

Mihi whakatau

Moana Nepia

E rau rangatira mā, Ngāti Whatua, Ngāti Paoa, ngā manuhiri tūārangi, e Gernot...
e mihi kau atu ana rā ki a koutou. Talofa lava, kia orana, Willkommen ... welcome!

To the many chiefs gathered here, including those from Ngāti Whatua and Ngāti Paoa,
distinguished visitors from afar, Gernot Böhme.... greetings and welcome to you all.

I've chosen today to share some poetry with you that gathers ideas regarding atmospheres evoked
through Māori ritual greetings and lament, and to touch on some of the themes that this symposium
is addressing.¹

When we talk about atmosphere in Māori, one of the words we use is rangi. Rangi is also day, weath-
er, sky, and Sky Father, one of our ancestors. Rangi also translates as air and melody. When we are
talking about atmospheres, we are talking about ourselves, not something that is separate from us.

There are many atmospheres in Māori thinking, many states and names for Rangi. Rangi, our father,
is also an ancestor from whom perception arises in whakapapa or genealogies. Our connection to
atmospheres both outside and inside, the nature of perception and existence are all understood in
terms of whakapapa, a relational way of understanding the world.

The first poem I'd like to share with you, *Tangi*, is by New Zealand Māori poet Hone Tuwhare, who
was from Te Tai Tokerau, the Northern region of Aotearoa/NZ. He wrote in English and was a master
at evoking senses of atmosphere and place.

Tangi is a lament, a crying and weeping. One of the first things we do in a formal Māori address is
to draw together our many ancestors, those who have passed away. Sharing this way, we also come
closer together.

Tangi
I did not meet her
on the bordered path
nor detect her fragrance
in the frolic of violets and carnations.

She did not stroll riverward
to sun-splash and shadows
to willows trailing garlands
of green pathos

Death was not hiding in the cold rags
of a broken dirge
Nor could I find her

in the cruel laughter of children
the curdled whimper of a dog

But I heard her with the wind
crooning in the hung wires

and caught her beauty by the coffin
muted to a softer pain-
in the calm vigil of hands
in the green-leaved anguish
of the bowed heads
of old women.²

The second poetic reference I want to make is to Rangiūia, who was a nineteenth-century tohunga (scholar) from Ngāti Porou at the Rawheoro whare wānanga (school of learning) at Uawa (Tolaga Bay), a part of the country that my ancestors come from, and that I call home. In a waiata tangi (lament) he wrote for his son,³ he refers to a particular state of Rangi in cloud formations from the south. People who know the history, or who are from the Ngāti Porou region, may know how this state of Rangi was also used to refer to a portent of doom.

In the last poem I will share with you, titled *Grief*, I refer to the separation of Rangi or Ranginui (Sky Father) and Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) as a space and source of continual lament, perceived in the movement of rain, water and cloud. This is a short extract:

Grief carries us home,
ebbs and flows with the tide,
paddles and surges through veins,
powers and floats, surging through water.

Grief takes charge, inspiring command,
declaring another call, to arms, to action, to move
again, to haul and lift up over rocky shore.

Rise and fall of this melody is rangi,
hugging, hovering, soaring, yearning over land.

Grief trembles, expanding air,
thunders and tumbles clouded.

Grief howls wind over sand,
galloping in from the sea,
swoops up to smother views
from the edge of an abyss.

Above and below, towards and away,
resoundings shudder
to land torn, numb,
dripping to sodden dust.

Tangi a lament moves and cries.⁴

In ritual acknowledgements of those who have passed, we are not just lamenting, we are coming together as the living faces of our ancestors. We are the embodiment of atmosphere.

Endnotes

1. This is an edited version of the mihi whatakatau (opening address) for the *2014 Interstices Under Construction Symposium*, 22 November, 2013, at the Design Theatre, NICA, The University of Auckland. Thanks to Moata McNamara for editorial support.
2. Tuwhare, H. (1994). *Deep River Talk: Collected poems*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, p. 22.
3. Ngata, A. (1958). The origin of Māori carving. *Te Ao Hou*. Vol. 22, p. 35.
4. Nepia, M. (2012). *Te Kore – Exploring the Māori concept of void*. PhD Thesis. AUT University, Auckland. Vol. 1, pp.9-10. http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/handle/10292/5480/NepiaM_voll