

AT THE CONFLUENCE OF POETRY AND POLITICS:  
COMPARING THE LIVES AND WORKS OF OODGEROO  
NOONUCCAL AND HONE TUWHARE

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*Scott William Mackay*

INTRODUCTION

The importance and power of art is woven throughout the islands of the Pacific. Art preserves, sustains, challenges, and modifies culture. It is culture's lifeline. Acclaimed Samoan writer Albert Wendt has argued that if the Pacific is not already the most artistically creative region in the world, then it certainly possesses the *potential* to become the most artistically creative (1983, 81). Art takes on many forms in the Pacific, whether through dance, sculpture, carving, ceramics, painting, tattooing, or oral and written forms such as plays, poems, and other types of literature.

Art is also political. Native Hawaiian scholar, poet, and activist Haunani-Kay Trask argued that in a contemporary context, politics as an art form has been "rendered illegitimate by the literary establishment who blindly envision art as separate to politics" (1999, 18). Such a division, she argued, is inappropriate in an indigenous or Native worldview. In Trask's own experience, she does not imagine herself "crossing from political resistance into artistic creation and then back again." "Life is a confluence of creativities: art is a fluid political medium, as politics is metaphorical and artistic" (Trask 1999, 18).

This essay focuses on the confluence of politics and art, specifically poetry. I consider the importance and effectiveness of poetry in conveying in a powerful way the experiences of indigenous Australian Aborigines and Māori brought about by the impacts of colonization. I examine the similarities and differences between Australia's and Aotearoa/New Zealand's colonial histories and the indigenous activism that emerged in those places in poetic form. I focus on the life and work of two prominent indigenous writers: Australian Aborigine poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Māori poet Hone Tuwhare.<sup>1</sup>

From the outset I would like to point out that this essay by no means attempts to conflate or simplify the diverse experiences of Australian Aboriginal and Māori communities. In any society, people hold a variety of views; they are shaped by the sociocultural milieu in which they live. What I instead hope to do

is show how two influential individuals have used poetry to capture the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they lived and worked.

In this essay, I draw extensively from Kathleen J Cochrane's 1994 biography of Noonuccal and Janet Hunt's 1998 biography of Tuwhare. Both works contain rich sources of information not found elsewhere, and are written with an authentic flavor. Cochrane had met Noonuccal in the early 1950s through the Queensland Aboriginal rights movement and they became lifelong friends. Cochrane's previous publications were in the field of special education, and before her retirement in 1988 she was a senior tutor at the University of Queensland. Hunt, on the other hand, focused on Tuwhare as part of a master's thesis at the University of Auckland in the late 1990s, which was later published. Hunt has been a secondary school teacher and a lecturer at the Auckland Institute of Technology and Auckland University

In recognizing that the commonly accepted frame for Pacific studies often excludes Aboriginal Australia, my hope is that this essay will illustrate the rich opportunities for comparative work between Aboriginals and indigenous Pacific Island peoples. My definition of the Pacific is not one that is merely defined by the arbitrary boundaries, categories, and stereotypes that have been constructed over the last two centuries by outsiders. It is my view that in sticking with such narrow definitions, one fails to acknowledge a region that had been thriving and growing for thousands of years before explorers, missionaries, and western academics arrived. In Wendt's words, "Oceania deserves much more than an attempt at mundane fact" (1983, 71). By including Aboriginal Australia in our discussions of the Pacific, I believe our knowledge of this vast region will expand and be enhanced.

#### COLONIAL BACKGROUND

To understand the worlds in which both Hone Tuwhare and Oodgeroo Noonuccal wrote from the 1960s on, it is important to provide a historical framework of the social and political policies enacted by the colonial governments of Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia. In understanding some of the key differences and similarities between Noonuccal and Tuwhare, one can clearly see how their life experiences influenced their future activism and poetry. With Noonuccal being born in 1920 and Tuwhare in 1922, and both having their

first books published in the same year (1964), meaningful similarities and contrasts can be drawn from the two, particularly in reference to their education, their experiences during World War Two, and their involvement in the Communist Party. I must emphasize here that the intention of this paper is not to offer a comprehensive account of their lives. Rather I seek to draw out specific themes that are helpful in showing how the works of two distinct individuals from different parts of the Pacific converged in such remarkable ways.

Early to mid-twentieth century life for Aborigines and Māori was quite dissimilar, despite the fact that both peoples became minorities in their own countries due to British colonial expansion. Kerry Howe has examined the disparate ways Māori and Aborigines responded to the arrival and subsequent settlement of Europeans in their homelands during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Howe stated, “Maoris were better able to cope with the consequences of European settlement than Aborigines. . . . This is by no means to suggest that Maoris were in any way ‘superior’ or that Aborigines were in any way ‘lacking’—each of their cultures must naturally be examined in terms of their own environments and value systems” (1977, 1).

The kinds of colonial policies implemented in early to mid-twentieth century Australia and New Zealand demonstrate the different circumstances Aborigines and Māori were trying to deal with. While Māori were struggling to maintain their culture and land, Aborigines were in a much worse condition, with few human rights afforded to them. Indeed, the Australian state and federal governments predicted and hoped that Aborigines would eventually just die out (Attwood and Markus 2007, 1). Both Aborigines and Māori, however, showed great resilience and fought to preserve their cultures and promote their indigenous and human rights throughout the twentieth century. Although both peoples faced many setbacks, they also experienced many successes. The emergence of indigenous artists proved to be a powerful influence as both Māori and Aborigines began demanding equal rights. During this time, Noonuccal and Tuwhare were very much at the forefront of their respective movements. In the following section, I examine some of the influences that shaped the lives of Noonuccal and Tuwhare. I consider the similarities and differences between the two, and how they fused poetry and activism to promote a deeper awareness of the plight of their peoples.

CHILDHOOD/EDUCATION

Both Noonuccal's and Tuwhare's childhood and education shaped their awareness of what was happening politically and socially around them. In later years, they translated those formative experiences into the rich and powerful poetry for which they became known. What they learned was not accomplished just through formal education, but also through the informal teachings of their parents and the communities in which they lived. While in the early years of the twentieth century Aborigines and Māori were for the most part not encouraged to pursue a formal education, much was learned through the strong oral traditions passed down from generation to generation.

Noonuccal's mother Lucy, who was half Aborigine and half European, was never taught to read or write. This was a wrong she could never forgive (Cochrane 1994, 48). Deprived of educational opportunities herself, Lucy was determined that her children would become literate. Noonuccal would later write a poem—entitled “Teachers”—about her mother's experience of not having the opportunity to be formally educated, which appeared in her 1970 publication *My People*.

For Mother, who was never taught to read or write  
Holy men, you came to preach:  
“Poor black heathen, we will teach  
Sense of sin and fear of hell,  
Fear of God and boss as well;  
We will teach you work for play,  
We will teach you to obey  
Laws of God and laws of Mammon”  
And we answered, “No more gammon,  
If you have to teach the light,  
Teach us first to read and write”

Noonuccal's formal education ended at the age of 13 in 1933 after she completed her final year of primary schooling at Dunwich Tate School on North Stradbroke Island. Most Aboriginal children were considered fit for work at this stage of their lives, and rarely did any of them progress further within the formal school system.

Noonuccal's father, Ted Ruska, was influential in teaching her to stand up and fight for Aboriginal rights. Ruska built roads and was an important figure in agitating for pay raises for Aborigines, who earned considerably less than their

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white counterparts in the state of Queensland (Cochrane 1994, 47). Recalling her father's own brand of activism, Noonuccal stated, "He'd . . . walk home and tell me that Mrs. So-and-so said you walk this land as though you think it's yours. [The young Noonuccal responded,] 'It is mine, isn't it?' And he'd say, 'Yes girl, and don't you forget it'" (quoted in Cochrane 1994, 44).

Similarly, Tuwhare's father, Ben Tuwhare, was also a road builder. Later in life, Tuwhare joked that his father "was a roads scholar. His school was on the roads with a pick and shovel" (quoted in Hunt 1998, 24). Like Noonuccal, life during the early years was tough for Tuwhare, with the family living a largely nomadic existence after the death of his mother in 1928. Tuwhare's father was a great Māori orator and storyteller who encouraged his son to memorize his whakapapa (genealogy) and to be proud of his Māori culture. Yet he also saw the English language as the future for his son, and so encouraged him to master it (Hunt 1998, 28). Tuwhare's father made a couple of attempts to further his son's schooling when they lived in Kaikohe, but it was in Auckland, where they moved in 1929, that the young Tuwhare finally finished his primary schooling in 1937 at the age of 15 (Hunt 1998, 21–25). Tuwhare would later write a poem about his childhood entitled "Never Look Back," which was published in his book *No Ordinary Sun* (1964):

Tastes were sharper then;  
sandwich spread was dripping fat  
on a dry old crust  
saliva'd exaltation  
to heaven's doorstep pure  
and juicy angels.

### WORLD WAR TWO

The outbreak of World War Two on 3 September 1939 had contrasting implications for Aborigines in Australia and Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Both Noonuccal's and Tuwhare's experiences bear witness to this, with the political and social ramifications of the times inspiring their thoughts and feelings, as would become apparent in their later poetry.

In Australia there was no conscription for overseas service during the first part of the war, although able-bodied men were called up for training unless

their job was deemed too important to wartime national interest. In contrast to white Australians, Aborigines were exempt from military service, since they were not considered Australian citizens. However, such restrictions did not deter their willingness to offer their assistance, and many did so. In fact, during World War Two, over 3,000 Aborigines (including Torres Strait Islanders) enlisted for military service, while a further 150–200 served without recognition or pay. Yet another 3,000 Aborigines supported the military services as civilian laborers (Hall 1989, 189). It is significant to note that neither commonwealth nor state governments acknowledged the contribution of Aborigine and Torres Strait Islanders to the war effort (Hall 1989, 189).

At the age of 21, Noonuccal voluntarily enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS). She did so in order to escape life as a domestic servant, a form of employment that many Aboriginal women were forced into (Cochrane 1994, 12). Despite being told of the racial abuse she might face in the service, Noonuccal's experience was quite the opposite. During her time at the tent barracks in Chemsides, Queensland, not only did she learn to operate a switchboard, but she also met Eris Valentine and Thora Travis, two white Australians. Both women were to be of great "significance to Kath, as they were the first experience she had of what it was like to live with white people who didn't notice her skin colour" (Cochrane 1994, 13). Robert Hall has argued that the war fostered an understanding, respect, and cooperation between Aboriginal and white Australia not seen before or since (1989, 193–194). Noonuccal's involvement in the war effort lasted until 1943, when she had to leave the service due to poor health. By this time she had been promoted to the rank of corporal and placed in charge of training incoming servicewomen; she also worked in the AWAS pay office (Cochrane 1994, 15).

In contrast to the situation of Aborigines, Māori involvement in the war effort was extensive, with many enlisting in the famous 28th Māori Battalion. Recruitment for the Māori Battalion throughout the war was voluntary and groups were organized according to tribal affiliations. Rather than join the Māori Battalion, at the end of 1939 Tuwhare decided to try to enlist with the New Zealand Territorial Army. To his disappointment, he was turned down for several reasons: he was color-blind, only 17 years old, and employed by the railways, an industry deemed essential to the war effort. By the end of 1944, Tuwhare was finally accepted into the army and spent six months training as a soldier at the Trentham Military Training Camp as part of the 16th

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Reinforcements. However, his dream to travel the world and serve his country was thwarted when, on 15 August 1945, the end of the war was declared (Hunt 1998, 48). In 1946 Tuwhare was given another opportunity to serve his country when he was sent as part of the Jayforce operation to demilitarize Japan.

The ocean voyage to Japan saw Tuwhare's artistic skills first emerge in the public eye. He had his first poem published in the ship's newspaper, although that poem has since been lost (Hunt 1998, 48). Tuwhare was also involved in a highly successful singing trio that entertained the ship's passengers. Indeed, the trio was so successful that they were asked to sing on radio stations and for departing US officers (Hunt 1998, 51–52). Although the group disbanded on their return to New Zealand, music, particularly jazz, continued to play a very influential part in Tuwhare's life and his poetry (Hunt 1998, 52).

The most moving and influential part of Tuwhare's war experience came in 1947 when he passed through Hiroshima a year after nuclear bombs were dropped on that city as well as on Nagasaki, killing 247,000 and 200,000 people, respectively. "No Ordinary Sun," the title poem of Tuwhare's first collection of poetry, which was published 17 years later, relates to the devastation he witnessed in Hiroshima. Indeed, this poem became particularly significant during the peace movement in the late sixties, seventies, and eighties (Hunt 1998, 49). Tuwhare stated, "The main theme is . . . the horror and desolation that the H-Bomb would bring, something I feel very strongly . . . I am aware all the time of the threat that is hanging over our world" (quoted in Hunt 1998, 49).

### THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The Australian Communist Party was established in 1920 and the New Zealand Communist Party a year later in direct opposition to capitalist exploitation. Noonuccal's and Tuwhare's interest in the Communist Party came in the wake of World War Two, albeit in contrasting ways. Noonuccal's involvement with the Australian Communist Party came quite by accident. After buying meat from her local butcher one day, Noonuccal's attention was caught by a letter to the editor printed in the newspaper her meat had been wrapped in. The author of the letter complained about a store in Bundaberg, Queensland, that displayed a sign in its window stating, "We serve Whites only." Impressed by the fact that the newspaper had dared to print the letter, Noonuccal later learned that the paper

was published by the Australian Communist Party (Cochrane 1994, 17).

Noonuccal contacted the local Communist Party branch to enquire what their policies were regarding Aborigines. They responded by citing article 1 of the International Declaration of Human Rights, which states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights . . . and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" (quoted in Cochrane 1994, 17–18).

Initially impressed by their policy, Noonuccal was asked to accompany party members to Bundaberg to protest outside the store. Joining her there was a local Aboriginal war veteran, dressed in full uniform and wearing the medals he had won for bravery during World War One. When the veteran approached the counter, the storekeeper informed him that the store did not serve Aborigines. The statement was met with strident opposition by members of the Communist Party, until eventually the sign was removed and the ex-serviceman was allowed to purchase a shirt (Cochrane 1994, 18). The Communist Party's enlightened attitude encouraged Noonuccal to start attending party meetings and reading Communist literature. Her excitement was short lived, however, as she became increasingly frustrated by the lack of direct action taken by the party against the discrimination of her people. Despite the party having established a program that covered Aboriginal land rights, social, political and legal rights, wages and working conditions, and education and the preservation of Aboriginal culture, such goals were never rigorously pursued, and the Communist Party failed to find a way to effectively work with Aborigines (Brown 1986, 53).

Noonuccal also grew impatient with her white Communist Party peers who insisted that they compose her anti-discrimination speeches for her (Cochrane 1994, 18). When her poetry first became public, people often assumed that it was not Noonuccal, but rather a well-known communist who had written her material (Cochrane 1994, 229). Noonuccal's link with the Communist Party was also used to tarnish her work, even after she had left the party. Noonuccal would look into other political parties throughout her life; however, she found them all disappointing.

While Noonuccal's involvement with the Communist Party was initially serendipitous, Tuwhare's introduction was much more purposefully driven. Tuwhare was recruited by the New Zealand Communist Party in 1942 through his involvement with the trade unions at the railways. Like Noonuccal, he was



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instantly impressed by what they had to offer. Tuwhare saw communism as a brotherhood and a cause in which racism was absent.

The party was involved in active protests against the maltreatment of Māori. In 1943 Tuwhare led a demonstration against the abuse of the Ngāti Whatua people of Orakei, Auckland, and in support of saving their traditional marae (a complex of culturally significant buildings) (Hunt 1998, 42). Tuwhare continued his membership with the Communist Party but was more focused on assisting Māori through the workers' union. He split with the party in 1956 to protest the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary, but returned in 1973 to accompany a delegation of Māori to the People's Republic of China, a trip that was conducted under the auspices of the New Zealand Communist Party. Tuwhare's 1974 publication, *Something Nothing*, features poetry written during this trip, such as "Soochow 1973" and "Kwantung Guest House: Canton" (Hunt 1998, 118).<sup>2</sup> Tuwhare finally ended his association with the party in 1978 when he was thrown out for writing in a publication run by the former general secretary of the New Zealand Communist Party, whom Tuwhare had earlier in that year helped expel from the party (Hunt 1998, 121).

On the surface, communism appealed strongly to indigenous and minority groups. However, the ideas of belonging and unity as promulgated by the party were often focused on improving the lives of white working-class citizens, rather than on advancing indigenous rights. Politics aside, both Noonuccal and Tuwhare seem to have been politically influenced by the Marxist literature they read during their time in the Communist Party, and both acknowledged the impact it had on their poetry. Despite the fact that the party proved to be limited in helping them advance the plight of their respective peoples, and while Noonuccal's involvement with the Communist Party was not as long or intense as Tuwhare's, communism gave them both the sense that anything was possible.

### ACTIVISM: A CASE STUDY

The 1960s through to the early 1980s was a period of widespread protest in the Pacific and, indeed, around the world. The Vietnam War, nuclear testing, exploitative mining and logging, uncontrolled development, racial discrimination, grievances over land rights, and the denial of basic human rights were all contentious topics that sparked public dissent on a scale never seen

before. Aboriginal and Māori protests before this time had been portrayed by politicians, commentators, and the media as disorganized, isolated events run by indigenous radicals. However, sustained developments in Australia and New Zealand—such as Aborigines winning the right to a referendum that would determine their eligibility to become Australian citizens, and Māori holding a series of land marches to air grievances against the Crown—contradicted these assumptions. Both Australian Aborigines and Māori formed movements that were large in number, positive in action, and shared a common goal. Importantly, Noonuccal and Tuwhare launched themselves into these efforts toward self-determination in their respective countries.

#### *The 1967 Australian Referendum*

In 1962, at the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) Easter conference, Noonuccal was elected as the Queensland secretary. At the conference, she read a poem that she had written specifically for the occasion, titled “Aboriginal Charter of Rights.” The poem sparked an outpouring of support for Aborigines attaining citizenship. When the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia was drawn up in 1901, Aboriginal people had no political power and were considered a “dying race.” As Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus argued, the drafters of the constitution paid little attention to Aborigines; indeed, the final document included only two mentions of them (Attwood and Markus 2007, 1).

The first specific reference to Aboriginal people in the Australian Constitution appeared in section 51. It stated, “The Parliament shall, subject to this constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth.” Importantly, clause 26 of the constitution defined precisely who was considered a member of the Commonwealth: “The people of any race, *other than the aboriginal race in any State*, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws (Attwood and Markus 2007, 1; emphasis added). The implications of the constitution for Aborigines were considerable. Under it, they were not protected by the federal government or the commonwealth, and states could adopt whatever policies and laws they wanted, regardless of their effect on Aborigines. Incredibly, all other minority races were granted protection.

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The second specific reference appeared in section 127 of the constitution: “In reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, *aboriginal natives shall not be counted* (Attwood and Markus 2007, 3; emphasis added). In other words, Aborigines were not even considered worthy of being counted as part of the national census—they were, for all intents and purposes, nonentities.

Noonuccal saw that much work had to be done if Aborigines were to win a referendum to change the constitution. Later that year, in 1962, a petition to the commonwealth government was organized for the removal of section 51, clause 26, and section 127 from the constitution. Noonuccal was asked by the Victorian Advancement League to tour all the states in an attempt to rally support for the petition. Noonuccal’s lectures and interviews during the tour were influential in garnering 103,000 signatures, which were presented to Parliament (Attwood and Markus, 2007, 32). During this time, Noonuccal spent much of her time in North Queensland, which was seen as important to the advancement of the movement, since the large Aboriginal population there was being oppressed by harsh state policies. The state government viewed Noonuccal as a troublemaker and refused her access to the Yarrabah Aboriginal Reserve where numerous reports of ill-treatment had been reported to the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI) (Cochrane 1994, 69). The complaints were largely centered on police brutality and the fact that Aborigines were not being permitted to control their own money and bank accounts.

Noonuccal was eventually granted access to Yarrabah in 1964. The visit and her subsequent damning report led to the drafting of new legislation to replace the 1939 Queensland Act, which

explicitly excluded indigenous people from voting in state elections, made it unlawful for any indigenous person in Queensland to knowingly receive or possess alcohol, restricted their movement, denied them any right to the lands of their birth or even the land where their reserves were located, and curtailed their access to the normal processes of justice available to the rest of the community. It also gave the relevant authorities the power to resettle them by force, remove their children without proof of neglect, forbid them to marry, censor their mail, compel them to work for low wages, withhold their wages without their consent and seize their property on the flimsiest pretext. (Fryer Library 2008)

It was hoped that the new draft would overturn many of the previous policies; however, the changes that were eventually made were only very slight.

In the midst of her activist work, Noonuccal was busy putting together her first volume of poems. With the release of *We are Going: Poems* in 1964 and *The Dawn is at Hand: Poems* in 1966, Noonuccal gave many lectures about Aboriginal beliefs, customs, and aspirations. That she spoke in front of predominantly white audiences was extremely important, especially given the fact that she was pushing for a referendum. Noonuccal's poetry was well received by many; however, she did face criticism from both whites and Aboriginals. Many white people either were unable to believe that her writings were her own, or they simply dismissed them as not being "real" poetry. At the other end of the spectrum, some Aborigines criticized the way in which she worked with the white community, a criticism that Noonuccal believed was usually driven by jealousy (Cochrane 1994, 72). Noonuccal, however, was not deterred from continuing to reach toward her goals for the Aboriginal people.

A change of government in 1966 saw Harold Holt become prime minister and schedule a referendum for May 1967. Noonuccal became the campaign director for the "Yes" campaign in Queensland (Cochrane 1994, 76). On 27 May 1967, Australia voted 90.77 percent "Yes" and 9.23 percent "No" (Attwood and Markus 2007, 54). This was a heartening result for the Aboriginal people, as they had finally won the support of white Australia for their civil rights. But despite Noonuccal's efforts throughout the 1960s, she was still dissatisfied—in reality, neither the referendum nor the changes made to the constitution brought appreciable and lasting change for Aborigines. A policy of assimilation was being promoted by the Australian government, but what Noonuccal wanted was more equitable terms under an integrationist policy.

### *Māori Land Marches*

Māori struggles in the 1970s centered largely on addressing land grievances with the New Zealand government. Before European arrival, Māori possessed 66 million hectares of land. By the 1970s, Māori landholdings had been reduced to less than 2 million hectares. The introduction of the Maori Affairs Amendment Act of 1967— popularly referred to as the "Last Land Grab"—further alienated Māori from their lands. As a result of the act, any Māori land held by four or

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fewer owners could be purchased by the general public. The act also gave greater intervention powers to the Māori Trustee, who was vested with discretionary authority to purchase and sell Māori lands (Harris 2004, 24). By 1975, government legislation continued to undermine Native land rights and tenure, leading Māori to mount protests on an unprecedented level. Prominent Māori leader and former Māori Women's Welfare League President Whina Cooper, who was eighty years old at the time, spearheaded the formation of the land rights movement—Te Roopu o te Matakite (The Group of Visionaries)— which led a march to the parliament grounds in Wellington on 14 September 1975. Departing from three points at the top of the North Island—Te Hāpua, Cape Reinga, and the Bay of Spirits—the march became New Zealand's longest, with participants covering over 700 miles in thirty days.

Tuwhare took a great interest in the march and vested much time in highlighting the plight of Māori and the significance of land to the indigenous occupants. As he stated, "Land is the very soul of a tribal people. It connects man with his ancestors in a great chain of being back through the mists of time to the creation itself through Papatūānuku, the Earth Mother. Land for all Māori is our tūrangawaewae [place to stand], where we have dignity before all people" (Tuwhare quoted in Hunt 1998, 131). Tuwhare also alluded to the 1975 Land March in his poem "Papa-tu-a-nuku (Earth Mother)," referring to it metaphorically as the awakening.

We are stroking, caressing the spine  
of the land.  
We are massaging the ricked  
back of the land  
With our sore but ever-loving feet.  
Hell, she loves it!  
Squirming, the land wriggles  
in delight.  
We love her.

Tuwhare became very important in documenting the march. While he was not as politically involved in the organizational processes of the indigenous rights movement as Noonuccal had been in Australia, Tuwhare's presence during the march was greatly felt, and his words were to become an inspiration for many of those involved. He felt a strong sense of pride as he witnessed the unification of

Māori, Pākehā, Pacific Islanders, trade unionists, socialist organizations, churches, and the anti-apartheid movements all coming together in support of Māori. Tuwhare noted, “It was, for the first time in our country’s painful history, an honest and true demonstration by lowly and humble folk. Māori and Pākehā, who together gave a more meaningful expression to the platitude, We are one people” (Tuwhare quoted in Hunt 1998, 134).

The march eventually reached Wellington on 13 October 1975, with an estimated 5,000 people descending on Parliament. The march left a permanent impression on New Zealand’s history. Tuwhare included some of the poems he had written during the march in his 1978 publication *Making a Fist of It*. The poems document the event in a way that news articles could not. The only photograph in that volume, which shows Whina Cooper walking hand-in-hand with her young mokopuna (grandchild), became a symbol for the Land March, and for Māori protest more generally. The image in the book is accompanied by Tuwhare’s poem “Rain-maker’s Song for Whina,” a tribute to both her and the march she so passionately organized (Hunt 1998, 135).

I’ll not forget your joints creaking as you climbed into  
the bus at Victoria Park to bless the journey.  
When you broke down in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer,  
I thought that what you left unsaid hung more tangibly  
uncertain above us all than some intangible certainty  
that we would all get a comfortable berth in the  
hereafter.

Tuwhare continued to be actively involved with Māori issues over the next decade, and in 1984 took part in another Land March, this time to Waitangi in the Far North—the region he called home. Organized by the group Kōtahitanga (Unity), Te Hīkoi ki Waitangi (the Walk to Waitangi) was arranged to remind the New Zealand government that there were issues that needed to be addressed and obligations that needed to be fulfilled with regard to Māori. The march moved from Turangawaewae marae in the Waikato region, through Auckland, and through various other tribal lands all the way to Waitangi.<sup>3</sup> By the time they reached the grounds at Waitangi on 6 February, there were over 4,000 protestors gathered. The governor-general had offered to meet with members of the protest group, but police refused them entry to the grounds (Harris 2004, 112). Despite such obstacles, the march was extremely successful in elevating public awareness

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of Māori grievances. Māori historian Aroha Harris has stated that the 1984 march became the pinnacle of Waitangi Day activism, as it demonstrated the breadth and depth of Māori concerns regarding the Treaty of Waitangi and, like the Land March of 1975 before it, brought with it a large amount of support from non-Māori organizations and individuals. It “unified Māori across iwi [tribe/tribal] boundaries, and drew Pākehā, Pacific Islanders, young, old, conservatives, liberal and radical under the common cause of the Treaty of Waitangi” (Harris 2004, 112).

### IS IT POETRY, IS IT POLITICS?

One thing that happens when you have a bit of white blood in you and have a bit of white education is that when you misbehave people say, “Aha, that’s the Aboriginal in you” and when you accomplish something they will say, “Aha, that’s the white coming out in you.” It happened [to me] as a child and it still happens. (Oodgeroo Noonuccal, quoted in *Oodgeroo*)

The strong political themes contained in Noonuccal’s and Tuwhare’s poetry have received considerable scrutiny from literary critics and scholars. As outlined in this essay, much of Noonuccal’s and Tuwhare’s work was inspired by the social and political contexts in which they lived. Noonuccal’s work in particular, which was much more politically open and upfront than Tuwhare’s, met with much criticism in Australia when it was first published.

As the late Australian poet, environmentalist, and campaigner for Aboriginal land rights Judith Wright stated, the white establishment expected Aborigines to be subservient, so when Noonuccal suddenly burst onto the literary scene, her poems were seen as “bizarrely dangerous to all preconceptions of what Aborigines were and all principles of what they should be” (Wright quoted in Cochrane 1998, 167). In the minds of supposedly academically qualified critics, Noonuccal’s work evidenced “neither the polish of English poetry nor the authentic voice of the song-man,” and therefore didn’t register as poetry in its truest sense (Wright quoted in Cochrane 1998, 167). But for Noonuccal, it was not possible to create Aboriginal literature that separated the social, political, and economic circumstances of the Aboriginal people.

To a lesser extent, Tuwhare faced the same backlash. Those of his poems that were openly political received less favorable reviews. According to

Hunt, this was often due to the fact that Pākehā critics held a different political position (Hunt 1998, 58–59). Conversely, Wright contended that the scathing reviews Noonuccal received from white Australian critics stemmed from the fear that the world would discover the unfair conditions under which Aborigines were forced to live (Cochrane 1998, 168).

Tuwhare never apologized for infusing his poetry with his politics. He warned: “If we become political non-participants, we’ll all end up like refugee ‘boat people’ who don’t identify, won’t fight, and just drift aimlessly from one country to the next. Real NOWHERE MAN” (Tuwhare quoted in Hunt 1998, 59).

Both Noonuccal and Tuwhare acknowledged that while protest and propagandist verse was not necessarily *good* poetry, it was nevertheless essential for expressing the political reality of indigenous people in Australia and New Zealand. Neither poet was attempting to imitate or rival the poetry the academic critics admired; rather, they were creating their own styles and writing for the people (not academia). The harsh judgments of the work of indigenous writers arose from an assumption that they were writing for a nonindigenous audience, which raised the expectation that they would project a nonindigenous point of view (Gilbert 1988). However, as Kevin Gilbert noted, “what is ‘protest poetry’ to one group of people is the ‘poetic expression’ of the black consciousness to another” (Gilbert 1988, xvi). In the case of Noonuccal’s and Tuwhare’s poetry, their work was being critiqued by individuals who were unaware of this important distinction.

Nevertheless, the power and intelligence of Noonuccal’s and Tuwhare’s work withstood the vehement critique, and they eventually received validation from the literary establishment, the wider arts world, and indigenous and nonindigenous peoples alike. In particular, Tuwhare found people from other islands in the Pacific such as Hawai’i very welcoming and understanding of his work. He stated that the people of Hawai’i saw his literature as not an object in itself, but rather a reflection of his heart and his culture. This was important to Tuwhare, as he always believed that “the work of art, the poem, novel or painting, should stand in relation to the society and culture in which it is produced” (quoted in Hunt 1998, 116–117).

Both Noonuccal and Tuwhare were pioneers of poetry in their own right. They created something new, something different. Their unique perspectives ignited fear in many people—people who denounced their work as illegitimate—yet they were not deterred. The honesty of the poets and the readability of their



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work were key aspects leading to the success of their poetry. Both indigenous and nonindigenous audiences were able to understand and relate to their creative offerings. Their poetry was more than words on a page; it inspired action and documented the significant steps that were being made by both Aborigines and Māori. No longer were Aboriginal and Māori experiences being relayed by white people for a white audience—they were being written *by* indigenous people *for* indigenous people. Poetry was an empowering tool for indigenous self-expression and self-affirmation. In response to the question of what makes a poet, Noonuccal opined, “Poets are born, but they are not born poets. Society creates the system that the poet is born into, and the poet has to work at becoming a poet through this system. Through poetry, the poet tries to bring about change in the society. Poets are teachers of change, critics of society. The poet is but a tool of society—not the yes-man but the camera that exposes the good and the bad of society (quoted in Cochrane 1994, 101). Tuwhare’s response to the same question was less absolute: “What constitutes a poem? Well, I can’t give a precise chemical analysis: I mean, I can’t give a recipe for a creative anarchic mind-explosion” (quoted in Hunt 1998, 189).

Both Noonuccal and Tuwhare spent a considerable amount of time in schools in their later years, stressing the importance of education, their own cultures, and tolerance of other peoples’ beliefs. They viewed children as representing the potential for change, provided they received the appropriate messages. Noonuccal stated: “Children and artists, any creative artists, are close. Children are very creative and they stay that way until they join the establishment. . . . They are the ones who will create the change. You must learn things at a very tender age. It’s the children who are innocent and ready to learn. It’s the children who are the hope of mankind. And frankly I am tired of talking to mentally constipated adults. . . . Children don’t have racist attitudes unless they’re taught by adults” (quoted in Cochrane 1994, 100–101).

### CONCLUSION

Noonuccal and Tuwhare experienced and achieved much more in their lifetime than this essay is able to detail. Their works are of considerable relevance to both indigenous and nonindigenous peoples today, and they will continue to hold significance for succeeding generations. While Noonuccal and Tuwhare never

met and were from different countries, their lives and experiences were similar in many ways. In focusing on the works of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Hone Tuwhare, I have tried to expand prevailing notions of what constitutes the Pacific— notions that continue to exclude Australian Aborigines. While Māori links to the Pacific are clear through their Polynesian lineage, Aboriginal links to the island region are not so clearly evident. In a contemporary context, however, Aborigines are becoming increasingly attached to the Pacific through their involvement in regional and intergovernmental organizations, as well as educational, religious, sporting, artistic, and cultural activities. What this paper has attempted to do is demonstrate the rightful place of Aboriginal Australia in discourse on the Pacific and in Pacific studies. In the words of the late Epeli Hau'ofa, "Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous. Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us" (Hau'ofa 1993, 68–70).

In this paper, I have also examined the dynamic confluence and interconnectedness between the arts—specifically poetry—and politics in the indigenous context. Although I have narrowed my frame of reference to the Aboriginal and Māori contexts, I believe that their experiences resonate with those of other people from throughout the Pacific, and around the world. As Gilbert stated, indigenous poetry appeals not only to one but to many groups: "Theirs [Australian Aborigines] is another reality, a reality that could find parallels in the experience of the indigenous peoples of South Africa or Bolivia, or of one culture, the Jews in Nazi Germany or the Palestinians in Israel" (1988, xvii). Locating common ground within and between indigenous groups is extremely important for advancing indigenous rights and moving toward a more self-determined future.

From an indigenous perspective, politics and art will always overlap. The scars of years of being assimilated, or in the case of the Aborigines rejected outright, will always be visible in indigenous peoples' art so long as injustice prevails. Noonuccal and Tuwhare exemplified how Aborigines and Māori were able to harness the written word and create beautiful and powerful poetry that will resonate long after they are gone.<sup>4</sup>

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### Notes

1. Prior to 1988, Oodgeroo Noonuccal went by her English name, Kath Walker, which was given to her at birth. During that time, very few eastern Aborigines had preserved their tribal names, but Noonuccal was determined to retrieve and use hers. The name “Noonuccal” refers to the poet’s tribe, located on North Stradbroke Island, and “Oodgeroo” is the Aboriginal word for the paper bark tree. For the purpose of this paper and in honor of her people, I use the name Oodgeroo Noonuccal chose.
2. Like Tuwhare, Noonuccal also visited China—albeit in 1984—and four years later published a book of her experiences, titled *Kath Walker in China*.
3. Waitangi was the location of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi by representatives of the British Crown and northern Māori chiefs on 6 February 1840. The treaty was supposed to recognize Māori ownership of their lands and other properties and bestow on Māori all the rights of British subjects. In return, the Crown was given exclusive rights to purchase Māori land. However, due to competing interpretations of the document between Māori and the Crown, the treaty has been the subject of widespread debate in Aotearoa/New Zealand since its signing. Waitangi has therefore become a symbolic site for Māori to air their grievances with the Crown.
4. Oodgeroo Noonuccal passed away in 1993 at the age of 72. Hone Tuwhare passed away in 2008 at the age of 85.

*Editor’s note: This article is a condensed version of a much longer paper written by the author as part of an honors course in Pacific studies at the University of Victoria, Wellington, New Zealand.*

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*Abstract*

In this essay, I examine the similarities and differences between Australia's and Aotearoa/New Zealand's colonial history and the indigenous activism that emerged in the form of poetic prose. I focus on the life and work of two prominent indigenous writers: Australian Aborigine poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Māori poet Hone Tuwhare, both of whom used poetry as a powerful tool of protest. I also consider the heavy critique they received, not only from the white literary establishment, but also from their respective indigenous communities. Using these examples, I show how the overlapping of indigenous activism and poetry was significant in advancing awareness of the plight of Aboriginals and Māori during a period of political awakening.

KEYWORDS: activism, indigenous rights, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, indigenous poetry, Hone Tuwhare