

Invasive weeds or I wish I could give you the world, but I was only given mud, rot and the bones of a half-eaten fish

Hana Pera Aoake, Wesley John Fourie, and Taarn Scott
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Agony of Toil

A response by Michelle Rahurahu

"We come unto you with our complaint as unto a doctor, that he may administer relief. It is this. We are without house or land in this town for the purpose of a market-place. We are like unto a Cormorant sitting on a rock. This tide rise, it flows over the rock, and the bird is compelled to fly. Do thou provide a dry resting place for us that we may prosper."¹

This is the cry of the people of Ngaai Tuuaahuriri; for access to their land, to their resources, for means to exist and prosper, the very land on which *Invasive Weeds* rests. It is a resounding call from tangata whenua, that still echoes three hundred years into colonial settlement; we have only ever wanted the tools to thrive.

I visited the exhibition on a Whiro moon, the day was short, just coming out of Matariki; Ootaakaro was half-clear, half-brown, the birds were screaming.

Matua Rangiānehu Mātāmua asserts, "For Māori, the year was divided into different seasons, months, and nights. Those were determined by a number of factors, including the position of the sun, the phase of the moon, the rising and setting of stars and ecological changes in the environment."²

I tried to embrace the cold, tried to take in all the signs but all I could smell was fire-smoke. I entered the gallery and was embraced by a curtain of muka; twisted and smelling like home.

1 Hone Paratene, "Address to the Governor", *Maori Messenger: Te Karere Māori*, 1860, Vol. 7, 20.

2 Rangī Mātāmua, 2017, *Matariki: The Star of the Year* (Huia: Wellington, 2017), 37.

WE X HAD TO X PLUCK YOU X FROM X YOUR AWA X

it stings but ao marama is waiting
the wind on your dry body
we only wanted you to feel

were you hoohaa; were you mamae honey

You did not settle, you thrashed

tui blacken on singular threads with death;
ipu-koorero-calp fading to pale
a remnant of rito-auburn sits on steel oioi

then we hung them:
vomit-riki at the stems;

Your fury painted the muka mucus-green
to summon a sneeze
we brushed your head
the skelped yowl shook the flaxen leaves

On the gallery floor lay rocks that were collected by the artists on a hiikoi from Ootepoti to Ootautahi in the shape of great tuna. Each creature was distinct—one was circular. The stones sat in varying sizes and sediment, some brown clay, some cold black, some bronze purple, some marbled grey. The marbling was my favourite; something unassuming ... with a history.

Handmade ceramics sat in the centre, painted in eggshell-teal-royal-blue-sharp-gold, water pooled in them and dripped out. Soil sat at the bottom of the pools and so did green oil drops, caviar-translucent, bits of shavings of steel or some malleable scattered metals.

You can tell the health of a river by the presence of tuna. The presence of tuna speaks to oxygenated water, the ecology of haataretare, Zemelanopsis, inanga, tiitarakura—even stream-side vegetation. A healthy river is elongated and accessible, unbarred by dams, unfettered by farming pollutants and emissions; the tuna can climb or migrate freely. Seeing a tuna out of water inspired a melancholy in me.

There are imprints from the hands of children who have instinctively plunged their hands in the handmade ceramics of water and wet the stones. The stones look like beached whales, the temporary reprieve from their misery drying on their backs. The curled metals remind me of the ones dissolved into invisible threats flowing through the city's freshwater, and the green droplets—oil-slick—carry warnings of the algae

A rallying dedication by Hana Pera Aoake is stamped into soft metal and attached to the wall, to their child, each paragraph returning to the core sentiment, “I wish I could give you the world, but I was only given mud, rot and the bones of a half-eaten fish”. Everything on display communicates toil; I think of the painstaking pressure applied to each letter depressed into tin, the hours scraping flax into muka, the time shaping clay, shaving metal, and collecting stones; only to haul them back to their original homes again. Yes, the shift in political tides, like parenthood, like the taming of invasive weeds, is a lifelong mission that is agonising. But, still, it is fruitful.

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