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Breathing space:
ecology and sovereignty in Pacific Island poetry¹

Abstract

This paper addresses the need to rethink notions of sovereignty and national self-determination in relation to ecology and place-based development. It argues that this requires an imaginative reconceptualisation of established institutional spaces to make them answerable to the places they represent and open them to cross-cultural engagement. It highlights the importance of creativity, specifically poetry, in this regard and suggests the relevance of Oceanian traditions to institutional innovation. Recognising the paradigmatic status of the canoe as a space-building and knowledge-organising metaphor, the paper shows, in a reading of poems by Caroline Sinavaiana, Robert Sullivan, and Teweiariki Teairo, how the metaphorical association of the canoe with the bodily image of breathing enables an imaginative connection between sovereignty and ecology that is also informed by Pacific epistemologies. It ends by suggesting how this vision could be relevant to conceptualisations of space, the negotiation of boundaries and cross-cultural action in globalised institutional contexts.

Terence Wesley-Smith, in a recent article on 'Self-determination in Oceania', discusses the problems attending the process of decolonisation in Oceania since the 1960s. Not only has the

internationally recognised principle of self-determination been unevenly applied, reflecting continuing colonial interests in the region, but where political independence has been achieved, it has largely relied on 'alien institutions, notably the western-style nation state' (33). According to Wesley-Smith, this is consistent with the way decolonisation has happened around the globe, which 'was neither rehabilitative nor particularly innovative [but guided by norms that] were essentially imitative of European models of economic and political development' (34). He points out the high financial and social costs of establishing and maintaining national sovereignty within the boundaries of former colonies that 'were established with scant regard for the traditional cultural and political features of Oceania' (34) and the damage done to local communities and ecosystems by efforts to make these political entities economically viable. Wesley-Smith cautions against both diagnosing the failure of states, which would justify international encroachment on sovereign rights, and 'derid[ing] the intrinsic value of sovereign independence' itself (42).² Instead, he calls for a strengthening of existing institutions that is consistent with indigenous practices and forms that have proved sustainable, and he points out that the main challenge here is not the design of institutions or even the availability of resources but 'to change the wider political culture in which western-style state institutions must operate over the longer term' (41). This is less a matter of management or regulation than of creativity, leadership and education toward a genuinely cross-cultural institutional engagement.

In as much as it calls for a critical rethinking and reimagining of the potential of existing political institutions, Wesley-Smith's argument is echoed by literary scholars like Diana Brydon, for instance, who, writing about the institutional place and role of literature in Canada, urges a rethinking of the space for action afforded by the structures of the nation state that is not determined

by a national(ist) imaginary. Such rethinking, Brydon notes, must do more than critique narratives of originary subjectivities or examine the production of cultural difference, by imagining and concretising '[n]ew modes of connectivity and [...] ways of being and working together [that] seem increasingly urgent at a time when our planetary interconnectedness becomes more obvious every day' (2007b:6). For this, she suggests, there is no need to abandon 'terms such as representation, sovereignty, and citizenship' and 'more may be gained by reclaiming and reshaping some of these old terms' (2007a:14). Quoting Donna Pennee, Brydon calls for ways of 'doing the national differently,' which 'will involve greater attention to institutions' (2007a:10) and forms of citizenship such as are represented in literary engagements with the terms that connect and mobilise people within national frameworks and beyond.

Such rethinking may have particular relevance to Oceania, where the transplantation of western political institutions has often proved divisive or disempowering and where the economic and ecological impacts of global interconnectedness are perhaps felt more urgently than elsewhere. Teresia Teaiwa offers examples of the kind of literary engagement Brydon suggests in a discussion of 'patriotic literature from post-coup(s) Fiji' (2004:82), where she shows 'how [...] particular representations of identity interrupt and intervene on a nationalist imaginary, and assist in the patriotic project of nation-building' (2004:85). For Teaiwa, too, doing the national differently requires nurturing 'the power of the imagination' and recognising that '[l]iterature and the arts are the cornerstones of a nation's imagination' (2004:92-3). This is not an argument for the instrumentalisation of the arts but a call for opening institutional spaces to the 'creative disturbance', as Sudesh Mishra described poetry at the OIS conference at USP in September 2010, which undoes the metaphors we live by, challenging the way we look at things and encouraging us to try

out other metaphors that might make a difference, when acted on. In this regard, I think Oceania also has a particular relevance to such institutional rethinking and reimagining elsewhere, because its long histories of settlement and connectedness across long distances provide alternative terms or imaginaries for working and living together in globalised institutional contexts.

The problem of modern western institutions is that they derive much of their global power from a claim to universality, their apparent indifference to cultural difference. Yet the very abstraction that underpins this indifference is an expression of a distinct cultural attitude: the spectral logic of representation that characterises the political and economic system based on commodity circulation, which encourages a buying into ideas whose material foundations are obscure. The nation is such an idea, or, in Ernest Renan's words from 1882, 'a soul, a spiritual principle' (19) that is not defined by race, language, religion, material interest or geography but nevertheless binds people as a 'spiritual family' (19).³ The development of the dense institutional network of modern western states is an effect of transformations of sovereignty in the context of European modernity of which James Sheehan highlights two important aspects. One is what could be called the bureaucratisation of sovereignty, the replacement of monarchical and religious authority by a legal and procedural order: 'By the middle of the nineteenth century, codes and constitutions, administrative regulations, and judicial decisions had turned the making of sovereign claims into a legal process' (8). The other is 'the association of sovereignty and national self-determination' (10), the vesting of sovereign authority in a state representing a more or less arbitrary territorial entity. According to Sheehan, this association 'heightened [the] persistent tension between sovereign theory and practice' (10): while sovereignty in principle (and outwardly) is indivisible, in practice (and internally) it is always contested and subject to compromise. Modern nation

states not only had to establish their sovereign claims among their peers but also negotiate rivalling sovereign claims within their territorial boundaries. The contemporary framework of national and international institutions, while stabilising this tension, according to Marc Weller, also essentially ‘disenfranchises populations’ (5) because it in effect neutralises and mystifies their connections to particular territories. The major beneficiary of this has been globally organised capital, resulting in still increasing densities of development with low attention to sustainability and conglomerations of transnational finance and business interests ever more dictating the focus and scope of (sovereign) states’ actions and their ability to deliver basic public services. Meanwhile, locally, in many places the ‘positive’ impact of state institutions manifests itself primarily in investment in infrastructure and what Marc Augé has called ‘non-places’ and in the enforcement of regulatory frameworks that are not easy to fill with what Renan referred to as a soul or a spiritual principle. The resurgence of nationalist sentiment, flag waving and the defence of blood or ethnicity, in many parts of the world is an indication of both a widespread alienation facing political institutions and the inadequacy of the prevailing symbols of sovereignty – inherited from monarchy and aristocracy – as beacons for institutional action.

In order to counter the present development that benefits global capital at the expense of local communities and the environment, it is necessary to make (state) institutions as spaces answerable to the places they represent, in ways that abstract universalism fails to do. Arif Dirlik sees this as the challenge of a place-based imagination: ‘the projection of places into spaces to create new structures of power, which may provide protection to places, because, rather than repudiate places in the name of abstractions, they incorporate places into their very constitution’ (39). This isn’t a question of prescribing the terms for a new global order but of formulating working principles for cross-cultural institutional

action and such a project, as Dirlik suggests, ‘may have much to learn from indigenous paradigms of the relationship between nature and society as well as from indigenous forms of social and political organization’ (39).

Learning from Oceania seems important in this connection because, as many scholars of the region have pointed out, indigenous epistemologies and social organisations of Oceania derive their concepts and terms from concrete locations and yet have an elasticity that permits them to encompass and connect distant island worlds on a global scale. Emphasising the anchoring of indigenous development in a given natural and cultural environment, Hawaiian scholar, Manulani Aluli Meyer, for instance, explains: ‘Our cultural as well as physical geography is the foundation of our creativity, of our problem solving, of our knowledge building. [...] Land, sky, and ocean [are] the home of metaphors that [people] continually draw on’ (129). Similarly, David Welchman Gegeo explains that in the epistemology of the Kwara’ae on Malaita in Solomon Islands the concept of place evokes a complex sense of source grounded in a specific location and integrating notions of place of origin, genealogy, right of access, social standing, rhetorical competency, cultural knowledge, kinship obligations, world view and a learning model (493–4). According to Gegeo, this concept of place is ‘portable’ (495) and can be stretched to encompass new situations, without therefore relinquishing its home in a particular physical and cultural location. These explanations are echoed by the French geographer, Joël Bonnemaïson, who observes that in the societies of Western Oceania it is from a concrete place that ‘space is shaped and, through it, a web of values and meanings is organized’ (2), resulting in ‘a vision [that] is not expressed by means of a constructed discourse or ideology but through images and metaphors that give rise to thoughts and representations’ (2).

The continuity of this metaphorical expansion or stretching in Oceanian worldviews lends them a particular temporal dimension, which grounds the ‘mapping’ of islands in cultural histories of settlement. Epeli Hau‘ofa has described this time/space continuum as ‘ecological time’ (2000:459f), which situates human activities in a cyclical relationship with a natural environment that also bears the mnemonic imprints of ancestral activities. The ecological orientation toward land, sky and ocean therefore acknowledges indebtedness to the gifts of nature as well as to genealogy and an expectation of human activities to cultivate the physical environment as both a natural and a cultural resource. This cultural attitude is expressed, as Hau‘ofa has put it, in the way in which Oceanian languages ‘locate the past as ahead or in front of us [...] on our landscapes in front of our very eyes’ (2000:466); more generally, it is expressed in a metaphorical view of language as a cultural resource itself, which, according to Teresia Teaiwa, characterises ‘many of the native linguistic traditions of Oceania’ (2005:29).⁴

One of the most prominent space-building and knowledge-organising metaphors in Oceania is what Polynesian languages variously call *vaka*, *waa*, *waka*, and English translates as ‘canoe’, as indeed the organisers of the OIS conference reminded us by including the special issue of *Dreadlocks* with the proceedings of the 2006 ‘Vaka Vuku’ conference on Pacific epistemologies in our conference pack.⁵ Recognising the paradigmatic place of voyaging in Oceanian histories and traditions, Vicente M. Diaz and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui in their introduction to a special issue of *The Contemporary Pacific* likewise identify the canoe as the basis for triangulations in a comprehensive sense and ‘suggest that it might serve as a tactical figure for indigenous political and cultural struggles’ (317), perhaps not unlike the metaphor of a field in Western traditions.⁶ With its connotations of genealogy, way-finding and settlement, the canoe offers itself as a powerful

symbol, indeed one that, according to Liz DeLoughrey, 'has been utilised by agents of colonialism *and* indigenous sovereignty' (99) alike, promoting 'contiguous forms of Pacific regionalism' (100). In her analysis, these competing discourses overlap in the use of the image of the voyaging vessel to connect the idea of ocean-going craft conquering a feminised water-body and the idea of male bloodstreams circulating through the vessels of an expanding yet closed ethnic body. DeLoughrey shows how the notion of Anglo-Saxon seafaring blood, which served to naturalize and legitimise an imperialist enterprise of colonisation (117–18), has been appropriated by Pacific Islanders to reclaim suppressed indigenous histories of voyaging and regional kinship and how the image of '(blood) vessels of sovereignty ha[s] been used to signify an indigenous regionalism in contemporary literary texts' (127). Its compatibility with the symbolism of blood thus suggests the cross-cultural potential of the mobilizing metaphor of the canoe, but as DeLoughrey points out, this also tends to 'reiterate the gendered logic of national belonging' (98) and to privilege 'metaphors of movement and fluidity that ultimately are embedded in the etymology and semantics of the term diaspora itself: sperm and blood' (100).

If, as Diaz and Kauanui argue, notions of 'race and blood' should be considered as 'imposed categories' (318) in discourses of Pacific indigeneity, it is interesting that in some Oceanian poetry the conceptual importance of the canoe is associated with another bodily image, that of breathing, which perhaps figures more prominently in indigenous epistemologies. Indeed, the image of breathing, in conjunction with the canoe, renders a different spatial or regional imaginary and correspondingly a different notion of sovereignty than the image of bodily fluids, which tends to emphasise circulation within (and between) ethnically circumscribed social bodies. I would like to argue that the recognition of the literal and metaphorical importance of breathing in Oceanian worldviews

underpins the use of the canoe metaphor to promote the value of an island-based concept of breathing space in three contemporary collections of Oceanian poetry: Caroline Sinavaiana's *Alchemies of Distance*, Robert Sullivan's *Star Waka*, and Teweiariiki Teairo's *Waa in Storms*.

Breathing forms part of the phenomenology of a Hawaiian conceptualisation of knowledge, according to Manulani Aluli Meyer, who in her chart of Hawaiian perceptual terminology associates the sense of smell with the activity of 'breath[ing] in' (131). By including in the relevant vocabulary words referring to breathing in, both through the nose and the mouth, Meyer suggests that the sense of smell may itself be part of a more encompassing sensory experience and that breathing as such may be a mode of perception mediating knowledge. Accordingly, Meyer points out, '[b]reathing into [a person's] mouth is one way knowledge was given and is a metaphor for how Hawaiians engage in knowledge maintenance' (132). Attention to breathing thus concretises a conceptualisation of knowledge that emphasises awareness of a relationship with a living environment, interdependence and causation. As such, it is also associated with the location of understanding or intelligence in the centre of the body, in the stomach region Hawaiians, according to Meyer, call *na'au*, which – similar to the Maori word *ngākau*, according to Anne Salmond (240-41) – refers to both the intestines and the heart (Meyer 143). As Meyer explains, this location of intelligence in the viscera expresses an understanding that effective knowledge involves awareness of feelings and affective responses, such as being at ease, apprehensive or fearful, which also make themselves felt as qualities of the experience of breathing.

Albert Wendt has related this sense of awareness to an Oceanian concept of space, *va*, which emphasises connectedness that may not be evident to the eye but may manifest itself among other ways

in the experience of breathing. Wendt paraphrases the meaning of the Samoan concept *va* as ‘the Space-Between-All-Things which defines us and makes us part of the Unity-that-is-All’ (181), and as Paul Sharrad, quoting Wendt, indicates, this concept of space has a perceptual basis in the epigastric area of the body that is also the centre of breathing: ‘*Va* is relationship, not objects, it is the spirit core (*moa*, centre) of our body that lies in the space between: “not quite in the heart and it’s not quite in the belly either”’ (Sharrad 193). Designating a centre in a bodily as well as a broader spatial sense, the meaning of *moa* in connection with the concept of *va* seems similar to the Hawaiian ‘idea of *na’auao* (enlightened stomach)’, which, according to Meyer, refers to ‘a cosmic center point’ (144) in the form of centred relationships, including ancestral relationships. In an interview with Juniper Ellis, Wendt explains that ‘*Va* and *Gafa* [genealogies] express the same connections: people and space and time. [. . .] The space between us is not empty; it forms relationships. Genealogies, *gafa*, convey the same thing’ (Ellis 55). Meyer’s observation that the use of breathing as a metaphor for knowledge maintenance ‘is deeply embedded in other, in elder, in spirit’ (132) suggests that breath concretises this dynamic sense of connection. As such, it may also lend itself as a metaphor to express the circular time/space continuum that, according to Hau‘ofa, characterises the ecological worldviews of Oceania. Breathing, in this sense, is associated with an acknowledgment of the presence and precedence of other life and recognition of its influence on one’s own. This sense of breath as something to be respected as also a property of others, and in some situations a sign of their authority, may explain its association with ideas of sovereignty in Hawaiian, where *ea*, according to Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel Elbert’s dictionary, means ‘sovereignty, rule, independence’ as well as ‘life, breath, vapor, gas, breeze, spirit’ (34). Sovereignty, in this understanding, seems to imply mutuality and its preservation to require the cultivation or protection of breathing space in an encompassing sense.

II

Caroline Sinavaiana emphasises the importance of breath as a guiding metaphor in *Alchemies of Distance*, where it provides the connecting line throughout the introductory essay that she calls ‘a kind of genealogy’ (11). Associating poetry with the need to breathe, ‘underst[anding] poetry as oxygen’ (11), she explains the cultural significance of breath in relation to a concept of space embedded in ‘Polynesian creation narratives, [where] breath (or fragrance, its cousin) precedes the creation of light’ (18) and thus the visible world, and to the Samoan concept of *va* (20), space constituted by relationships. For Sinavaiana, poetry is an art of creating and cultivating breathing space, a way of responding to stifling situations and of transforming ‘distance(s) – of space, time or the heart – [...] into deeper proximities, other ways of being connected’ (12). As a metaphor for poetry, breath thus also concretises the metaphorical view of language Teaiwa associates with ‘native linguistic traditions of Oceania’ (2005:29), which takes and transforms meanings from language in place while remaining mindful of its sustainability as a cultural resource. Sinavaiana relates this to a more conventional association of poetry with orality but particularises this notion by referring it to Polynesian oral traditions of ‘talking story, fragrance, and breath – transmigrating [...] onto the printed page’ (15) and by linking it with the image of the canoe as connecting and world-enlarging vehicle, carried by ‘the moving line of breath – of poetry’ (12). The twenty poems of her collection thus metaphorically appear as canoes, sailing on the poet’s breath, and the variable placement and length of lines throughout, giving each poem a different spatial appearance on the page, draws attention to the connecting space, as each poem responds to the presence or precedence of a relationship.

Alchemies of Distance is organised in four sequences according to the metaphor of a journey with 'departure', 'traveling party', 'lament', and 'reunion', emphasising a cycle of separation and (re) connection, imaginatively forging new relationships and bringing them back to the fabric of old ones. The metaphor of breath allows the poet to make connections with distant places and to relate poetry to the capability of cross-cultural communication of music, as in the poem 'adobe duet', which evokes an encounter situated in a landscape reminiscent of the American Southwest. Dedicated to the deceased son of a musician, the poem joins a mother in

her grief/ a firey stream
poured into the ear of a
small clay flute/ her breath
swirling there/ ocarina exhaling (63),

and in departing transforms the experience into a memory sustained by the image of a canoe:

we hasten to follow
this melody home/ we climb into mist
& the breathing of streams
we climb onto feathers/ on the back
of her song/ then rise from deep canyon
sailing out above trees. (64)

Teweariki Teairo likewise organises his collection, *Waa in Storms*, on a spatial metaphor, a cycle of 'waves' entitled 'Pond Storms', 'Lagoon Storms', 'Ocean Storms', and 'Calm Again', emphasising the importance of centred relationships. The sequence evokes the value of breathing space, as Teairo uses the metaphor of storms to refer to problems weighing down on relationships at family, local, and regional levels, resulting in separation, isolation and anguish. Like Sinavaiana, Teairo points out that he wrote his poems during

‘a particularly difficult period of [his] life’ (x) in response to which the poems express his feelings and concern and particularly the value of relationships. The central importance of valuing and cultivating relationships is emphasised at the beginning of the collection in the image of a formal garlanding of its readers and invoked in many poems that acknowledge the presence or precedence of someone familiar, a member of the family but often also a mentor, to whom the poet pays his respects. It is as vehicles for the cultivation of relationships as well as in their design to weather metaphorical storms, that Teairo’s poems are also likened to canoes (*waa*), suggesting a conceptual affinity between the canoe as connecting vehicle propelled by wind and the poem as vehicle for the poet’s voice carried on the breath.

Canoe and voice themselves figuratively represent connections that are not directly visible but nevertheless have a distinct spatial shape. Both Teairo and Sinavaiana foreground specific connections in many of their poems. Both date their poems, without arranging them chronologically, and indicate for most of them the place where they were composed. This precise location is coupled in many poems with a specific address or dedication. Reading the poems thus becomes a movement back and forth between different (island) locations, imaginatively following each poem as it establishes or acknowledges a relationship, and the collections as a whole constitute a space made up of many intersecting pathways. Both poets, but Teairo in particular, furthermore use the graphic arrangement of their poems to indicate that connections, although invisible, are not to be imagined as abstract lines connecting dots but have a spatial extension and shape that changes, similar to the pathway of a canoe negotiating wind and currents or the quality of a voice modulated by changes in breathing. In the final section of his collection, ‘Calm Again’, Teairo includes a rare undated poem entitled ‘steady waa’, which sums up the value of centred relationships captured in the metaphorical coming together of poem, canoe and voice:

this
my *waa*
of learning
it is strong
truly balanced as it should be
it is anchored so very strongly
very firmly
to the sky
the land
the sea
all (89)

The canoe looks stationary, symmetrically balancing learning, associated with ancestral and mentor relationships, and relationships with sky, land and sea. At the same time, reading orients it in space, with sky, land and sea ‘firmly’ in front.

The metaphorical cluster of poem, canoe and voice also centres the relational worldview of Robert Sullivan’s collection, *Star Waka*, but while the underlying principle is similar, Sullivan’s exploration of the metaphorical possibilities of sustaining an all-encompassing worldview by way of the canoe (*waka*) metaphor is more ambitious and far-reaching than Sinavaiana’s and Teairo’s, especially in its eventual association of the reclamation of sovereignty with the

restoration and cultivation of breathing space. Assembled in a numbered sequence, Sullivan's 100 poems, likened to *waka*, evoke connotations of a giant fleet, but in its metaphorical operation, the *waka* also brings to mind the image of a shuttle in a loom, weaving the ramifying connections that hold together an Oceanian worldview into an intricate tapestry. Still, the image of a tapestry with its connotations of flatness and covering does not quite fit the spatial imaginary Sullivan evokes, which celebrates the space-between constituted by a myriad relationships and is therefore more aptly described in terms that Joël Bonnemaïson derived from his studies of Oceanian canoe societies: 'a complex network, a flexible and reticulated system of places and roads of alliance, weaving nexus upon nexus around various places of confluence, which themselves are connected with spatial configurations farther away' (8).

Sullivan's collection can be read as a single poem, charting the voyage of the eponymous 'star waka' past 2000 lines, and as such it represents a space/time continuum held together by the constant renewal of connections. The 2000 lines of the poem signify spatial extension as well as time, referring to both years and genealogies. *Star Waka* thus recreates the 'Pacific [as] a far-flung society' (70), reaching into the past of navigational histories as far as Hawaiki and out to an imagined future of 'spacecraft *waka*' (50), bringing oral traditions as well as textual and electronic archives into a vast and at the same time intimate conversational space. Significantly, while taking part of his inspiration from Western literature, Sullivan does not organise his poem on the model of an epic, with a single narrative voice and hero: 'There is no Odysseus to lead this fleet – / not even Maui who sent waka to their petrification' (70). Instead, like Sinavaiana and Teairo, he gives each poem a different shape, mirroring the distinct and dynamic spatial nature of individual relationships that fill and animate the vastness that Wendt describes as 'the Space-Between-All-Things which

defines us and makes us part of the Unity-that-is-All' (181). As a vehicle that holds together a decentralised and localised space of constantly moving relationships, the canoe therefore appears in many guises, including Sullivan's old car in 'Honda Waka' (8), computers in 'waka rorohiko' (59), a TV program, '*waka huia*' (63), the Civic cinema in Auckland (49), books, and of course the vessels that brought Sullivan's Maori and European ancestors to Aotearoa (89). Anything can become a *waka* that connects, down to 'molecules of waka, powered by breeze' (62), and *waka* can be found everywhere: a milk carton, for instance, becomes a *waka* by virtue of its Waitangi Day expiry date (65). In effect, *waka* becomes an 'attitude' (85), an expression of 'the psyche of [Pacific] cultures, [their] closeness' (46), which in Sullivan's collection permeates every aspect of everyday life, like breathing.

Indeed, the spatial imaginary that nourishes the metaphorical attitude at work in *Star Waka* may be described by the image of space itself as breathing. This space refuses to submit to any contour but constantly shifts, expands, contracts, and always connects, as Sullivan suggests, with startling effect, by moving from a vision of 'spacecraft *waka* [. . .] singing waiata to the spheres' (50) to a picture of the 'emanations from the breathing of [his] daughter' (51), sleeping in the intimacy of the family bedroom. Breathing freely as a sign of empowering connectedness thus ultimately appears as a metaphor of sovereignty in *Star Waka*, expressed both in the celebration of the poet's sense of connectedness and capability, manifest in the sustained power of his voice, and in the imaginative commitment to the restoration of an indigenous universe in the form of relationships concretised in the image of the breath and sustained by the metaphor of the canoe. This association of sovereignty with breath becomes increasingly explicit toward the end of *Star Waka*, for instance in 'Waka 78 An historical line', which represents the onslaught of colonisation on the Maori in a single sentence of the form, 'In the

New Zealand Wars [. . .] the Empire took the waka' (87), which is twenty-five lines long and literally leaves the reader out of breath while metaphorically expressing the destruction of indigenous sovereignty associated with the loss of ancestral *waka*. The last three lines of the poem metaphorically acknowledge the resulting marginalisation but also express the resilience of the indigenous worldview that also underpins Sullivan's imagination: 'The iwi hid the old ones / we have today. Or built them again. / They had the psychological template' (87). 'Waka 100', the last poem, finally brings the collection to the threshold of a 'New World' (110) and the recovery of 'a culture / that has held its breath / through the age of Dominion' (111), captured in the resurrection of *waka* that 'rise – rise into the air – rise to the breath – / rise above valleys into light and recognition' (111) and invoking breath as a cosmic gift associated with divinity:

holder of the compasses –
 wind compass, solar compass,
 compass encompassing known
 currents, breather of the first breath
 in every breathing creature,
 guide the waka between islands,
 between years and eyes of the Pacific
 out of mythologies to consciousness. (111)

III

The metaphorical association of sovereignty with breathing and with what Samoans call 'nurtur[ing] the *va*' (Sharrad 248) has particular significance to Oceania, where, as the three poets suggest, it resonates with deep cultural attitudes toward family and elders as well as the environment and the past. But it is also relevant to a

globalising world, in that it can influence our imaginative attitude toward islands (and by extension, toward other places as well) and assist us in rethinking priorities that guide us in the institutional spaces in which we work. Indeed, I consider this one of the strengths of the metaphor of breathing, that it has the capacity to articulate a value that is at once shareable and particular and even personal, reflecting the dual nature of 'sovereignty as both a doctrine and a set of activities', as James Sheehan puts it: 'As a doctrine, sovereignty is usually regarded as unified and inseparable; as an activity, however, it is plural and divisible' (2). As a metaphor grounded in concrete experience, the image of breathing can acknowledge both the value of self-definition, to which everyone may lay claim, and the value of negotiating difference, without recourse to abstract universalism.

To people whose livelihood depends on the sea, islands may quite literally represent breathing space in the sense of a place to call home, as Epeli Hau'ofa suggests when he notes that '[o]ur' natural landscapes [. . .] are maps of movements, pauses, and more movements' (2000:466).⁷ The presence of the sea indeed accentuates the value of breathing space insofar as it reminds us of the fact that the ocean not only sustains the atmosphere and photosynthesising environment that is a condition of terrestrial life, but in its very vastness and perpetual motion also naturally limits and potentially threatens breathing space as a resource. Islanders everywhere (even in Hong Kong) are accustomed to the periodic visitation by storms, which temporarily force them to seek shelter and to emerge to inspect the damage done to their homes. At the same time, the limited space for settlement on islands imposes natural limitations on the space anyone can claim for their home and obliges people to accommodate the potentially contesting claims of their neighbours. As Vilsoni Hereniko pointedly observes: 'The sea of Oceania may be vast, but no one I know is fighting for a piece of the ocean to build a house on'

(167–68). As is well known, colonialism and its lasting (global) effects have severely exacerbated the pressures on the ecological and political equilibrium in Oceania in the form of military and commercial encroachment, pollution, rising water levels, and what David Gegeo calls the ‘implosion of place’ and a concomitant tendency of ‘space [...] to explode’ (498, italics removed), as a result of over-crowding and the disruption of customary mobility. Such problems accentuate the focus of indigenous struggles for sovereignty on the protection of breathing space, as Meyer suggests when she describes the effects of colonial education in Hawai‘i as a form of ‘carbon monocultural poisoning’ (125). At the same time they emphasise the inextricable association of these struggles with respect for the incontestable sovereignty of the natural environment and the need to strengthen cooperative bonds across regional boundaries.

The three poets likewise address these pressures and thereby indicate the relevance of the restoration of a relational space concretised by the metaphor of breathing to global issues. Thus Sinavaiana associates her poetic quest for breathing space with her actual relocation from Samoa to Honolulu, ‘away from the toxic milieu of colonial isolation’, emphasising the importance of regional connectedness that provides ‘[s]aving distance, perspective, breath’ (12). Sullivan laments the destruction of the global environment, which threatens to devastate island worlds most directly, in ‘Waka 57 El Nino Waka’: ‘El Nino is blood from our mother. She bleeds / internally; then from ocean into air in a maelstrom’ (64). And in the poem ‘49 (environment I)’, he asks, ‘will the next makers of waka / live in submarines [...]?’ (53), suggesting that global warming may eventually not leave any place to fight for to build a house on. Similarly, Teaero, in ‘natural meal’ (62–63), denounces corporate greed that gobbles up the island world, cyclone and all, and in the poem, ‘What is...’, he pithily lists the effects of global development on island settlement:

rising rising rising?
global warming
population
cost of living
expectations
blood pressure
unemployment
inflation
stress
temper (69).

In 'Storms,' Teairo acknowledges the visitation by storms as an ordinary aspect of island life, a confrontation of the always longer breath of the natural environment, 'bursting into our pacific lives / from across the eternal ocean / breathing restless hurricanes' (4). But the metaphor cuts both ways, also likening visitors to unwelcome storms and perhaps urging them to pause and reflect, as does the poem, 'Un-beatitudes,' which calls attention to the pollution of oceans, islands and skies and ends with a plea:

Spare a thought for ourselves
All tense and taut
Tightly wound up
Ready to explode or is it implode?
Upon ourselves or is it others?
In a stormy mess (61).

Perhaps the most important implication of the association of sovereignty with breathing, however, is its emphasis on the cultivation of connections and the negotiation of political and cultural boundaries that this involves. Herein lies the principal difference between conceptualisations of sovereignty in terms of blood and conceptualisations in terms of breath, for while the

metaphor of blood tends to emphasise interiority, incorporation and sameness, the metaphor of breath puts the emphasis on kinship as always also a relationship to others, implying recognition of and respect for difference. The image of breathing allows us to rethink what constitutes a people as the bearer of sovereignty, for what ensured the peopling of the Pacific Islands over centuries by what Epli Hau'ofa has called '*ocean peoples*' (1993:7) is not primarily the protection of bloodlines but the ability to settle differences. As a metaphor for sovereignty in a sea of islands, attention to breathing thus concretises an 'ethos of engagement' (Connolly 2192ff) rather than regulation, a reckoning with the presence and precedence of other, often invisible, agents, and an awareness of the need to negotiate boundaries.⁸ To say that such an attitude underpins the writing of the three poets is not to deny that the image of blood also forms part of their metaphorical repertoire, which it does, but to suggest that the relational values associated with the image of breath take precedence and in some ways even express themselves in a reconceptualisation of the connectedness evoked by the image of blood. Robert Sullivan conveys this most strikingly when he turns the idea of 'blood relations' into an image of exteriority and articulation, of 'veins touch[ing] veins' (109). Speaking of sovereignty, Sullivan exclaims, 'we are peoples united by more / than genes, by more than the tongues / of our ancestors reciting names / of great ones' (46), pointing to a psychic closeness, which he elsewhere (in 'Waka 76') punningly refers to as 'a waka attitude' (85).

As a metaphor of sovereignty encompassing the cultivation of connections, the image of breathing thus also highlights the cultural ability to negotiate boundaries, a point Joakim Peter emphasises in his study of Chuukese travels, where he notes that 'strong clan connections and trade partnerships must be maintained for basic life support' (263) and that this involves attention to 'boundaries [that] require negotiation' (262). Travels, in his analysis, 'can be

seen as a series of purposeful negotiations and conversions of unfamiliar and unfriendly forces to serve a defined purpose or a set of purposes' (262). Peter criticises the ways in which the arbitrary drawing of political boundaries between parts of Micronesia variously administered in association with the USA has hindered the provision of and access to vital services such as health care in the region and suggests the importance of finding ways of working within and across institutional boundaries, based on principles such as might be formulated via the image of breathing.

Peter's observations on the negotiation of boundaries also apply to the metaphorical itineraries charted by the three poets, which foreground cultural boundaries with an invitation to familiarisation, notably by including words in indigenous languages and providing assistance to the non-native reader in the form of glossaries or reference to available resources. Including twelve poems in Kiribatese among the 64 of his collection, Teairo evokes the familiarity of boundaries and the experience of communicating across linguistic and ethnic differences most compellingly in 'Wordless games', watching a Tuvaluan and an I-Kiribati-Fijian boy at play: 'You do not know / Each other's language / Yet you talk together / Communicate nicely / Understand each other / So well' (93). His question, 'What connects you so?' (*ibid.*), draws attention to a relatedness concretized by the image of breathing and its grounding in histories of Pacific settlement and migration whose patterns of relatedness, similarity and difference, as John Terrell (122–51) has shown, are not explicable in terms of models based on hegemonic assumptions of assimilation or diffusion, underpinned by images of flow or circulation.

The affirmation of the possibility of non-hegemonic dialogue distinguishes the metaphorical experiments of all three of these poets. This possibility is based on the metaphorical grounding of language itself in particular islands worlds, which supports its

conceptualisation as a shareable resource, a conceptualisation that links these poems to indigenous epistemologies and linguistic traditions. Metaphor in this view does not lead to abstraction but expresses an attitude that recognises its constitutive relationship to other, potentially rivalling, claims; thus also an attitude that can creatively enable cross-cultural (institutional) engagement. In the final section of *Star Waka*, Sullivan offers an image of the emergence of such an attitude in a sequence of poems (Waka 84–90 and 92–96), most of which begin with ‘I am’. Successively, a series of speakers (including the ancestral navigator Kupe, an anonymous English settler, Odysseus, Maui, Hawaiki, Tanemahuta, and Tangaroa) step forth and each make a bold claim of sovereignty. Individually, these claims contest one another, but as Sullivan steers his *Star Waka* past them, they emerge, to borrow Diaz’s and Kauanui’s metaphor, as ‘moving islands’, in view of which the poet triangulates his own location, challenging us to do likewise.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published in a special double issue of *New Literatures Review* 47–48 (2011) on the literature of postcolonial islands, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey. Research for this paper has been supported by a grant from the General Research Fund of the University Grants Committee, Hong Kong.

² This contrasts with other critics of the concept of sovereignty who liken it to a disease. Anthony Burke, for instance, in an article entitled ‘The Perverse Perseverance of Sovereignty,’ speaks of ‘its malign, suffocating ontology’, and Michael Brown, in ‘Sovereignty’s Betrayals,’ deplors ‘the viral spread of the idiom of sovereignty’ (185). A more nuanced critique is offered by Marc Weller in ‘The Self-determination Trap,’ analyzing the effects of the narrow definition of sovereignty in international law, which either tend to make the concept meaningless or violent conflict seem inevitable.

³ It may be worth remembering that the bond, which Renan identified as a shared pride in having done great things and a wish to achieve still more together, essentially depends on the work of a collective imagination.

⁴ Teaiwa writes: ‘One word can have many layers of meaning: the Hawaiians call this *kaona*. Thus, a limited vocabulary does not constitute a limited worldview; the *kaona* principle enriches, makes complex and versatile a limited vocabulary. No word is disposable – if the singular referent it ‘originally’ represented is no longer, then the word is recycled to represent a new referent. But more often than not, words will have multiple significations in a single enunciation’ (2005:29).

⁵ ‘Vaka Vuku: Navigating Knowledge,’ Pacific Epistemologies Conference, Suva, Fiji (3-7 July, 2006). See Prasad (2006) and conference website at <http://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=1351>.

⁶ Thus, according to Diaz and Kauanui, ‘Pacific studies [too] can be likened to a canoe’ (322).

⁷ I think Pio Manoa made a similar point at the OIS conference when he associated the land, *vanua*, with the values of leisure, peace and stillness as the basis of culture.

⁸ In his critique of the identity claims underpinning the image of the nation, Connolly calls for an ethos of engagement that recognizes ‘multi-dimensional pluralism’ as the objective of institutional innovation. In his view, such an ethos becomes negotiable ‘when each constituency, first, honours the moral source that inspires it, second, acknowledges the contestability of the source it honours the most, and, third, addresses the history of violences enacted to universalize the source it honours’ (194). Connolly, too, sees this as primarily an imaginative challenge and calls for ‘new improvisations today, those that rework received representations of majority rule, minorities, progress, dissent, rights, sympathy, property, tolerance, secularism and creative dissidence’ (195). While his position is opposed to the nation state as such, I think a genuine ethos of engagement might also open the institutional spaces of the nation to new ways of doing the national differently.

⁹ Peter uses the conventional metaphor of blood when criticizing the constricting effects of boundaries on traditional mobility, but the value of purposeful negotiation and engaging with unseen forces, which he promotes, seems equally (if not better) expressed by the metaphor of breathing.

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