

“A knife through time”:
Robert Sullivan’s *Star Waka* and the
Politics and Poetics of Cultural Difference
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Media coverage of cultural and economic matters in Aotearoa-New Zealand strongly indicates that Maori—and more broadly Pacific—cultures are ‘hot properties’ in national and international music, literature, fashion, art, décor, and cuisine, not to mention sport and tourism. Yet Maori political discourses identify continued disadvantage and discrimination facing Maori people, while non-Maori political discourses remain divided between those committed to rectifying the legacies of colonial dispossession, and those who would draw a line under the putative past to move into an implicitly assimilative future. The space that opens between these various political positions and the celebration of Maori and Pacific cultures nationally and internationally is a critical space of contemporary cultural politics in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and one that Robert Sullivan’s 1999 poetry collection *Star Waka* actively occupies and engages.

Published on the eve of the new millennium, *Star Waka* enacts a poetics of liminality that urges a rethinking of the relationship between the cultural politics of representation, cultural decolonization, and indigeneity at the interface of the postcolonial and the global. The collection explores the question of what can serve as cultural reference points for Maori, individually and collectively, in a bicultural postcolonial nation-state as the third millennium witnesses an intensification of the processes and perspectives of globalization, with their ambivalent implications for Maori agency in decolonization. More implicitly, it poses questions about the very notion of culture *as* a reference point at this juncture. While the identification of cultural reference points is pursued by way of a structuring star-waka-ocean motif (discussed below) that governs the collection, the question of culture *as* a reference point may be inferred

from the metonymic references to the kinds of work the term ‘culture’ has been required to perform across the historical and political spectrum of discourses since colonization.

I argue that by reading together the desire for, and the problematization of, the stabilizing force of culture at the intersection of the postcolonial and the global, *Star Waka* can be seen to offer an intervention into a global cultural market that figures diversity as a positive resource at the same time as it needs to extinguish the threats of alterity. Importantly, however, Sullivan’s intervention—indeed the wider postcolonial project of *cultural* decolonization—is necessarily implicated in this problematized desire, this ambivalence.

As a collection of poems, *Star Waka* invokes the “ungatherable” aspects of culture,¹ a turning away from systematization, totalization, and appropriation as/in consumable, assimilable images. Paradoxically, this refusal takes place within a literary genre that comprises images and imagery. Even when its ‘content’ appears metonymic with regard to the social and political reality it engages, however, the poetic image proposes a metaphoric *relation to* reality, culture, and identity. This metaphoric relation plays across the terms of similarity and difference. It interrupts and displaces, rather than continues, the practices and legacies of capture and containment of the Pacific by visual and verbal image-makers—explorers, missionaries, painters, ethnographers, writers, photographers, and tourists—whose images have been accorded metonymic status in colonizing and postcolonial discourses alike.²

Star Waka undoubtedly manifests the degree of formal and thematic diversity that invites its assessment as a representation of the heterogeneity of Maori cultural identity, itself a plurality of identities, as discussed in Dieter Riemenschneider’s primarily spatial reading of the collection’s treatment of the interaction of the local and the global. Poems invoke the mythic, legendary, and historical pasts of Polynesia and Europe, including voyages of discovery, settlement, and colonization; the oral, literary and other artistic histories and heritages of regional cultures; local, regional and international political and social formations; the Maori renaissance, international indigenous alliances, and the economic reforms of the late twentieth century that offer new forms of agency for some

Maori, while impacting harshly on the rural and urban proletariat, the poor and unemployed. There are poems that explore the cyberworlds of email and the Internet (eg. *39 A wave*),³ and that articulate space travel fantasies (*iv 2140AD*; 46). Some poems are primarily visual, concrete works (*Waka 29 waka taua*; 53), some offer quiet and intimate family moments (47; 48 (*Bright 1*)), and some articulate mythic and historical voices (*Waka 87*; *Waka 88*; *Waka 89* and others).

This pluralist, additive evocation of range, however, misses the disjunctive, interruptive temporality of the images that comprise the works. It is not simply a variety among/across mythic time, historical time, colonial time, or past, present and future, or indeed across local, regional, global, galactic and cyber-spaces. Instead, each spatio-temporality is constitutively haunted by others.⁴ The complex figuration of space and time renders many of the images and references uncanny—strangely (un)familiar—for readers attuned to the mythologies, histories, and socio-political present of Aotearoa-New Zealand.⁵ On one level, it complicates the binary terms of the conventional bicultural relation of Maori and Pakeha [settler] by drawing out the threads of difference within each—their multiple heritages and histories, their past, present and future networks of filiation and affiliation, and indeed the complex dimensions of subjective and collective experience buried under those identifications. Yet the liminality of *Star Waka*'s spatial and temporal location and its affective and effective ambivalence further evoke the cutting edge of cultural difference—"a knife through time" (*i*)—beyond diversity or heterogeneity. It is, to borrow Homi Bhabha's words, "not a celebration of fragmentation, *bricolage*, pastiche or the 'simulacrum,'" But rather "a vision of social contradiction and cultural difference—as the disjunctive space of modernity" (238). I read *Star Waka* as exemplifying Bhabha's insistence that

Cultural difference does not simply represent the contention between oppositional contents or antagonistic traditions of cultural value. Cultural difference introduces into the process of cultural judgement and interpretation that sudden shock of the successive non-synchronic time of signification. . . .

Designations of cultural difference interpellate forms of identity which, because of their continual implication in other symbolic systems, are always “incomplete” or open to cultural translation. (162–63)

The cutting edge of cultural difference can be related to Bhabha’s contentious concept of hybridity, not simply as the ontological (syncretic) outcome of the literal and figurative encounters and exchanges depicted in the poems, but also in the sense of the complex interruptive space-time that neither fixes nor multiplies, but de/constitutes or de/constructs the image, the poem, the collection. The political effect of such ambivalence attains specific significance in relation to the challenges facing decolonization of (a) culture posed by the contemporary proliferation of images in the name of (self-) representation, taken as the sign of agency within globalization. Bhabha posits the hybridization of English authority and English presence in the encounter with colonial space and its native inhabitants, renders it ambivalent, a “split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (107), with repetition pointing to temporal, and difference to spatial, movements or displacements. However, his argument concerning the *presence* of the symbol of cultural authority—the colonial “English book” as the “*surface* that stabilizes the agonistic colonial space”—calls for extension in the postcolonial context where the postcolonial (counter)claims of originality articulated by the indigenous (post)colonized manifestly split and double all expressions of cultural presence or identity (110). Not only do two ‘surfaces’ vie for the stabilization of postcolonial space, each ostensibly in contestation with the other, but the *postcolonial* dynamics of hybridity destabilize even those identity claims, invocations of presence, and articulations of original authority made from the cultural space of indigeneity.

Further, the political significance of postcolonial indigenous “effects of presence” is transforming in ways that demand a *contemporary* (re)assessment of the full import of hybridity. Expressions of Maori cultural identity have served to sustain both individual and collective agency. As the means of producing and disseminating such expressions

have, however, expanded so dramatically with the developments of visual media and the intensification of market logics under globalization, the political stakes may lie more in an interruption of, rather than the feeding of the circulation of images. Accession to the “logic of the signifier” threatens to divert contemporary objects of cultural value, turning them into objects of (global) cultural demand (Bhabha 119), problematizing any claim to cultural cohesion other than through market access and attachment. Indeed, global cultural commodification seeks to resolve the disjunctive time of modernity whose hybridity at least offers space for otherness to articulate itself, even if it does not unify into a ‘self.’ In this context, then, there is renewed importance in Bhabha’s insistence that “the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply *there* to be seen or appropriated,” and that the cultural symbol “retains its presence, but it is no longer a representation of an essence; it is now a partial presence, a (strategic) device in a specific [post]colonial engagement, an appurtenance of authority” (114–15). Such claims, developed with regard to a colonial context, now come to suggest a postcolonial logic of resistance to cultural appropriation, commodification within a global market, to point to a politics of elusiveness, a veritable *trompe l’oeil*.

Star Waka intervenes and disrupts the (self-)presence and availability of identity-images on two levels: the spatio-temporal liminality that informs the collection on a structural level is extended in the hybridity of specific poetic images. In this way it dramatizes the problems and the politics of cultural identity, whose celebration and interrogation call up and indelibly mark each other. Liminality, with its implications of transition and process, is figured formally in the collection’s construction by way of the waka-ocean-star motif—each poem containing one or more of these figures, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively—which I argue is also an image of metaphor itself, and like translation, involves ‘carrying with’ or ‘carrying across’.⁶ The tripartite structure consisting of a vehicle or vessel (the waka), a medium across which it travels (the ocean), and the reference point for navigation or guidance (the star), echoes the structure of metaphor that consists of tenor, vehicle and

ground, where the tenor (subject) is carried by the vehicle (analogous image or object) by way of the ground (the mediating term, the basis for comparison, that draws the tenor and vehicle together). While the terms of the tripartite structure do not map exactly on to one another, my point concerns the structure itself, and the insistence on three terms, offering mediation and movement, rather than an unmediated two-term likeness between one element and another that collapses them into one, subsuming the difference that separates them. Both metaphor and translation represent the ambivalence of presence—splitting and doubling the linguistic or cultural sign, destabilizing the terms that comprise it. The openness of movement points to a resistance to the order of self-same identity, challenging the binary oppositions of essentialized presence and absence, subject and object, identity and difference. These oppositions continue to privilege the former and, while holding them out as the prizes of all political struggles for freedom, depend upon the continued construction of the latter within violent relations of power.

The collection comprises 101 poems (the first, a *karakia*—prayer or incantation—unnumbered), and 2001 lines, invoking the millennial moment it spans in both time (date of publication on the threshold of a new century and a new millenium) and space (the Pacific as the site for the first dawning of the year 2000). The poems articulate this spatio-temporal threshold with a constant theme of voyaging. Along with the voyages of migration and settlement of Maori from the mythic Polynesian homeland of Hawaiki—as figured in the opening *He karakia timatanga* and in poem *i*, and back to which the whakapapa or genealogies carry their descendants in Aotearoa—many other voyagers, past, present and future, traverse the work: from Odysseus (*Waka 88*), Kupe, the legendary discoverer of Aotearoa (*Waka 69 Kupe*; *Waka 86*), and European colonizers and settlers (*Waka 87*), to urban drifters (*x Goldie (1)*) and space travellers (*46*; *iv 2140AD*). While attending to the geographical, historical and social specificity of Aotearoa-New Zealand, the collection responds in its very structure to the opening of all bounded forms to the effects of international, global and even galactic flows.

While there are three numbering systems employed for the poems, some with additional titles and some without, the systems leak into each

other, preventing the bounded definition of each and thus present the secure mapping of the collection into discrete sections. This fluidity unsettles the very structure it invokes, demonstrating the dialectic of location and movement, the transformative encounters between ocean and beach that define and dissolve the coastline, just as image, poem, collection and cultural context enter into dynamic relations of exchange and mutual transformation. Fluidity, in turn, invokes the oceanic medium across which Polynesian and European voyagers made their journeys, as well as the transactions and exchanges of the contact zones.⁷ However, the connotations of fluidity as even, smooth, and able to find a natural balance—connotations that ideologically invest many discourses on globalization, or ‘global flows’—are complicated by imagery of chaotic ocean weathers. The latter serve as reminders that transactions and exchanges were, and are, rarely across equal terms and understandings, and the flows of peoples, goods, wealth, and ideas are similarly shaped by the forces of political economy. Similarly, the poems register the different ‘weathers’ of personal, social and political life, not by naturalizing them but by politicizing ‘climate’ itself, depicting forces that are increasingly difficult to see (other than in their effects), to locate, to control or indeed to evade, as globalization effects forms of dispersal without dismantling inequities and injustices. In *Waka 57 El Nino Waka* we read of

a compass based on currents, such was
the reliability of the sea. Today the sea
is unreliable.

...

El Nino has burst into the sea
as rapidly as it has burst into our popular culture
and our livelihoods: droughts and floods and storms
around the rim of the Pacific (64)

The poetic images through the collection acknowledge and critique—whether seriously or satirically, in a subdued or vociferous tone—the kinds of systems of power/knowledge and representation that have underpinned imperialism and colonialism, the assimilative or discrimina-

tory nation-state, and neo-imperial military and economic interests, all dependent on the construction of spaces and peoples as knowable, mappable, penetrable, conquerable, consumable. This mapping and penetration, and its implication in power politics, is invoked in the grid-lines—cartographic and political—implied in poem 43:

The South Pacific Forum met recently in Rarotonga
CHOGM meets soon—they've readmitted Fiji
The powerful and the powerless
Across (internationally) and vertically (internally).
Power is on show in Polynesia regularly. (47)

Here the term “power” brings together space and politics, ambivalent evocations of modernity’s enlightenment project, and its pairing of “powerful” and “powerless” (found also, for example, in poem *xxv power/powerlessness*, and poem 46), is connotatively echoed in the image of power “on show” in Polynesia “regularly”: the former phrase encompassing senses of both openness (or accountability) and control (through the spectacle of power) in display. The implicit grid-mapping image of power (“across” and “vertically,” “internationally” and “internally”) is interrupted by the semantic ambivalence that haunts the affirmative images. Further, the prosaic language of the first two lines, culminating in the political acronym CHOGM⁸—a figure of language fully reduced to instrumental efficiency—is challenged by the play of meanings that confuse or even ‘short’ the semantic circuitry in the rest of the poem, where no term is amenable to a single and transparent interpretation. Thus the poem ultimately eludes containment within its own invocation of grids, maps and power.

While these structures are thematized and visually evoked in 43, other poems deal with relations between power and knowledge systems as they construct or inscribe place and identity within power relations (see *xiii Independence Day*), and the engagement with the authority of European visual representations of Maori in *xxxiv Goldie (2)*:

The ancestors in the portraits
look grim, with few exceptions.

The ones in *Arrival*
look destitute. I cannot speak

as a direct descendant
of a Goldie subject,
as my ancestors were depicted
by Lindauer.⁹ (38)

These final two stanzas of the poem suggest the virtually ubiquitous reach of European powers of representation a domination that inevitably occludes the space to articulate other knowledges (see also *x Goldie (1)* and *xxxv*). Despite its concern to assert Maori specificity, however, the collection most effectively contests colonizing ways of knowing not by replacing them, but by interrupting, disrupting the temporal unity and fixity of representational knowledge-claims.

Star Waka invokes grids and structures, only to reveal their instability by means of a palimpsest of temporalities. Each term of the structuring metaphor that governs the collection—star-waka-ocean—is hybridized in specific poetic images. In the rest of this analysis, I take each metaphor in turn to show how it is a term *of* translation as well as in various ways *in* translation, its multiple iterations not simply calling up multiple referents but opening up any one of them to the play of time. In using mostly the English-language word ‘star’ rather than Maori ‘whetu,’ the linguistic sign calls up celestial, navigational, and cosmological associations, and in more recent idiomatic English it serves as a term of affirmation and refers to the product of the postmodern entertainment industry, circulating as media image. Stars have also become “tagged for domination” (*Waka 16 Kua wheturangitia koe*) in the era of space travel and futuristic dreams of conquest and colonization. What links these various meanings is their common invocation in systems of guidance or direction, but within irresolvably different cultural ontologies and epistemologies: the early voyagers navigated by the stars, and as stars are said to be the ancestors who have returned to Hawaiki after death, they offer ancestral guidance to the living: “yet stars are/ancestors/they are stars/our ancestors/and we will be stars” (*Waka 16 Kua wheturangi-*

tia koe). The cosmological merges linguistically with the idiomatic and postmodern (image) senses of ‘star,’ but this combination is an unstable conflation of radically incompatible terms. This poem meditates on the challenges facing Maori as these sources of guidance are literally blanked out “where the power/of the land powers/a mechanical culture,” where “we are vacuumed into this/culture of menace to the land,” a disenchanting “culture of dead capitals . . . a culture that knows/no boundaries/has only prophecies called strategies”:

And stars look down on this and eyes
Of divinities
Look down on stars
And eyes
Of the powerless look up

But only at night
When machines
Lighten blackness
When many stars
Are lost in the lightning

Except in papakainga
From tops of pa
From middle of ocean (20)

Only the specific Maori spaces of village and fortress, the historical medium of ocean, are sufficiently far from the over-powered, over-lightened world to allow the people to see their ancestral guides any more—an observation with metaphysical implications.

In poem *viii No*, the lines “yet waka searches for star/among all people/who have become stars” allude to both looking to the ancestors for guidance and navigation, and at the same time to the problems of leadership and direction in the face of a postmodern culture of the image. The latter can be extended, with reference to other works in the collection, to the larger question of participation in the bureaucratic structures that shape and represent ‘Maori culture’ in the post-1980s

era. However, the ambivalence of these lines relates both to the semantic palimpsest, where each reading is haunted by an other—neither is fully present or fully absent—and also to the temporal effect of hybridity where the ‘present’ is disjunctive, split by other temporalities. There can be no choice between them, nor can they be added together as each also interrupts the other. This is the ambivalent time of cultural difference that characterizes the postcolonial moment. The postmodern moment of Maori stardom is evoked in the poem *xxv power/powerlessness*, the title itself questioning the images that follow:

waka cuts it
Maori in magazines
remarkable
sensational
sports stars
Maori models wear groovy fashion
single studded ears
indigenous beauty
at the second Maori expo
dark green lipstick
sips from silver
coffee cups (29)

The striking image in the final three lines turns the references to fashion and commerce throughout the poem into a late twentieth-century picture of glamour, marketable indigenous beauty. But the choice of colours also evokes the native forest of dark green trees and ferns, and silver running streams against an implied brown earth, or perhaps drops of moisture onomatopoeically suggested in the repeated ‘(i)ps’ sound of “lipstick,” “sips,” and “cups.” In this way, the Maori woman as image of fashionable beauty also suggests the woman as Papatuanuku,

or Earth Mother, and if this metaphor holds, it is undecidable which serves as the referent for the other in the poem. Whether tradition guides and grounds Maori participation in postmodernity, or whether the postmodern appropriates tradition: this uncertainty pervades the poems in the collection. Poem 54 *waka rorohiko* is similarly concerned about the impact of individualizing technologies such as computers for Maori culture, traditionally sustained by the primacy of collective face-to-face encounter: “without this unity our collective knowledge/ dissipates into cults of personality.” This poem also points to the multivalence of ‘waka,’ the second term in the metaphorical triad that informs the collection.

Through its various invocations, ‘waka’ articulates a range of temporalities in interruptive and ambivalent relation to each other. Although often translated as ‘canoe’ (contested with reference to the size of the vessels in *xvii Some definitions and a note on orthography*), it refers also to the crews who made the originary voyages, settling different regions of Aotearoa, and whose descendants trace their ancestry back to a particular waka—also, therefore, to the people of the specific waka-descent. In other words, waka refers to ancestors and descendants as each is contained in the other, both ‘vehicles’ for the reproduction and transmission of cultural identity. In poem *i*, we are told

In ancient days navigators sent waka between.
Now, our speakers send us on waka. Their memories,
memory of people in us, invite, spirit,
compel us aboard, to home government, to centre (3)

These lines evoke the journeys between the islands of Polynesia described by Epeli Hau’ofa,¹⁰ the movement, arrival and settlement of Maori in Aotearoa, now remembered in marae oratory as whakapapa, recalls links to the migratory waka, and the memory of this cultural history harnesses collective political agency. The line “Star waka is a knife through time” could be seen as expressing the complexity of time and space that characterizes the collection, as knives generally bear traces of all they have passed through. Similarly, the choice of diction at certain points causes the image to oscillate between historical moments and referents:

Hear sounds of waka knifing time—*ae*, again,
what belongs to water belongs to blood. Crews leap aboard
leap out, with songs of relations and care
to send them. Whole families have journeyed here,
they continue the line. The bottom line

is to know where to go—Star points. (3)

This passage could refer to ancestral journeys to Aotearoa, to the history of whaling in the Pacific, to the arrival of colonizers and settlers from Britain, as the connotations of “blood” include family, life and death, myth and history—once again invoking the pervasive theme of direction, guidance and leadership condensed in the image of ‘star’. The reference to continuing the line, supplemented by “the bottom line,” carries the genealogical reference across to one of accounting, conflating print, narrative and of course economics. *Poem vii Reconnaissance* is similarly a temporal palimpsest signalled by key choices of diction, as the legendary preparations for the waka migrations and the industrial work of forestry (in which many Maori have been employed), fleets of waka and logs transported in fleets of trucks, are both possible readings of the same images, despite their radical temporal and cultural disjuncture.

A waka is also a box or container in which precious items are kept, such as huia feathers in a waka huia, while *Waka Huia* is also the name of a television program that screens weekly in Maori language on Television One, the New Zealand channel that seeks to culturally define the nation (‘us’) through its charter (see *Waka 56 A Double-Hulled Waka ii*). One poem refers to a Honda waka; aeroplanes are waka, and spacecraft are fantasized as space waka. Poem 54 *waka rorohiko* refers to a computer (a box containing precious material, and loosely translatable as ‘electric brain box’) on which the speaker has found a database containing whakapapa, traditionally produced and transmitted collectively and orally. While ‘waka’ functions as a base for the conceptual as well as linguistic translation of ‘computer’ into Maori, it would be too simple to see this as an assimilation of technology into Maori language, or reconciliation between modern machinery and traditional Maori concepts.

Sullivan's poetic persona is caught in the midst of the complex time of cultural difference, and so cannot distance fully from it, resulting in a poignant ambivalence and contradiction: the librarian Sullivan, whose culture of "access for all, no matter who, how,/why" is paid his "respects"; the Sullivan of Maori ancestry, who is concerned about (implicitly paradoxical) "tapu/information" on the internet: tapu connotes the sacred or restricted, while information exists by virtue of access and circulation. He asks what the "big Western principle stressing/egalitarianism" means for "Maori knowledge," whose collective passing down ensures unity. This tension is not resolved.

The collection—understood as the poem, *Star Waka*—is in itself a waka, a poetic waka or waka of poetry, and of the poet's waka or genealogy. The many primarily personal poems about family, friends, memories (*v Honda waka*; *xv Sullivan Whanau*; *xxx*; 40; 47; 48 (*Bright 1*); 52; *Waka 73 Gone Fishing*) testify that the collection is a vehicle and container of treasured things that link the poet to ancestry, whanau, culture and words. Further, *Star Waka* is self-consciously structured, aware of itself as a poetry sequence, of its craft or artistry as a contrapuntal intervention into European recorded history, so that in *Waka 56 A Double-Hulled Waka*, we read "and so this waka has passed its/thousandth line," and in *Waka 94*, "I am Tane Mahuta—and not offended/to be introduced at this late stage." Even more strikingly with its reference to the print medium, the final poem *Waka 100* begins, "Stroke past line 1642/into European time. Stroke past 1769/and the introduction of the West//Stroke on the approach to 1835/and formal Northern Maori sovereignty." Yet the print medium and references to the introduction of European historical time (Abel Tasman's 'discovery,' Captain Cook's arrival, the Maori Declaration of Independence) contain echoes of the rhythm of the stroke-call to propel the waka, another temporality obeying rhythmic rather than linear, progressive, historical-clock time. However, this strategy also prevents direct recourse *back* to tradition, identity and authenticity—what Bhabha would call the pedagogical time of culture—other than as cut across by the performative act of enunciation or articulation. Even assertions of Maori cultural identity are haunted by the interruption implied in the need to make them. Not

the least of *Star Waka's* gestures of self-referentiality as a poetic waka is the numerous poetic intertexts it invokes. However, these point to the notion of ocean, the third term of the triad, suggesting a medium in, through or over which the collection journeys.

When it is not figured literally, ocean as medium is suggested figuratively in images of other waterways or fluids/fluidity, such as blood (blood ties, blood spilt), as well as in the concerns with language as medium, and the histories and politics of English and *te reo* Maori, with orature and print. It is also implicit in spatial concerns with land, outer space and cyberspace as mediums through which Maori representations and images are projected and circulated. Indeed, as well as the problems of waka rorohiko discussed earlier, Sullivan refers to such technologies as integral to the construction of international indigenous alliances, forged through “the NativeNet email discussion list” (see *39 A wave*). Even the notion of ‘context’ could be an inflection of the oceanic metaphor, as it invokes the medium through which things (or meanings) travel.

In poems contemplating the politics of language, Sullivan problematizes attempts at fixity of meaning in the context of cultural difference. At the same time, he shows context itself to be a hybrid and unstable term. In *xvii Some definitions and a note on orthography*, he notes that “it is still very/difficult to procure word processors”

that have a set of macronised vowels
and subeditors who do not pluralise
Maori loan words although most have
ceased italicising them
to give a sense of inclusion
in one context

in the other context
it is for purposes
of pacification (21)

The senses of integration and assimilation, participation and absorption that constitute the term “inclusion” cannot be resolved by reference to the putatively stabilizing concept of “context.” “Pacification” bears both

the literal meaning of suppressing resistance as well as the interruptive echo of the assertion of a Pacific identity. Context itself, like ‘the local,’ remains ambivalently caught between times and spaces that inhabit the postcolonial moment of cultural difference.

This theme is continued in the next poem, *xviii Similitude*, whose title invokes the senses of similarity, the poetic trope of simile, and the threat of assimilation. Likening the fact that “Mangere’s/ancient stone fields/ have a sewerage pipe/cut through them” to “sticking a pipe through Stonehenge,” he insists

don’t you think it is wrong?
who thinks it is right?
is this extraordinary?

we are told *ordinariness*
is the standard in justice—
yet the word *Maori*
means *ordinary* (21)

This poem calls up the question of norms, standards and justice, all terms to which Western modernity’s project of universal enlightenment has appealed, but values nevertheless undercut by its own colonial processes of imposing them on others, and possibly further challenged by contemporary appeals to market forms of value. Bhabha asks, “what is modernity in those colonial conditions where its imposition is itself the denial of historical freedom, civic autonomy and the ‘ethical’ choice of refashioning?” (241). Poem 50, whose epigraph is Shakespeare’s “*It is the star to every wand’ring bark, whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken*” is similarly concerned with questions of value(s), asking “What is gallantry these days/but by Mistsubishi?” It proceeds to interrogate the notion of ‘justice’—natural, legal, political—with biting irony:

we watch and wait for justice. Justice
for inclusion in the proletariat. Justice
for compliance by salary. Justice
for revoking our guardianship of all
the eye can see in the imposition

of adversarial law. Justice for our apathy.
Justice the person who sits at the bench.

We wait for the Justice bus

....

Why turn and face the sun, knowing
That justice is going to run you down? (55)

Textuality, and indeed poetry more specifically, serves as another ocean of reference. *Waka 76* begins, “Tangaroa slams his pint on the bar, / ‘Gissa nother,’ he hisses,” where both the demotic setting and diction, and the specific abbreviation “gissa” is reminiscent of the major Maori poet Hone Tuwhare’s poem, “Sun o (2),” which begins, “Gissa smile Sun,” along with his general invocation of male camaraderie. However, not all poetic intertexts are from New Zealand: in *Waka 98*, images of paper cut-out waka are followed by the question, “what dread hand shaped your fearful symmetry?” and in the following lines waka is addressed as “tiger of the sea carrying deities/to an empty land filled with fur seals,” both calling up Blake’s “The Tyger.”

Many poems in the collection undoubtedly articulate and affirm Maori cultural identity and traditions. Thus, in *Waka 56 A Double-Hulled Waka (ii)*:

Make moko in the wrinkles
warriors for ourselves, for our people,
leaping from pits into bright daylight
defying the culture of the death
of our culture. (63)

My argument neither denies these claims, nor takes such affirmations at face value—though perhaps in another sense it takes them precisely and solely at face value, without anchoring them to essential and timeless truths. Commenting on the Algerian writer Frantz Fanon, Bhabha points out that

Fanon recognizes the crucial importance, for subordinated peoples, of asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and

retrieving their repressed histories. But he is far too aware of the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that "roots" be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present. (9)

Instead, the poetic expressions of Maori cultural identity are unavoidably produced from, and articulate the split time of, postcolonial cultural difference. They are iterative, "signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction—that takes you 'beyond' yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political *conditions* of the present" (Bhabha 3). In this way, the hybridity of the images or poems is not an index of the failure of political agency, but the condition for a truly transformative intervention into a totalizing present that presumes to cast both past and future in its own image. Two poems in the collection present speculative accounts of globalized futures, one dystopian and the other utopian, and in each case it is the movement of return to, and reinscription of, the cultural present of Aotearoa-New Zealand that constitutes the political intervention.

The first, *iv 2140AD*, is set 300 years after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, but the technological futurism—"Waka reaches for stars—mission control clears us for launch/and we are off to check the guidance system/personally"—is undercut by its reflection of recent and contemporary social and political concerns. In fact, even the pursuit of sovereignty is presented against a knowledge of self as Maori—looking to the stars, ancestors, gods, for guidance—already inflected through nineteenth-century western anthropological discourses: "Some gods are Greek to us Polynesians,/who have lost touch with the Aryan mythology," and further, through a twentieth-century relativization and Disneyfication of culture more generally: "but we recognise ours and others—Ranginui and his cloak,/and those of us who have seen *Fantasia* know Diana." The 'mission,' "to consult with the top boss,/to ask for sovereignty and how to get this/from policy into action back home," is expressed through the diction of 1990s New Zealand bureaucratic cor-

poratization that reshaped even Maori forms of social and political collectivity.¹¹ The problems of persistent inequality that shadow this rise of managerialism, and that serve as a warning against uncritical Maori participation in it, are depicted in the rest of the poem:

Just then the rocket runs out of fuel—
we didn't have enough cash for a full tank—
so we drift into an orbit we cannot escape from
until a police escort vessel tows us back

and fines us the equivalent of the fiscal envelope
signed a hundred and fifty years ago.

They confiscate the rocket ship, the only thing
all the iwi agreed to purchase with the last down payment. (7)

These lines are rich with political and historical resonance, and play across connotations of both corporate Maori collectivity and the banal realities of everyday life for those who cannot pay for a full tank of fuel; cash payment for rocket fuel jars with the rise of credit and electronic financial transactions that characterise a global econosphere. Similarly, the police escort and fine suggests the disproportionate degree of involvement with police experienced among Maori. The penalty fine cancels out the “fiscal envelope,” which refers to a once-and-for-all monetary payment to iwi—tribes—proposed by a National Party government (and rejected by Maori) as the resolution of all grievances and claims brought under the Treaty of Waitangi. The ‘confiscation’ of the rocket ship echoes colonial government confiscations of Maori land as retribution for resistance to colonization, and offers an ironic comment on the pointless and implicitly divisive effect of accepting monetary compensation for the injustices of colonial history, and doing so within the formal context of social and cultural reconstruction effected by corporatization.

In relation to the space-time of postcolonial globalization, however, the poem's most significant trope is that of “drift[ing] into an orbit we cannot escape from.” It captures the sense of entrapment by, and endless circling round, the colonial moment which, no matter how far out from

that centre the rocket reaches, it is held in the same orbit around the same centre. In this way, 2140AD is just a 300-years-later recycling of the same historical processes and relations. The orbital image points to a political failure to articulate cultural difference; in Bhabha's terms, "The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (7). However, the poem itself reveals what Bhabha expresses when he writes that "the present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence; our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities" (4). In this way, *iv 2140AD*'s representation of the continual recycling of past and future as an immutable, essential present is itself an intervention that estranges the present from itself. It is with this point that I return to the argument that *Star Waka*'s hybridity is an interruption to the production and circulation of identity-images feeding a global cultural market in diversity. The collection's metaphoric structure, the metaphoric relation to the material, social present, illustrates Bhabha's contention that "the move . . . from the material to the metaphoric, is not a smooth passage of transition and transcendence. The 'middle passage' of contemporary culture . . . is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience" (5).

Poem 46 also takes a speculative global perspective, though it presents an ironic utopia, in contrast to *iv 2140AD*'s ironic dystopia. It begins:

it is feasible that we will enter

space

colonise planets call our spacecraft waka

perhaps name them after the first fleet

erect marae transport carvers renew stories

with celestial import (50)

Dieter Riemenschneider has described 46's "vision of a paradise in outer space [that] might be read as fractured in a double ironical revision

of the European ‘canoes’ utopian search for paradise in the expanse of the Pacific”, where—presumably by the logic of analogy that undercuts the vision of a *different* colonization—“the waka’s travelling into space may end by exporting and being tied down to our global imperfections” (145). The imagined difference of this envisaged colonization turns on the primacy of aesthetics over politics in a future space-world, where “we” might

establish new forms of verse
free ourselves of the need for politics
and concentrate on beauty

like the release from gravity
orbit an image until it is absorbed
through the layers of skin

spin it
sniff and stroke the object
become poetic (50)

These lines both articulate the basis for the poem’s utopic vision (freedom, beauty, release), and at the same time contain the echo of an image that in *iv 2140AD* depicted entrapment (orbit). They oscillate seemingly ambivalently between images of distance and touch, contact and non-contact, transcendence and assimilation, although the idea that we might “become poetic” shimmers with suggestive possibilities of reconceptualizing identity itself.

Before returning to how notions of identity are refigured, I suggest that the poem proceeds to its conclusion by way of images of cultural ‘freedom’ that have to be seen as disturbingly close to the processes of cultural globalization, where a local voluntarist relation, “picking up the tools/our culture has given us//and to let them go again/knowing they won’t hit anyone,” opens the way to an aestheticization of culture that depends on, and produces, total cultural relativism: “no longer subject to peculiarities/of climate the political economies/of powers and powerless.” The arguably utopic quality of this vision—a world of total equal-

ity—is troubled by the implicit loss of any necessary relation to an/the other, and of any meaningful articulation of value and identity. Perhaps this speculated transcendence of culture and identity is the ideal solution to contemporary problems of violence and inequality enacted in their name or cause, but its similarity to exactly the conditions dreamed by the global culture market—which has contributed little if anything to the economic and political freedom of colonized and oppressed peoples—suggests that the leap from worldly power politics to otherworldly aesthetics will leave the conditions of suffering untransformed. I prefer to read the poem, its intuition, in the light of Bhabha's comments on the aesthetic image:

what Emmanuel Levinas has magically described as the twilight existence of the aesthetic image—art's image as 'the very event of obscuring, a descent into the night, an invasion of the shadow'. The 'completion' of the aesthetic, the distancing of the world in the image, is precisely not a transcendental activity. The image—or the metaphoric, 'fictional' activity of discourse—makes visible 'an interruption of time by a movement going on the hither side of time, in its interstices.' (15)

In other words, its gesture is to offer a poetic intervention into our political present, to light the fuse that winds through its cracks and fissures, to open new faces in its rock-solid façade ('the real world'). From this perspective, the suggestion that we might 'become poetic' can be seen, not as a denial or transcendence of power and identity, and their mutual implication with discourses of culture, but as a radical rethinking of those very terms with an ethical charge whose very import could be global.

In conclusion, the poems in Sullivan's collection are not simply diverse accounts of the challenges facing Maori as postcolonial politics intersect with the dynamics of globalization. The poems embody evocations of the split and doubled or hybrid time of cultural difference. In its spirit, a politics of decolonization might consider that "Every *positive* form can accommodate itself to its negative form [opposition], but understands the challenge of the *reversible* form [ambivalence] as mortal. Every struc-

ture can adapt to its subversion or inversion, but not to the reversion of its terms” (Baudrillard 21). Thus poetry can draw to a crisis the economic logic of the cultural market, and the politics of representation predicating signification on the subject-object opposition, so that “the dividing line that defines the victory of the one and the defeat of the other, is illegible” (Baudrillard 22). This is not an argument for poetry rather than politics, but for re-energizing the duel between the ‘realities’ to which they belong, and for critically reassessing the belief in, and demand for, representation. At the same time, the ambivalent, uncontainable language-forms of poetry such as Sullivan’s palimpsestic images, offer a new way of thinking about the stakes of decolonization in the wake of globalization, and of any oppressive system whose power rests on knowing its other.

Acknowledgement

I am very grateful to my colleague Simone Drichel for her generous and insightful comments on a draft of this essay.

Notes

- 1 This term is used by Phillipson in his argument for art’s potential to refuse the terms of culture, for art’s transforming potential, “to enable us to ‘see’ our relations to others, nature-culture, and ourselves, differently—to draw us into their own elsewhere” (202–03).
- 2 See Keown, especially 2–15.
- 3 I am rendering the titles of poems as they appear in the collection, in italics rather than in quotation marks. The titles are also more strictly a numbering system, as I will discuss below, and only some have additional titles.
- 4 In using the term ‘haunted’ I am invoking Bhabha’s account of the “ghostly time of repetition” that characterises the national ‘present’ (143). See also Gunew for a discussion of the notion of haunting with respect to ‘settler-indigenous’ relations and multiculturalism in Australia, Canada, and to a lesser extent New Zealand. Gelder and Jacobs further discuss the haunting disturbances of ‘settler’ space in *Uncanny Australia*.
- 5 See Gelder and Jacobs for an extended consideration of the specifically postcolonial forms of the uncanny that unsettle ‘settler’ identity and the national sense of being ‘at home’. They argue, in relation to the Australian context, that, “the various promiscuities arising from this movement [between ‘one nation’ and a ‘divided nation’], where sacredness and modernity solicit each other, produce a condition for the nation which we will designate as ‘uncanny’” (22).

- 6 Bhabha contends that, “metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the ‘middle passage’ . . . across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people” (139–40). He refers to a “metaphoric movement [that] requires a kind of ‘doubleness’ in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centred causal logic” (141).
- 7 This term is taken from Pratt. She explains that, “By the term ‘contact,’ I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” (7).
- 8 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.
- 9 Both C.F. Goldie and Gottfried Lindauer painted early twentieth-century portraits of Maori in a detailed realist, if not always completely accurate, style. Their work has been controversial for its focus on elderly Maori depicted within the terms of the period’s discourse of Maori as a noble but dying race. However, these paintings were very popular at the time, and have remained among the most popular portraits of Maori, including among Maori for whom they have “been valued as memorials to ancestors and kin.” See Bell and Blackley.
- 10 Hau’ofa writes, “The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. . . . Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers” (8).
- 11 Barcham has argued that “Government reports released during [the 1980s] thus outlined the government’s new policy position as being that *rangatiratanga* (indigenous rights) was to be exercised through iwi [tribes] (Minister of Maori Affairs 1989), and that increased focus was to be placed upon iwi as the major player in Maori economic development (Minister of Maori Affairs 1990) as they were seen by the Government as constituting part of an unbroken line of cultural continuance as the legitimate receptacle of current Maori voices. . . . [Thus] New Zealand government policy has played a pivotal role in the iwi-ization of Maori society as the conflation of Maori society with the institution of iwi was given legislative force through the codification in law of a number of specific acts throughout the 1980s” (141).

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