, this carved Māori walking

stick, with me and telling its story. This is our Polynesian library; this is our storehouse of knowledge. This beautiful tangible material object combined with this really abstract notion of poetry creates a wonderful opportunity for people to feel that poetry has something to do with them, that they could possibly belong to poetry, because in a very physical way they can feel, touch, caress the *tokotoko*. Then we start talking story. Often the conversation goes something like "*this* is a poem, it's a concrete poem" and it just opens up the conversation, rather than having the majority of people with their noses pressed up against that glass window thinking "How do I get in? How do I get access to poetry?"

Paloma Fresno-Calleja (PFC): We understand that there is a *tokotoko* for each Poet Laureate. Could you explain more about the significance of this particular *tokotoko*?

STM: There is a parent *tokotoko* which is on permanent display at the National Library in Wellington and that is the one that is ceremonially bestowed upon the incoming Laureate. But each Laureate has one specially carved for them by Jacob Scott from Haumoana in Hawke's Bay, and then the Laureate gets to keep it. I gave the carver things that represented my culture. The top part, the *fue* or flywhisk, is from Samoa and was given to me by his Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Tupuola Ta'isi Efi.[3] I knew that I wanted the carver not only to reflect my story from his position, but it would be important that I have a physical presence in the *tokotoko* because I am representative of Samoans, Tuvaluans, the Pacific diaspora, Oceania.

PFC: So, you carry the *tokotoko* around when you travel?

STM: Most Laureates do not carry the *tokotoko* around, and it is usually viewed as a lovely keepsake or trophy (Michelle Leggott would carry hers around with her because it doubled as a walking stick). When Jacob Scott got to know me he knew that I would take it to the people so I'd need to be able to travel with my *tokotoko*, disassemble it and put it in a backpack, so it comes apart in 11 pieces.

I have been working on a poetic memoir, which is now about 50,000 words, where each piece begins a tale. Basically, the question that the *tokotoko* has been posing to me as a poet, as a 48-year-old professional, Pasifika mother, looking after children and parents, and juggling contract work and representative Pasifika policy issues is: "How do you hold the fire without burning out?" Each *tokotoko* is named and Jacob Scott named this one Tusitala Kapura. Tusitala is my name, which means storyteller, and in Māori *kapura* means "the long slow burning flame". He said to me: "You're no longer a new spark. You are now the source for other people to take their sparks off and fly, so you are the source." I was just struck by the resonance of what I'd been trying to come to terms within myself, by what was being materially reflected in this piece.

The middle piece has been burnt. I was told that burning part of a carving is a Haumoana carver's signature. So this piece has held the fire and hasn't burned out and this thought has drawn me into a huge poetic relationship with the *tokotoko*. So I wondered how each piece of the *tokotoko* held its own tale and wisdom, and how I might hold the flame and not burn out. This written memoir has been a process of discovery for me. Even down to the *tokotoko's* rubber foot! When his Highness gave me the top part of the *tokotoko*, the *fue*, which is a talking chief's flywhisk, I asked him: "What does the *tokotoko* (*to'oto'o* in Samoan) mean for Samoans?" Tui Atua replied

that the *to'oto'o* is what it sounds: the *o'o o'o*, the tap-tap-tapping of its foot on the ground. It's about keeping one's heel to the earth, it speaks for the need for humility and leadership, the need for dynamism, for movement, and in both a physical and metaphysical sense, to keep grounded. So my memoir chapter on this rubber foot part is about how I use trail running, and more specifically barefoot running through trails, to keep myself grounded and centred in community. I am part of the Waiheke trail tribe, so I am supported by people who do not know anything about any of my other roles, except that I am a heel-to-earth runner with them. And it's incredibly cathartic in terms of processing the kinds of stresses and demands required by this and other institutions. This is the kind of wisdom afforded me by the *tokotoko*, but the story is all about running a half marathon.

JMW: Is that distinctive of your *tokotoko*, the rubber foot that keeps the heel to the earth? It encapsulates so much of the balancing side of your life, the need to keep things in place. It is densely symbolic.

STM: Yes, when his Highness gifted me the *fue*, I thought "This is amazing, somehow this composite material object reflects who I am and where I'm at." Then I felt scared because these are the tools of office for a talking chief, a *tulafale*, and talking chiefs are of rank. And I said to his Highness: "Am I allowed? These are tools of office of talking chiefs. I was born in New Zealand, I do not speak Samoan fluently. I do not have a title. Am I allowed to hold this *taonga* (treasured possession)?" He said to me: "You are already a *tulafale*. You are our own fast talking chief, and you have been so for a while now." This was a wonderful moment of permission. While he is the pre-eminent scholar on precolonial Samoan belief systems, he is also a very progressive thinker. He is often criticized for it because he both believes and promotes the idea that culture must be dynamic in order for it to thrive. Most people wouldn't be in the position to ask for permission from his Highness, so that is another motivation for me to go into schools and talk to the students; here is the physical evidence that I have that permission. And if I have permission, I want to pass that on in the sense that I believe everyone is a fast talking chief, everyone has the right to write and tell their story, especially through poetry.

It is through objects like this that we used to know and tell our stories. Most of us are no longer literate in reading *taonga* housed in museums now; they need to be translated and deciphered. What I do by taking the *tokotoko* on adventures with me is a modern way of taking an ancient form of storytelling into schools and communities. When I go to schools, students love rubbing and touching it. So my message to fellow Laureates is to take the *tokotoko* with you. Many of those *tokotoko*, though, are carved in one piece so it makes it difficult to travel with them. For example, Cilla McQueen, who lives on the rugged coast of Bluff in the South Island, had hers carved from a piece of gnarled driftwood.

But I was a bit anxious about replacing C.K. Stead as Poet Laureate. The way he occupied the Laureateship was primarily, in outward terms, maintaining a blog with long and rigorously critical essays giving an overview of the state of New Zealand literature. I was not at all interested in replicating that.[4] Peter Ireland, who is the National Library's *kaitiaki* (guardian) of the Poets Laureate told me: "You do you. That's why you are here now."

PFC: That is the point, that every Poet Laureate is different.

STM: It was hard, though, because I was the first Pasifika Poet Laureate. Hone Tuwhare in 1999 became the first Māori Poet Laureate but sadly passed away in 2008 and wasn't here to give advice. The importance of role models is in fact what motivates me to keep going into schools. Even as the New Zealand Poet Laureate I was looking for ideas about how I would do it. So I ended up taking a little bit from Michelle Leggott, a little bit from Vincent O'Sullivan, a little bit from Hone Tuwhare, a little bit from Bill Manhire, and a lot of me. And that has been a strategy that I've embraced ever since; you have to have composite role models so that you feel like there's a place for you and how you do things. Albert Wendt and Witi Ihimaera are very important, but I lacked female role models.

PFC: This in fact is a theme that runs through your poetry, the preoccupation with tracing or establishing a female genealogy for your own work, the importance of acknowledging those who came before you. You often mention writers that have inspired you, like Alice Walker, and specifically female writers and leaders from the Pacific to which you refer in a number of poems.[5] Could you explain a bit more about the importance of establishing such a female genealogy?

STM: On that wall behind you [points to office wall] I have photographs of the 16 first-wave Pacific Island women poets, the first to publish a sole collection of poetry in English from their island. My PhD thesis (Marsh 2004) looked at the first five: Jully Makini (Solomon Islands), Grace Mera Molisa (Vanuatu), Haunani-Kay Trask (Hawai'i), Konai Helu Thaman (Tonga), and Momoe Malietoa von Reiche (Samoa). The book that I am now writing covers the first 16. A great sister mentor of mine, and one of my peers, was Teresia Teaiwa and, frankly, she burnt out.[6] So I thought "Must all gifted, talented, committed Pacific women burn out?" Certainly, this was my observation. We can't even support each other; we are so busy doing everything. How do we gain inspiration from each other and nurture each other and live the lives that we are living? And I decided that my strongest contribution would be to make these poets visible and vocal in both my poetry and in my critical work. I originally wanted to publish the book with an academic publisher, but I have decided that if I write 16 long chapters about them in conventional academic-speak, I am going to lose the people that most need to hear about these women. It's all about access and impact now. So in my book, the short chapters aim to hook the reader into the world of these poets one poem at a time. They are story-based and metaphor-based and where I am in conversation with each poet's key poem.

I have been discussing this and obtaining support from Paula Green whose amazing new book called *Wild Honey* (Green 2019) looks at all New Zealand women poets from a womanist lens. And she writes unapologetically about their work as a woman, as a poet, and as a critic. So my project now has some renewed energy.

JMW: Because she provides a model?

STM: Yes, interestingly, in figuring out what goes into each of my 3000-word chapters about these Pacific women poets, I started making one poem to capture each poet's life. That means that I now have another related book project where each women's life is explored through a 20-stanza poem, accompanied by my own drawings. It will be an e-book that will be made freely available across Oceania. So the ni-Vanuatu student who currently

knows nothing about Grace Mera Molisa, the first ni-Vanuatu poet, will have access to her work through this e-book. I am working with a software designer who loves the idea of me wanting to make e-books of this nature freely available. Another offshoot to that project is *Mophead*, the graphic mini-memoir. It is a children's book, but it also operates in an inspirational leadership space and will hopefully appeal to whole groups of adults.

JMW: Could you talk about the importance of Polynesian mythological figures and how you use them in your poetry? I am thinking of Sia Figiel's work and how they figure there.

STM: We have a tendency to romanticize our mythic figures, and I have got responses to well-known mythological figures like Nafanua,[7] but I am kind of a fringe dweller. In the prose poem "Not Another Nafanua Poem" (Marsh 2009, 4) I talk about Nafanua's sister and the sacrifices of the women who live in the shadows of those who become famous and laurelled. There is also a poem about Maui and Hinemoa, "Calabash Breakers" (Marsh 2009, 8), and the breaking of rules. I am always thinking of those who get left behind, and I want to speak for them. It's a subversive way of nodding to Polynesian mythic gods, but always talking about the boundary-breakers and rebellious characters who are outside the box. Those are the role models for me, those who disrupt spaces in positive, challenging, and unorthodox ways.

JMW: You have often mentioned the importance of your mother as a role model, as someone from which you inherited your ways of communicating publicly and your storytelling skills. *Fast Talking PI* was dedicated to her as "the ultimate fast talker", you include poems about her in all your collections, and a substantial part of *Dark Sparring* narrates her illness and how you came to terms with her death.

STM: She was not your conventional Samoan mother and she also responded to things in a subversive way, primarily because she hated the hypocrisy that she saw in the Samoan church. She hated how her siblings would empty their cupboards and give 500 dollars for the church plate and then not have food. She was also my grandfather's favourite (according to herself). His name was Vaelei Tusitala and he was a church minister. But Mum always maintained he was different from other ministers because he was skinny. Obesity is the sign of corruption as far as Mum was concerned. And because she did not have that conservative cultural rootedness, we didn't either. She was vivacious, loud, she would walk to my high-school prize-giving in stilettos and wearing a hat with a fascinator. She was larger than life. And she was quite fearless, but in my early days that behaviour had the opposite effect on me. I became uber-conservative and uber-quiet – sometimes it seemed as though she took up all the oxygen in the air. I was self-conscious and embarrassed by some of the outrageous public behaviour. I used to dread going with her to pick up welfare benefit cheques where staff were often haughty, especially towards Islanders. She went on the solo mother's benefit when my parents were divorced and had feisty responses for anyone who dared look down on her or us.

Fast Talking PI is dedicated to her, Sailigi (Lina) Crosbie. Crosbie is my father's name, it's Scottish. Albert Wendt once famously said that we are all mongrels and that is something that we don't claim enough either. *Mophead* (Marsh 2019) the graphic mini memoir, claims this *afakasi* [half caste] identity which means acknowledging that we are part of many things, many countries and bloodlines. I want kids to feel that there are all

kinds of identity storylines you can pull on if you want to because they are all part of your *whakapapa*, of your lineage. My consistent message over the years has been: "You do you, you do your Pasifika stuff exactly the way you've been brought up to live it. We may not look traditional but culture is always changing and dynamic."

JMW: On several occasions, you have mentioned how you discovered the power of performance poetry and the impact that Sam Hunt, who visited your school, had on you. Do you recall any other female or performance poets as influencing you at that stage?

STM: I remember Pam Ayres, she was English but she seduced me with her rhyme and set metre which gave me access to this world called poetry. And she was funny. She broke down the walls, I could relate to the topics she talked about. I too was scared of the dentist. And it was her way, the pleasure of verbalizing poetry, the oral nature of it that I related to, and both she and Sam Hunt did that.

JMW: But they were both Anglo-Saxon; how about the Polynesian oral tradition?

STM: It was not until 1998 that I stumbled upon Pacific poetry. I do not speak Samoan fluently, but there is heteroglossia in my poems, and translated proverbs. Some terms like *akafasi*. Those Samoan words represent whole worlds that sit on the line. These stories and myths, poetry, and literature are pathways for those of us in the diaspora. I began learning the Samoan language when I started university in 1998 and I got an A+ for my written language. Then when I went to live in Samoa for three months, it started coming out of my mouth more fluently and I could make myself understood. But unless the language surrounds you in your living environment, and you speak it, you lose it. This is what happened when I returned to New Zealand. My 73-year-old mother-in-law lives with us, and she cannot always help me unpack Samoan words, proverbs, or sayings. She left Samoa when she was 16 to migrate here. She is fluent in the language, and in practising social protocols, but in terms of deep knowledge, it has all been Christianized out of her – this began well before she left Samoa.

PFC: Another theme that runs through your poetry is the difficulty of negotiating the multiple roles and responsibilities in your life, the competing requirements of your private and public spheres.[8] How do cope with those varied demands?

STM: A mainstream magazine wanted to interview me at home and I said Nana was not happy about having strangers in the house; my role there is very different from what I do at work. I wear different hats and shoes. I am a Samoan daughter, wife, and mother in the house. Performing those different roles grounds me, like trail running. I have also tried to become more strategic with my time and energy. After this interview, I am doing a recording for the television programme *Tagata Pasifika*.[9] I will take the 122-slide PowerPoint about my period as Poet Laureate to them and they will make it into a film which I get to share with the world. I do not have the time or resources to do it, so they will. In that way I have the chance to make something that goes on beyond me, and which can be sent to schools as a resource. There's a Maori proverb that says "The kumara never sings of its own sweetness", but at this level of representation you have to be visible and vocal. I often find myself in a paradoxical place. I have to humbly publicly represent and promote myself and my work in order to better serve my communities, and also remain authentically me.

PFC: You teach both Pacific literature and creative writing at the University of Auckland and those experiences are often incorporated in your own poems.[10] Could you explain the interrelations between your creative work and your teaching practice?

STM: I have just returned from teaching in our creative writing MA course. I had planned technique-based exercises, but I thought I wanted to do something different and wanted to share with my class what I was writing at present and talk about what inspired them. Some of the best classes are when a writer shares what they are working on at present. I played a video with Ann Lamott, and we worked at identifying voice and effective storytelling techniques during the talk. I asked them to identify 12 truths about writing they have learnt so far. As this class will be spending [a] whole year together, I went in with two objectives: I wanted to deepen the *va*, the relation space between them; and I wanted them to produce some writing and figure out how best to tell a story in a condensed way. I set 30 minutes for writing, and then we edited and verbally shared the writing. I wrote as well. We identified all the commonalties and some of the central weaknesses. One is when you fail to concretize an abstract concept in words, in an image, in dialogue, you forget it and it is no longer memorable; it has to be demonstrated in action, dialogue, or some quirky thing. It was a great session. As a writer, I share in the learning process, they learn from each other, and from me, and I am learning from them. There is something about showing yourself where you are both known and not known, and the known part is very Polynesian. I need to earn the right to be heard, I need to expose a bit of me so a relationship with students can be established. Not a nonentity standing in front of you, but Selina in front of you.

PFC: You also teach a course on Pacific literature, but there are surprisingly few courses like this currently being taught at New Zealand universities.[11] Are your students mostly from Aotearoa New Zealand?

STM: It is ironic that international students take Pacific literature papers, because they say they cannot do this anywhere else in the world; but local students seem to dismiss it or consider it is less relevant. I am looking for a successor. At the moment, it's just me and Alice Te Punga Somerville, who teaches Māori and Pacific literature at Waikato. I keep Māori literature out of my course ("Pacific Literature in English") because I do not want to lower the urgency to replace Professor Witi Ihimaera's teaching position at my university. His position has still yet to be filled, and due to budget constraints, filling that role is now even more problematic. There's always a struggle between honouring Treaty obligations and juggling practical constraints such as resourcing and staffing. We have a number of Māori writers, like Paula Morris here, Tina Makereti at Victoria University, and James George at Auckland University of Technology teaching practice-based creative writing courses, but those are quite different from literary courses dealing specifically with exploration and critique of Pacific literature.

PFC: This special issue of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* explores different definitions of "New Zealand literature", who gets included or excluded in academic or literary definitions. Do you feel that Pasifika literature is sufficiently represented in anthologies, literary journals, prizes, etc. There is, for instance, a majority of poets

and playwrights, rather than novelists. How would you explain this lack of Pasifika novelist in Aotearoa New Zealand?

STM: Simply put, writing a novel requires solitude, focus, and time. Lots of time. Pacific Islanders, whether living in the islands or in diaspora, tend to live within a vast network of extended families, their attendant obligations, as well as within large religious and/or politically active communities. A large portion of my own life has been spent living with and supporting extended family members which puts a premium on time, energy, and focus. Why do you think I've written poetry all my life? I can begin and finish something in a relatively short space of time. Poetry is a doable form amidst the hubbub of communal living in all its forms. Certainly more Pacific literature could be represented in mainstream publications and awards – we should not rest on the laurels of a few. However, as more PIs infiltrate those spaces of judgement, editing, and curation, our aesthetics will be – as has always been the case – reflected in who gets included or excluded. See for example, my 25 choices for *Best NZ Poems 2017* is a selection the media cited as presenting a "diverse bouquet of voices" (https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/news/2018/05/best-new-zealand-poems-presents-a-diverse-bouquet-of-voices). I didn't set out for diversity. Like every non-PI judge before me, I just chose what appealed to me, what I liked. And because I'm a PI, brown voices appealed to me. Brown aesthetics resonate with me, so they "win".

Notes

1. As explained in the National Library website: "The award of Poet Laureate celebrates outstanding contributions to New Zealand poetry. For a two-year period, the Laureate is supported by the National Library to create new work and promote poetry throughout the country. The Laureate is an accomplished and highly regarded poet who can speak on behalf of New Zealand poetry, and to its readers." Accessed September 2019. https://natlib.govt.nz/about-us/scholarships-and-awards/poet-laureate.
2. The New Zealand Poet Laureate Award has been previously granted to: Bill Manhire (1997–99), Hone Tuwhare (1999–2001), Elizabeth Smither (2001–03), Brian Turner (2003–05), Jenny Bornholdt (2005–07), Michelle Leggott (2007–09), Cilla McQueen (2009–11), Ian Wedde (2011–13), Vincent O'Sullivan (2013–15), and C.K. Stead (2015–17). The New Zealand Poet Laureate for 2019–21 is David Eggleton.
3. Samoan Head of State (O le Ao O le Malo) from 2007 to 2017.
4. Marsh's blog entries written during her laureateship can be found at http://www.poetlaureate.org.nz/.
5. See, for instance, "Circle of Stones" (33–34) in *Fast Talking PI* (Marsh 2009) ; "Apostles" (1–11), "Led by Line" (13), or "Queens I Have Met" (42–46) in *Tightrope* (Marsh 2017).
6. *Tightrope*'s dedication reads "for Teresia Teaiwa shooting black star (1968–2017)" and the collection includes the poem "Essential Oils for the Dying" (65), written in her memory (Marsh 2017).
7. Nafanua was a historical warrior princess and the goddess of war in Samoan mythology and has featured prominently in a number of works by Pasifika writers, most notably in Tusiata Avia's (2009) collection *Bloodclot*. For an account of various revisions of the goddess figure, see Marsh (2016a).
8. See, for instance, poems like "Things on Thursdays" (11–14) and "Cardboard Crows" (19–21) (*Fast Talking PI* [Marsh 2009]), or "The Working Mother's Guide to Reading Seventy Books a Year" (80–81) (*Tightrope* [Marsh 2017]).

9. *Tagata Pasifika* is a weekly television programme airing on TVNZ which deals with general affairs related to New Zealand Pasifika community and other topics of the wider Pacific region. See https://www.tvnz.co.nz/shows/tagata-pasifika. The interview with Marsh is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tLZpk33eic.
10. Poems about Marsh's teaching experiences include "Teaching Pacific Literature" (16) (*Dark Sparring* [Marsh 2013]) and "In Creative Writing Class" (95) and "Explanation of Poetry to My Immigrant Mother" (32–34) (*Tightrope* [Marsh 2017]).
11. Current courses include "Oceanic Literatures of Aotearoa: Ngā Tuhinga Kōrero o te Moana nui a Kiwa" taught by Dr Tina Makereti at Massey University, and a more general course on Pacific cultures ("Introduction to Pacific Histories, Languages and Cultures") taught by Alice Te Punga Somerville at the University of Waikato.

Acknowledgments

Paloma Fresno-Calleja gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO), the Agencia Estatal de Investigación (AEI), and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (Reference FFI 2016-75130-P).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Paloma Fresno-Calleja is senior lecturer in English at the University of the Balearic Islands. Her research focuses on New Zealand and Pacific literatures. She has published articles on the work of Pacific female writers such as Selina Tusitala Marsh, Tusiata Avia, Sia Figiel, and Lani Wendt Young, and translated short stories by Pacific authors such as Sia Figiel and Albert Wendt into Spanish.

Janet M. Wilson is professor of English and postcolonial studies at the University of Northampton, UK, and specializes in Australasian postcolonial and diaspora writing. She has written on Pacific and Maori writers in the co-edited "Pacific Waves: Reverberations from Oceania", a special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54(5) (2018), and has just published the edited volume *The General and the Nightingale: The War Stories of Dan Davin* (2020).

ORCID

Paloma Fresno-Calleja http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2094-7536
Janet M. Wilson http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5655-6209

References

Avia, Tusiata. 2009. *Bloodclot*. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
Best NZ Poems.2017. Edited by Selina Tusitala Marsh. Accessed February 2020. https://www.bestnewzealandpoems.org.nz/past-issues/2017-contents/
Eggleton, David. 2014. "Paradise Pasifika." *Landfall Review Online*, October 1. Accessed September 2019. https://landfallreview.com/paradise-pasifika/
Green, Paula. 2017. "In Conversation with Selina Tusitala Marsh." Accessed September 2019. https://nzpoetryshelf.com/2017/11/21/in-conversation-with-selina-tusitala-marsh/

Green, Paula. 2019. *Wild Honey: Reading New Zealand Women's Poetry*. Palmerston North: Massey University Press.
Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 2004. "Ancient Banyans, Flying Foxes and White Ginger: Five Pacific Women Writers." PhD thesis, University of Auckland.
Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 2009. *Fast Talking PI*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 2013. *Dark Sparring*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 2016a. "'Nafanua in the New World': Pasifika's Writing of Niu Zealand." In *A History of New Zealand Literature*, edited by Mark Williams, 359–373. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 2016b. *Tala Tusi: The Teller Is the Tale: A New Zealand Book Council Lecture*. Wellington: New Zealand Book Council.
Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 2017. *Tightrope*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
Marsh, Selina Tusitala. 2019. *Mophead*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.