Indigenous Naturality in Unnatural Spaces: A Study of Affective Indigenous Writing and the Natural World

A thesis presented by

Halie Pruitt

to

The Department of English

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in the field of English

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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This project seeks to bring together a body of literary texts that focus on the experience of environmental disaster and drastic land change from the perspective of indigenous, island peoples. This research not only stems from devastating climate-change related ecological disasters that have plagued island communities in recent years (Puerto Rico comes to mind), but from the lasting impacts of destructive colonialism. For instance, New Zealand’s high rate of depression and mental illness is considered (by certain Maori people) to be a result of fading cultural ties and connection to the land. Focusing on a collection of Pacific indigenous texts, I highlight Pacific traditions and ways of knowing which have been obscured by colonization and the western canon. I explore the ways in which grief, nature, love, and life are inseparable from one another and from the self. This is important because existing critical work has focused on the tragedy of environmental disaster, and identified nature as an external, bodiless force-- this is not a way of knowing for indigenous island peoples, who see themselves as an extension of the land, and an attack on nature is an attack on the self (and vice versa). This literature breaks away from the environmental genre of Pacific texts that Laurence Buell identifies as “toxic gothic,” and centralizes it in the affirmative traditions of indigenous praise. Key texts examined include Sia Figiel’s *Where We Once Belonged*, Hone Tuwhare’s *Deep Water Talk/No Ordinary Sun*, and Witi Ihimaera’s *Tangi*. While recognizing that indigenous peoples are not, indeed, the stories that they tell, the collection of literary works I analyze in this thesis reveal aspects of culture unseen through sociological or scientific research. Of these collected works, each foreground interconnected themes of tragic loss, questions of identity, and integral familial bonds, all of which cannot be divided from poetic representations of the natural world.
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To my parents, for believing in me through it all

To Professor Dillon, who helped me turn a giant sea monster into a much more manageable sea monster

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To Alex and Eamon, the beautiful girls who kept me on track

And to my cohort, the ones who pushed me out of my own darkness, all I can say is.... really??
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This project, though a master’s thesis, has been 'in work' for the past three years. What started as a brief conversation in my undergraduate professor's (Matt Anderson) office resulted in an independent study, three paper conferences, and a master’s thesis. Perhaps this concept will plague me for the rest of my academic career. As I have dedicated so much time to researching and creating content for this project, I would like to take some time to reflect on how I got to this moment, and my place within my own work.

As a person who has been in transit their entire life, I have had difficulties pinning down my interests-- the places I have seen, the people I have met... it has all been as diverse and wonderful as my interests have been. The two things that remained with me in every coastal city I lived in was a love of books and the sea. I was fascinated by the world and all that it held for me—I felt connected, grounded to the sea. My parents couldn't keep me from the rocky shores, just as they couldn't keep me from devouring pages and pages of written lives. Stories of fiction drove me like waves did.

Nature took hold and called me to the Gulf of Maine where I had intended to do work rehabilitating marine animals; I hadn't the slightest idea that I would leave with a dual degree in English Literature and Marine Science. I had, through my diverse coursework, found that at the crux of my interests lie one unifying concept: I was driven by the unknown, by that which was hidden to the world, to those that had been undervalued, defaced, and misrepresented. To this end, I failed to understand and apply myself to the western canon; I wasn't struck by Emerson, Poe, Dickinson, or Shakespeare. No. I was born from the Afghan women poetry translations I read, from the souls of contemporary Japanese writers like Murakami, and taken away by the prolific prose and poetry of indigenous writers.
I wanted to write something that would not only unwrap and un-package stories that have been neglected, but through this process I wanted to better understand my own stories. I think that it's essential to illuminate my own position within my work, particularly as I attempt to work within a decolonized/indigenous methodological framework (starting now and extending into future research). I began to write about islands because I was born on an island in the Pacific—Okinawa, Japan; I became interested in indigenous writing and stories because I myself am a Choctaw Native. I am not writing this paper from the position of a native indigenous person, or even a non-white indigenous person, but rather as a person highly invested in these narratives and dedication to work in line with indigenous ways of knowing, tradition, and form. This being said, there will be sections of this text which will have a specific focus on scientific research with regards to climate related event, which is not research in line with indigenous principles. Though I will expound more on this later, I will be using this research as a way to explore not only the ways that indigenous lives are impacted, but also to address why indigenous knowledge of climate change and climate impacts has been disregarded.
INTRODUCTION: INDIGENITY IN THE FACE OF DISASTER

*Perhaps the thing that most distinguishes islands, at least oceanic islands... is their extreme vulnerability, or susceptibility to disturbance*
Raymond Forsberg, 1963

*The swaying palms, the gentle surf lapping upon the sand
A gentle breeze so keen to please slowly gusts across our land
Our island home is all we have known as centuries rolled by
Our island people stood alone on reefs so barren and dry*
Jane Resture

“Homes flattened, crops destroyed, and livelihoods affected for a long time to come. But even among all the devastation and chaos caused by Mother Nature, there are still smiles, laughter and a willingness to carry on... Most of all, there is hope.”

Cyclone Gita (February 21, 2018), the most devastating cyclone to hit Tonga—a small collection of islands in the South Pacific—in 60 years has left 40 percent of its residents’ homes irreparably damaged. After nearly 2 months of relief efforts, electrical systems are still under construction, 100-year-old sacred buildings have been demolished, and Tongan children are going to school in tents provided by UNICEF (“Tonga Takes Stock”).

The world at large is being ravaged by global climate change and has been for the past 60 years; we’ve heard the facts and seen the graphics—in the next 50 years the coasts will be underwater, we will continue to see extreme temperatures, drought, coral bleaching, fisheries destruction, storms. The list goes on, the list is endless. It is hard to reconcile with the idea that a significant percentage of people around the world deny climate change’s looming and insidious
influence on nearly every part of our lives.\footnote{EPCC results, perception of climate change in western perceptions, European perceptions, etc.} In this past year alone (2017), there has been over $300 billion worth of damage to the United States due to climate-related disasters, with a bulk of this cost coming from the climate-exacerbated hurricanes, Maria and Harvey.\footnote{Look at Appendix A, figures 1a and 1b for graphics which will help visualize how different billion-dollar climate-related disasters have changed over time. To address the concept of climate-related disasters, the topical paper \textit{Global Increase in Climate-related Disaster} notes that “The first half of this decade will be ostensibly remembered for deadly climate-related disasters; among them, the great floods in Thailand in 2011, Hurricane Sandy in the United States in 2012, and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. The year 2014 was the Earth’s warmest in 134 years of recorded history (NASA GISS 2015). \textit{It is hydrometeorological (floods, storms, heat waves) and climatological disasters (droughts, wildfires) rather than geophysical ones (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions) that are on the rise}” (ABD 1; emphasis mine).} Hurricane Irma similarly desolated many Caribbean islands; the extreme flooding throughout South Asia killed more than 1,200 people; heatwaves and drought in East Africa, Pakistan, and India have killed thousands and left these regions desperate for food and water (citations here). Climate change expresses no prejudice, chooses no country, no race, no religion, and yet we find particular communities—impoverished communities of color—most victimized by these events. We can see this truth in historic events like Hurricane Katrina, where those people “targeted” by the storm were mainly poor, black/brown individuals settled along an already vulnerable coastal area (citation here).\footnote{While I plan to address vulnerability, adaptation, poverty, and climate change in a later chapter, I’d like to expand on the connections between hurricane Katrina, hurricane Maria, and other climate-related events. Though I don’t have space to do so in this paper, there is a clear link in experiences between these marginalized communities. See “Bad Elements” By Cindi Katz for more information on this disparaging reality.} New Orleans’ population among the submerging coastlines of Louisiana provides significant evidence for the pressing intersection between race, class, and climate change impacts.

The world at large is under threat of catastrophic damage due to climate-related disasters; however, it is not so simple or productive to examine ecological, physical, and geological changes at such an immense scope. In order to truly comprehend the tragedy of the land, we aim our study at a much smaller target. Much like Charles W. Woodworth’s classification of
*Drosophila melanogaster* as a model organism for genetic research, scholars involved in climate research have identified model ecosystem—-islands. I here return to my epigraph for illumination on the scope of this project: "Perhaps the thing that most distinguishes islands, at least oceanic islands... is their extreme vulnerability, or susceptibility to disturbance" (Forsberg, Cite).

Drosophila functions as a model organism due to its size, limited amount of genetic material, and ease of replication; islands similarly are microcosms of greater ecosystems and communities. Their small size and significant populations make islands more susceptible to land change and climate issues, and though not all islands/communities are created equal, we can see replicated issues across all islands and their communities.

The world at large and the people that inhabit it are experiencing tragic, unnecessary loss, and for these (post) colonized⁴ island communities, this loss is manifold. Their loss is one motivated by greed, perpetuated through systemic racism, and grounded in a devaluation of native tradition. The communities most vulnerable to loss are those people who *do* have close cultural connections and ties to the ecosystem—indigenous and aboriginal peoples. From the point of Pākehā⁵ landing on their shores, indigenous islanders have had to fight against colonization and some of its more insidious effects; colonization’s impacts have reached every aspect of indigenous life, and a large fragment of this loss and degradation of indigenous life is the destruction of the ecosystem through climate change and settler colonial environmental disruption. Many scientific and sociological studies outline these ranging consequences, and yet there is still something each researcher fails to take into account—-the voice of the indigenous, a

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⁴ The term “(post) colonized” here is used in this way to indicate that although these island communities have gained independence from their European oppressors, colonization is still gripping the communities in a way which causes significant damage.

⁵ White, non-indigenous people. This term is used by various pacific island communities to indicate others outside of the community. I struggle with using this term as I am, myself, Pākehā in the eyes of pacific indigenous communities. Ultimately, I use it here in an effort to celebrate indigenous language, culture, and to use their own words. Other versions of this word include “palagi” and variations of this.
real expression of indigenous experience, and an understanding that... things are not so simple. Too long have Pākehā studies repeated colonizing acts through research. In efforts to find and highlight indigenous voices, I must turn toward indigenous writing—indigenous fiction. Indigenous stories have been told from the western perspective, have been framed by Pākehā perceptions of Maori, Samoan, Tongan, Tuvaluan, Tokelauan, Fijians, Papuans, and all indigenous island communities. By focusing on a collection of Pacific indigenous texts, I aim to highlight Pacific traditions and ways of knowing which have been obscured by colonization and the western canon. This project explores the ways in which grief, nature, love, and life are inseparable from one another and from the self, while transitioning away from existing critical work within ecocriticism towards a more indigenous/decolonized frameset, which focuses less on the tragedy of environmental disaster and nature as an external, bodiless force, and more on a collective consciousness that extends from the indigenous to the land. I have chosen to take in three indigenous texts: Tangi by Witi Ihimaera, Where We Once Belonged by Sia Figiel, and Deep Water Talk by Hone Tuwhare. Of these collected works, each foreground interconnected themes of tragic loss, questions of identity, and integral familial bonds, all of which cannot be divided from poetic representations of the natural world.

BACKGROUND

Climate change and ecosystem devastation is not something that has simply snuck up on the world in the past 60 years. No. It has been accumulating (devastatingly) from the time of first contact by Europeans. Perhaps the most devastating of all is the role scientists have played in the destruction of the very world they sought to understand and explore. Pioneers and adventurers

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6 Appendix B for an extended list of indigenous island peoples of Oceania.
revealed for their insight about the earth and its ecology—I’m thinking Charles Darwin and James Cook here—have been the very perpetrators; these men are never directly identified as colonizers, but their discoveries led to the undoing of many island nations. Best known for his significant contribution to the theory of evolution, accounts written in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection; Or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* and other works, Darwin’s expeditions for knowledge and subsequent notoriety of the islands created a downhill domino effect. Upon the arrival of the H.M.S. Beagle, Darwin and his crew marched on Galapagos soil, bringing with them a collection of pirates and their goats (for their consumption); with this action, the crew members left a cross-generational, unnatural footpath in their wake. The invasive feral goat population that was introduced to the islands had severe impacts on the Pinta, Galapagos ecosystem, “including habitat destruction, soil erosion and overgrazing of selected plant species” (Campbell et al. 2; Weber 9; Hamann 37). The hundreds of thousands of goats, which have overcrowded and out competed the native species, serve both as an allegory for colonialism and as a byproduct of colonization. Soon, however, the goats were not the only invasive species; as tourism and international trade soon began to grip the island, as did the second world war. By the end of World War II, the Ecuadorian government realized the importance of maintaining the Galapagos’ natural beauty; human introduction and “The rapid social development and the impacts of globalization… triggered complex social-ecological change” and much of it seems irreversible (Benitez-Capistros, Huge, and Koedam 2014). While the Galapagos is the perfect island to research human impact on island ecosystems, the

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7 “In World War II, the U.S. Navy obtained permission from the Ecuadorian government to establish bases in the Galapagos to guard the approaches to the Panama Canal. An airbase was established on Baltra and a radar station on the north end of Isabela. These were abandoned shortly after the war. The airbase was given to the Ecuadorian government, and eventually transformed into the present commercial airport, operated by the Ecuadorian air force” (White, 1997)

8 The constraints of this paper do not allow for an extended account of the impacts on the Galapagos’ ecosystem, nor does it allow me to go into depth about the organisms that have gone extinct due to environmental colonialism.
community that was colonized was not one of indigenous island peoples, but rather the endemic flora and fauna and the island itself.

When looking toward Pacific islands in particular, we see all of this climate vulnerability caused by anthropogenic effects; El Niño events, fisheries collapse, extra-tropical cyclones, sea level extremes, ocean acidification, ocean warming, beach erosion (the list is, again, tiring and endless) are only some of the major climate effects. Many of the smaller pacific islands are under threat of eroding away entirely; the more sizable islands, with more sizable populations, have varied topographical structures which are potentially wave/erosion resistant. Islands like Tonga and Fiji are composed of more coral and lava geological forms, and yet the populations and civilizations of these (and other) pacific islands are situated on small patches of low lying coastal areas (cite multiple sources). Flooding and inundation of these coastal communities have, and will continue to have, great socio-economic and racial implications. Not only will businesses that drive the economy of the island suffer from the consequences of climate change, but the vulnerable indigenous populations will be at greatest risk. These beautiful and exotic areas—draw in tourists, leading to industrialization and urbanization of the land, and as a result we see the stark economic inequality between Pākehā and native individuals. This inequality leads to a dislocation of indigenous peoples to low, un-safe areas of their islands (cite vulnerable).

Throughout history, people have been able to adapt to climate change, but the exponential rate of global warming combines with racist principles where "key vulnerable groups are... excluded from making decisions on the public management of climate-related risks" (Adger 7). Though land devastation is a crucial aspect of the anthropogenic impacts on the land, the more

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9 “Poor Households are, for example, forced to live in hazardous areas on the margins of urban settlements, which puts them at risk of flooding and are frequently ignored when the infrastructure is designed to alleviate such vulnerabilities” (Adger 7).
treacherous is the change that comes about through global expansion and industrialization which affect native islanders physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The acts of marginalization of the indigenous communities is four-fold: acts of violence, depopulation, dislocation, and poverty. These acts are interconnected, and interplay with the environmental concerns which plague islands.

Much like the islands they inhabit, indigenous communities are exceptionally unique and diverse in the aspect of culture, language, and systems of belief. Much like the biodiversity of the islands they inhabit, indigenous peoples are under threat of both a physical (and geological) erosion as well as a cultural and traditional one. The convergence of Pākehā and climate related crises has created a cacophony of indigenous health issues and violation of basic human rights; through observing the livelihoods of indigenous peoples, studies have shown “gaps are not only in health status… circumstances of extreme poverty are significantly more prevalent among indigenous peoples than non-indigenous groups” which are grounded in the dismantling of native economies and socio-political structures, the lack of access to rights to life (including education in native languages, social services), as well as the violence of mandatory dislocation, armed conflict, and physical acquisition of land (Health of Indigenous Peoples, 3). Each of these forces, as determined by the UN, are concerns from a human rights landscape, as they are “compounded by structural racism and discrimination” and cause indigenous people to be especially assailable by poor health.

This poor health is inseparable from indigenous relations to the land and the environment, for example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, “Loss of coastal land, urupā (cemeteries), marae (traditional Māori meeting places), and other sites of cultural significance will add to the existing higher rates of mental illness and suicidal behavior experienced by Māori” (Jones et al. 2014).
• Higher rates of mental illness in indigenous communities (footnote)

• The clear linkage between mental illness and climate devastation due to indigenous ties to nature

• Western mental health conceptions are individualized, and clinically-centered, indigenous mental health requires a different approach and language

Within the confines of western medicine, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders IV (DSM-IV) identifies a person with a Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) as experiencing a loss of interest in pleasure or regular activities for more than two weeks, a change from a person’s baseline, impairment of social, occupational, and educational functions; Though this definition is both broad and specific as to what indicated clinical depression, it was put in place to function for westernized communities; Pacific cultures, like the Tongan, Samoan, or Māori, do not have a word in their languages to identify deep sadness or depression. Many of these listed cultures use the word mamai (Samoan) or He malohi (Tokelauan) which mean ‘unwell’ in the respective native languages (“Tokelauan Depression”, 67). This study identified these different terms as existing in the culture—that there was some sort of related illness experienced by the indigenous population, but that the words were not expressive of the entire mental illness; the Pākehā experience of depression is identified as being different, and participants of the study found it difficult to put a term to the feeling of fatigue and hopelessness that typifies western depression, settling on the term “fita” or ‘burden’ (68). This study identifies indigenous depression symptoms as “well-hidden sadness and isolation”, as well as the aforementioned feelings of being ‘unwell’ and ‘burdened’. With the cultural principles of privacy, pride, and a smiling mask of politeness, it is a feat to investigate the presence of depression in these communities, and yet research surveys in New Zealand showed strikingly
high prevalence of mental disorders compared to the global average, where nearly half of the population had experienced mental illness in their lifetime. The indigenous population in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands are disadvantaged, have lower-skilled jobs and low income compared to palagi/Pākehā, and thus the quality of life these pacific islanders receive is directly correlated with the high rates of mental illness. Pacific natives attribute this increase in mental illness to the decline of “close cultural connections” which are considered by the indigenous peoples to be protective against mental illnesses.

A sizable aspect of these close cultural connections is a relationship with the land; this kinship is so significant that climate change has created "Psychological impacts on young people who may suffer anxieties about potential catastrophic climate change, not unlike those experienced by children growing up with the threat of nuclear war" (NZCPHM 2013, 8). Kinship here must be utilized because, for indigenous peoples, a relationship to the land begins before birth:

The process of human reproduction is interwoven with biological, social, spiritual and ecological elements… an interactive relationship with kin, flora and fauna (Jahnke, 2002); a dynamic relationship between atua (God, or spiritual deities), people and whenua (land) (Tate, 2010); and a “symbiotic relationship between humans and nature in which the health of each depends upon that of the other, which in turn places responsibilities upon communities and individuals.” (qtd. in Le Grice & Braun)

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10 The New Zealand statistic for having any mental disorder throughout one’s life is 46.6% of the entire population. For New Zealanders having a mental illness in the past year was significantly lower, at 20.7%, and the month mark is only 11.6%. Mental illness of Pacific people born in New Zealand was found to be double that of emigrated New Zealanders, and their disorders much more severe.
This life structure is vastly different from a pakeha’s, which helps us understand that Māori and pacific islanders cannot be viewed through an individualistic framework—and that this framework must include representations of kinship to the land. While a rising number of Māori health care providers are changing what it means to care for indigenous health, clinical and sociological studies are limited in how they represent indigenous peoples—their emotions and relationships and ways of knowing cannot be confined into these studies. With this in mind, I look toward literature. While recognizing that indigenous peoples are not, indeed, the stories that they tell, looking at a collection of literary works reveals aspects of culture unseen through sociological or scientific research. Readers are able to ingest the extended expressions of indigenous people through reading fiction, and indigenous writers are able to express what might not be easy to say out loud.

KINSHIP WITH LAND

I have spoken briefly on the necessity to study the environment with indigenous peoples in mind, however there is a larger question that drives this project: what can come of researching literature and the environment? One of the founding fathers of the Ecocritical literary movement, Lawrence Buell, argues that “the success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges not on ‘some highly developed technology, or some arcane new science’ but on ‘a state of mind’: on attitudes, feelings, images, narratives” noting that the environment needs to be brought into the forefront of the public eye through varied media.11 This concept, however, forces the idea that environmental literature must speak about nature in a way that replicates environmentalists and scientists, which forces nature writers into an ambassadorship that they may not have asked for.

11 Ulrich Beck, sociologist studying species extinction, "only if nature is brought into people's everyday images, into the stories they tell, can its beauty and its suffering be seen and focused on."
Buell’s arguments also hinge on a western idea which plagues ecocriticism—that the natural world exists as a separate entity, that tragedy of environmental disaster and nature as an external, bodiless force. That it exists for us to comment on it, for us to somehow save the environment through writing; this disassociation does not account for indigenous kinship with the land, nor the idea that land is an extension of native selves. Buell’s Ecocritical framework fails to account for the human as nature, which is as pivotal in pacific indigenous literature as is the world around us. Pacific indigenous literature centers on the complicated relationship of indigenous life through natural imagery, highlighting the presence of kinship and self with nature.

Māori Author, Hone Peneamine Anatipa Te Pona Tuwhare (1922 – 2008) best accentuates the collision between nature, spirit, loss, and life that typifies pacific indigenous literature. One of the most distinguished Māori poets, Tuwhare, awarded the second New Zealand poet laureate from 1999 to 2001 and the Prime Minister’s Award for Literary Achievement in 2003, was born in Kaikohe into a life of overt poverty in the midst of the great depression. After the death of his mother at the age of six, Tuwhare’s father (Peneamine Anatipa Te Pona Tuwhare) uprooted Hone to Auckland in order to find work. In Auckland, the small family lived in a “tin shack with an earthen floor” surrounded by the ocean and half a dozen Māori families which “all in all, life in that small house, embraced closely by his father, seemed… marvelous” (Deep River Talk, 3). Throughout his life, Tuwhare was a voracious reader and was deeply invested in stories—listening to the Māori ghost stories and traditional songs that his father would recite with friends after he had already gone to bed, reading through the new testament and absorbing its cadence. However, substantial poverty and the uprising in the Pacific during World War II cut short his formal education as he enlisted in the Sixteenth Māori Battalion for the occupation of Japan. After the war, Tuwhare was an accomplished
boilermaker and a communist; Marxism and communism had “opened [his] eyes to politics, to social injustice at home and around the world, and to the problems of working-class people” (4).

Following the death of his father, Tuwhare began to write poetry seriously, publishing “Thine Own Hands Have Fashioned”—the poem he was told of his father’s demise—a year later; seven years after this, No Ordinary Sun was published and well received. R.A.K. Mason (friend and poet) wrote about Tuwhare’s work:

Here—and I think this is for the first time—is a member of the Māori race qualifying as a poet in English and in the idiom of his own generation, but still drawing his main strength from his own people… In such a noble poem as “No Ordinary Sun,” in speaking against atomic evils imperiling our shores, he draws so profoundly from Maoridom that the source can be felt to lie in the depths common to all mankind” (qtd. in Deep Water Talk, 5).

In his poetry, critics have identified a conversation between the many voices of Tuwhare (Marxism, Christianity, Maoridom) and “the voices of the natural world as well” (3), and many who study poetics would identify his as belonging to the romantics; however, the bleeding of these voices—Māori myth with Te reo12, Marxist politics, and biblical visions of nature—create a unique, indigenous poetic voice which reflects much of Tuwhare’s kinship with the land as well as western influences through religion and politics. Within his largest collection of poems, Deep Water Talk there is a great sense of the celebration of nature as exists in romantic poetry, and a similar elevation and lyricism, but this is mixed in with authentic Māori expression.

An early poem—“A burnt offering to your greenstone eyes, Tangaroa13”:

When I go, Earth, I shall not succumb

12 Translated literally, “The language”
13 Ocean god
to your pervasive clutch:

nor forbear the sun’s hot licks,  
or ribbed umbrella of rain slanting.

I’ll not crouch there to the lee side;  
sit lonely in the shadow of the wind.

Burnt and sere, my soul on ashen wings  
shall dust instead of the leaning

greenstone walls of Tangaroa advancing,  
crumbling…

*Ah, then watch him froth and gag, Earth.*  
*Watch him heave!*

Here, Tuwhare is in conversation with Earth, telling her that he will not join with the soil when death comes for him, but rather that he will join and mix with the crumbling sea. Tuwhare calls upon Māori gods and myths in a form reminiscent of Keats and Shelley, but throughout—even in this early work—you can see the small touches of his indigenous upbringing. The greenstone walls (waves) of the ocean god calls to Māori specifically; greenstone, or pounamu, is a sacred stone found only in South Aotearoa, is shrouded in Māori myth and legend. Maori oral storytelling has spread the tale of Ngahue and Hina-Tua-Hoanga, guardians of the stones named Poutini and Whaiapu. Hina-Tua-Hoanga became jealous of Ngahue’s stone and drove him out of Hawaiki, leading the latter to find refuge in Aotearoa, where it has since fragmented into streams and been used by Māori as weapons and ornamental pieces. This moment, and his direct summoning of Tangaroa ascribe maoriness to his work, and yet we also see this in the way Tuwhare addresses Earth, as a friend: “When I go, Earth, I shall not succumb… *then watch him*

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14 Hawaiki is the place from which all pacific indigenous groups came from, where they will go after death, where the old gods live. This is decidedly a spiritual place more so than a physical one, yet many Māori and Pākehā alike quest to find out where Polynesians come from. ([https://teara.govt.nz/en/hawaiki/page-3](https://teara.govt.nz/en/hawaiki/page-3))
"froth and gag, Earth." A moment like this is more than simple personification used to make a point. No, the gesture towards Earth here is one of kinship, a closeness, a bond that does not typify romantic poetry. Maoridom is also identified in this poem through examples of strength in the face of deep loss, deep sadness—the poem opens with this warrior like strength: “I shall not succumb” and continues through as Tuwhare refuses to slink and hide from his fate in shadows, away from the sea. Tuwhare instead joins with the old gods, with Tangaroa, who then reaches out for him.

“Nocturne”
And if the earth should tremble
to the seas unfathomed rage
it is because the sun has fled
uncapping the stone nipples
of the land.

The moon has torn
from the pulsing arm of the sea
a tawdry bracelet… and I
alone am left
with the night-sea sobbing.

My heart shall limping come
to police the night
so that no surly light
shall flare
nor sad spring blood forth
a despondent moon
to limn the swollen night
in anguish

“Burial”
In a splendid sheath
of polished wood and glass
with shiny appurtenances
lay he fitly blue-knuckled
and serene:

hurry rain and trail him
to the bottom of the grave

Flowers beyond budding
will not soften the gavel’s
beat of solemn words
and hard sod thudding:

hurry rain and seek him
to the bottom of the grave

Through a broken window
inanely looks he up;
his face glass-gouged and bloodless
his mouth engorging clay
for all the world uncaring…

Cover him quickly, Earth!
let the inexorable seep of rain
finger his greening bones, deftly
Part of Tuwhare’s charm is the diversity of his collections, the mixture of feelings we see across even one chapter of his poetic life; the turning of the page offers a new range of emotions, a new form of relation to the environment. Above I provide a selection of poems to show the breadth of his work in relation to the land. Through these you can see the way that Tuwhare relates to the natural world, particularly with representations of loss and grief. In “Burial,” he addresses the inevitability of bodies meeting Earth, and urges the rain to “seek him to the bottom of the grave.” The diction at the close of the poem does this in three parts where he commands Earth to “cover him quickly” and allow the “inexorable seep of rain” embrace the body “deftly.” The desire for an embrace by Earth in the moments after death is a loving one; Tuwhare asks for a quick, tender touch by Earth to counteract the unnaturalness of a “face glass-gouged and bloodless.” Death (represented in “Tangi”), however, is not found in the inevitable flowers of a
Tangi, or through Earth’s weeping willows, but rather in the naturalness of human sorrow, in “the calm vigil of hands… /in the green-leaved anguish /of the bowed heads /of old women.” “Rain” stands out from the collection of poems for its position as a love poem written to rain; and yet, this poem is most telling about the Māori kinship with the environment. His body opens to take in the rain—more than this, he makes it clear that no disability or force on earth could hinder his relationship to the rain, for “if [he]/ should not hear/ smell or feel or see/ [rain]/ you would still/ define [him]/ disperse [him]/ wash over [him].” They are not separate from each other, and never will—nor should—be. “Nocturne[’s]” junction with land is much harder to distinguish; there is a presence of anger in the disruption of celestial bodies, torn away from the bodies of the earth and Tuwhare is “left with the night-sea sobbing” and the earth trembling “to the sea’s unfathomed rage.” Where the other poems of this selection simply feature nature and help define Tuwhare’s connection, as a Māori, to nature, this one does seem to take an ambassador type role with regards to environmental disaster. Frank Stewart, Pākehā poet and essayist, remarks of Tuwhare’s poetry that the later volumes are more evident in their social consciousness, noting that there is “anger mixed with obligation, which has joined rather than replaced the romanticism of Tuwhare’s first volume.” How, then, would Stewart categorize this poem’s clear presence of anger and obligation? One could read this poem as a nocturne, as a commentary on night, but there exists something deeper in an “abandoned earth” and a sobbing night-sea—an indication of a more permanent separation than the earth’s natural turn.

Tuwhare’s collected works give great insight to different expressions of Māori kinship with land, it is a part of his heart and spirit. When asked about his poetic process, Tuwhare expressed:

15 A Tangi is, simply, grieving, weeping. This world also represents a funeral rite in Māori tradition
Most art, I think, is in praise of something. It might be a dynasty, it might be a tribe, it might be a person. You know, you write a love poem to someone; you paint someone whom you love. You carve something… but basically I think art is intended to please, to praise, to highlight (9).

This praise, this love and care, is often directed or channeled through images of nature and through depictions of indigenous spirituality—often times, for Tuwhare, they are inseparable.

Praise addressed by Witi Ihimaera, however, is embodied in Māori tradition with human loss. Best known for his novel *The Whale Rider* and its subsequent film, Witi Ihimaera is categorized as the first Māori novelist, with *Tangi* being his first novel, and has subsequently won multiple Wattie Book of the Year Awards, New Zealand’s Laureate award, and the Prime Minister’s Award for Literary Achievement in 2017. Unlike Tuwhare, Ihimaera was able to pursue and obtain higher education and found work writing for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 1973 onward, Ihimaera worked as a writer and has amassed nearly 40 publications including novels and short stories. His initial intention when writing literature was to “establish and describe the emotional landscape of the Māori people,” and his first novel, *Tangi*, is such an account. This novel is centered around a relationship between Tama, a young Māori, and his father who has recently passed; it has been described as “a moving account of death—but also an affirmation of life. It describes, simply and affectionately, rural Māori life—with its emphasis on aroha and family unity—in hope that such a life will never be lost” (cover copy).

*Tangi*’s Tama struggles to reconcile with his father’s recent passing and uses natural imagery to express mood, to express personality, to express anguish, and to identify with his tribe/his people. Nature pervades every aspect of the piece, beginning at the moment when he learns of his father, Rongo’s, death:
My sister’s voice breaks and driftwood splinters float in small eddies. Then softly she begins to weep, scattering the stream with a rain of tears.

--What’s wrong, Ripeka? Ripeka, something’s wrong.

The soft sound of her weeping echoes to me from home. From Waituhi, where there is no sadness. A cold wind suddenly swirls across the waves

--Oh tama…

--Ripeka, what’s wrong?

But she still weeps, the wind rising. The waves rippling colder and colder. The driftwood splinters scattering upon the warm stream….

--Dad… he’s dead Tama…

--He’s dead, Tama. Dad…

Why is it so dark? It is only morning. And look: there is a small canoe adrift on the waves, the cascading sea, amid the falling rain.

--Dead Tama. Dad’s dead.

--No…No

--you’ll have to come home.

My sister begins to weep again. The sound of thunder is in her voice, gathering across the greying, tossing waves. (3-4)

Tama expresses his immediate grief, and the grief of his sister through a pained relationship to nature; Ripeka’s voice is driftwood splintering into pieces, and her tears join with the earth into a stream. The natural imagery is fragmented and desolate as her splinters scatter, as waves ripple colder and colder. The stream, life, at this moment is turning, is greying and threatens to topple the narrator and his family. This dark, cold, and dangerous natural world is employed at
moments of separation from his whanau, particularly while he is still in Wellington miles away from his family.

Aue, e pa…

The darkness and the storm abate. I am alone upon the towering cliff. Even the wind has gone, sweeping away from this place to look upon my father…

--I have to go home, Mr. Ralston.

As I say the words, my head whirls. My body, it seems to fall from the cliff, down, down toward the beach. (19)

Here, the environment is pushing Tama by abandoning him, he is lost and feels he can only be found at home, in a place where nature finds him well. Wellington, as a Pākehā city, is no longer safe—the nature surrounding him is meant to be a place of refuge, meant to be family, even, but something has shifted in this relationship, there is a disconnect. In a world without his father, Tama and his kin all feel the anxiety which springs from loss; Tama is using his natural surroundings to express an overwhelming feeling of anguish, however nature, too, is grieving and while in Wellington, “the harbor [is] choppy” and the sky is “dark and bleak” as the wind escapes to find Rongo (46). Wellington is a site where all of Tama’s pain converges and manifests at every moment he is not attending the tangi, and so he is surrounded by “a brown haze seeping into the sky” (46). Only through returning to his whanau, to his family, his tribe, and nature, will the skies clear.

As much as Tangi expresses the darkness that consumes Tama, the text similarly associates a lightness, a presence of life in death:

--Haere ra, son

--E noho, e ma
My mother, don’t weep. I’m only going away for a short while. I’m coming back.

--What a tangiweto\textsuperscript{16} you are, mum.

--What’s these then, ay? Mum says, pointing at my own tears.

--I suppose you call that rain...

I look toward the hills, the mist is lifting. The sun flooding the sky. Nesting among the hills is Waituhi, my home, my whanau (31).

As Tama catches a train, he recalls a tender moment with his mother, Huia. His tears are not like rain, rather, they are rain—his emotions are a part of the earth and the natural imagery is used in jest, light hearted and uplifting—and in Waituhi, a flooding sun replaces dark skies. In moments like this, even steeped in the burden of loss and separation, the characters can resonate positively with the earth; this balance is most clearly seen through Huia’s growth:

My mother’s eyes glisten. Once, dad was her guiding star. But he has drifted beneath the reddening horizon. Now she gleams her own light…

--E ma, I’ll be back soon, I yell. The wind snatches the words and flings them into the sky. I lift my arms to wave…

--E ma….

My mother’s face gleams like a star reflected in the sea. The sea is calm with night. As the train moves away from the station the star slowly submerges, slowly drowns beneath the waves. (32)

In the absence of his father, Tama’s mother—though burdened with a great sorrow—rises up, becoming her own celestial being, becoming her own light, forging her own path through the universe. The world around her is calm, and when Tama and the family is near her, she is

\textsuperscript{16}“Crybaby”
assured. She too, at moments of separation, experiences suffocating environments and sinks, pulled underneath the water—similar to the beach that called to Tama to fall from the cliff, down, down. The ocean reaches to embrace them both.

While Tama and his family find strength with each other, through the land, and through close family ties, there is one source of strength which exceeds all others—memory. Woven between those woeful moments when the family may as well succumb to the anguish, “world flickering memories of him like flames flaring suddenly in the darkness. The flames light up brief glimpses of him and [they] remember him” (47). His father, Rongo, was the center of Tama’s universe, the guiding light for each family member:

My father was the Sky. He held dominion over night and day. He was both sun and moon, keeping constant watch over his children. Every day he arose to keep Papatauanuku warm. Every night he cast his wistful light upon her. Sometimes he wept and the dew of his tears fell softly upon her. She, to console him, grew with beautiful crops and fruit and flowers. And often she would rise with the mist from the hills and reach out to brush his sorrow away… Now the sky has fallen. His first children hold sway over the earth… (52)

In this moment we are concretely settled in Māori kinship to the land; Rongo and the sky are one, at least for his family. Rongo’s calmness, strength, and presence is completely drawn from his relation to the land, to myth, and above all… his love and praise of her, Papatauanuku. The Earth Mother. This love, too, is passed on after his death, passed on from Māori father to Māori son in the stories he told, in the calmness and assurance of her. This moment, too, crystalizes Earth’s subjecthood and her kinship with Māori like Rongo and Huia; in his embrace of her,
Rongo receives life and love in return as Papatauanuku is there to provide for him and console him as he does for his own family.

While Buell has worked to expand ecocriticism beyond an examination of pastoral elements of writing, or romantic notions within poetry, his Ecocritical framework is unsuitable for analyzing Indigenous—or other decolonial—texts. As shown through this section on indigenous kinship with the Earth, the western fragmentation of humans and nonhuman entities cannot reveal the truth of these texts. Buell cements this idea as he remarks that “acts of environmental imagination… may connect readers vicariously with others’ experience, suffering, pain: that of nonhumans and humans” (Writing for an Endangered World, 2); it is clear that Buell finds it essential for humans to recognize the suffering of nonhuman entities in order to conserve the earth, and even takes steps beyond a profit-driven concept of environmentalism, but fails to account for basic indigenous ways of knowing about the natural subjecthood of the environment and its conservation.

COLONIALISM, RELIGION AND UNNATURAL INTRUSIONS

The knowledge and power sought by European colonizers of the Pacific came at the great loss of indigenous islanders, through commercialization of the peoples and the islands, as well as the previously addressed environmental losses and health concerns. Each author discussed in this paper is at a point of (Post)colonization; they are writing after the independence of their communities has been achieved, but also in a recognizable aftermath of colonization. The texts examined give insight to the ways in which their colonization remains to significantly impact the experience of their world. While a historical account that I will provide about Europeans in the Pacific gives insight to the events which formed this experience, it is the combination of
sociological/environmental data and literary analysis *alongside* this history which solidifies our understanding of colonial intrusions in the Pacific.

The exotification and colonization of the Pacific began, as does all colonization, with a desire for exploration; Dutch explorer Abel Tasman ‘discovered’ Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1642, over 100 years after Magellan had mapped out islands in the Pacific (Guam and the Philippine Islands) while searching for Indonesia (Keown 30; “Magellan History”). Although these two explorers somewhat paved the way for European colonization, it was the British and the HMS *Dolphin* which—similarly to Darwin—created notoriety around the Pacific. Between 1769 and 1779, English cartographer, James Cook “established the extent and boundaries of the Pacific Ocean, proved that the great southern continent did not exist, charted most of the major islands in the Pacific, and provided Europe with an extensive collection of material objects as well as scientific and ethnographic data (Campbell 1989: 55)” (qtd. by Keown 30). Cook’s journey—and his death via poison arrow—ignited the following years of exploration and the field of Pacific Ethnography, which specifically led to the categorization and dehumanization of Pacific Islanders.17

Following the curtails of these explorations—and the writing produced during/after the voyages—missionaries began to work to convert the ‘heathens’ of the Pacific. European missionaries sought to convert the indigenous islanders to Catholics and Christians, and through this conversion, indigenous islanders became missionaries themselves, thus beginning the Pacific diaspora (Keown 36). Within countless missionary journals throughout the nineteenth century,

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17 J.R. Forester, a German scientist aboard HMS *Dolphin*, and fellow crew members compared physiognomic and social traits of Polynesians and Melanesians, identifying the light-skinned Polynesians as less savage than their dark-skinned Melanesian counterparts. “These scientific theories about Pacific Islanders developed alongside philosophical theories on ‘natural man’” which circulating about the ‘noble savages’ of Africa (Keown 31). To further this dehumanization, the ethnographic studies situated the Pacific as an “erotic paradise in which Pacific women freely offered sexual favors to European male visitors” which was taken up by subsequent Europeans writing about the Pacific (Keown 32)
Pacific Islanders are being framed as ‘barbarous’ and ‘cruel,’ which further fueled writings about the Pacific with negative stereotypes and gave grounding to the missionary/colonizing effort. Regardless of this historical devaluing of indigenous knowledge and faith, “Pacific Islanders (of various Christian denominations) are among the most committed church-goers in the world” (Keown 37); The prevalence of Christianity is clear throughout the selected texts of this essay, each has their own relationship to western religion and each intermixes Christianity with indigenous mythologies and cultural practices.

Jumping forward, the outbreak of World War II was devastating for islands in the Pacific and had an active colonial effect by way of post-war nuclear testing. In response to the war, many Māori men joined the military and shipped off to the battlefield, as New Zealand and other Pacific islands were the among the first countries to become involved after the invasion of Poland in 1939 (NZ at War). For those who remained on their Pacific Islands, production of food stuffs and other forms of labor were galvanized by the over looming threat of loss of their people and their land (NZ at War). After the war’s end, the United States – fearful of retaliation or another atomic fallout—began testing nuclear weapons in the Marshall Islands and

During the period from June 30, 1946, to August 18, 1958, the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands, all of which were considered atmospheric. The most powerful of those tests was the "Bravo" shot, a 15-megaton device detonated on March 1, 1954, at Bikini atoll. That test alone was equivalent to 1,000 Hiroshima bombs (U.S. Nuclear Testing).

These nuclear tests also had the purpose of determining whether continental detonations would impact the health of Americans, and many have speculated that “US forces may have intentionally left Micronesians at unsafe distances from the testing sites in order to document the
effects of radiation on humans” as the islanders were not evacuated until the third day after the largest blast (Keown 90). The second blast, in the series of 67 nuclear tests, contaminated the bikini atolls and, eventually, the indigenous peoples, who suffer from long-term health problems (“The Marshallese; Gilbert 1954; Keown 92). Here there is a clear disregard for indigenous lives as human lives, as Melanesian bodies were sacrificed and colonized, subjugation through nuclear processes. When discussing the impact that the Pacific nuclear testing had on these islands, Elizabeth Deloughrey noted that the extended nuclear testing “catalyzed a global resistance movement,” and Pacific literature plays a significant role in this protest (Routes and Roots, 215).

Each of these various aspects of colonization—exploration, conversion, and nuclear devaluation—are seeping into indigenous urbanization, globalization, and the repeated subjugation of indigenous islanders. The texts of this thesis work to step away from the romanticized notion of the indigenous—while there is a clear and defined kinship to the earth in the previous chapter, globalization has extended this relationship and challenged the idea of the modern indigenous people. In her chapter about globalization and urban indigeneity, Deloughrey posits that “indigenous subject[s are] rarely associated with modernity, unless it is to propose an essentialist critique of modernization” and “functions as an ethical foil to white modernity. In the rare instances when the popular imagination positions the indigenous subject in urban space, cultural death and ‘fatal impact’ are assumed” (197). However, Deloughrey also notes that the “urbanized and/or diasporic native subject” has created subsisting problems for indigenous subjects that rely on “claims against the colonial nation-state” (197). She is pointing here toward the clumsy and difficult relationship to colonization that is regularly experienced by indigenous islanders and argues against identifying the indigenous situation as “tragic” or “toxic” purely from the standpoint of romantic indigenous relationship to nature, as Buell does. Similarly to the
intention of this paper, contemporary indigenous narratives and stories do work to make visible this complex relationship of indigenous identity and colonization; where Deloughrey’s work in Routes and Roots falls short is in highlighting this intricacy through a collection of indigenous texts, choosing instead to focus on the most notorious pacific writers, Samoan author Albert Wendt and maori author Witi Ihimaera. While there may be multiple factors weighing in on this decision, this choice seems to favor accessible capitalism over surfacing indigenous work, which only serves to extend the colonial impact on indigenous writers.

The depictions of the natural world throughout Sia Figiel’s Where We Once Belonged is an example of this complicated indigenous navigation in the post-modern literary era. ‘Where We Once Belonged’ is Sia Figiel’s debut novel. This coming-of-age story of a Samoan girl won the 1997 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for The Best First Book in the Southeast Asia and South Pacific Region. Figiel’s debut novel is credited as the first novel written by a Samoan woman that has been published in the united states. Her work deals heavily with a portrayal of the mixture of traditional and contemporary village life in Apia, and often addresses taboo cultural issues that other authors dare not reach. In both Tuwhare and Figiel’s work, we see the intermingling, colonial remnants of Christianity, environmental demise, and violence; these remnants collide with nature to define and protest contemporary indigenous experiences.

Where We Once Belonged is a colloquial masterpiece if nothing else. The novel follows Alofa Filiga, a thirteen-year-old Samoan girl, on her search for womanhood within the confines of her village, Malaefou. Her story opens blending tradition with western influences; customary to Malaefou tradition, Alofa is glued to a group of girls (Lili and Moa), and together they are called “Charlie’s Angels,” based off of the American crime drama. They talk of Samoan myths
surrounding the ‘moon sickness’ (a time when women enter womanhood) and they speak dramatically about other girls in the village—ones who are “snakes in disguise.”

When we talked about Afì we whispered. We whispered and whispered. And when she would see us she would say, ‘If I find out you’re whispering about me, I’m gonna break your face! Understand?’

We whispered anyway. Anyway. In our very invisible voices. Loud enough for ants and snails and beer bottles to hear… Even as we yelled out these insults in our ant voices, we knew deep down that we were envious and jealous (WWOB 3-4, emphasis mine)

The kinship addressed in the last chapter pervades the final sentences here: as the children quietly whisper to themselves, it is as if they were in conversation with the earth, speaking secrets to the ground. Alofa relates their silent whispers and taunts to the ants and snails and expands this conversation with the earth to the beer bottles littering the area. The unnatural and natural elements in Samoa merge together as a result of colonial pollution within the first few pages of the text; the beer bottle is as natural to the earth for these kids as are the snails and ants—and perhaps just as populated. Their voices, too, are not merely voices of Alofa and her friends, but they are ant voices: small, collective voices… voices of the earth. This specification by Figiel highlights the kinship the indigenous feel to the land, as well as a distinct separation from western ontologies of individualization and objectification of land. The objectification of the land can be seen through the beer bottle becoming a natural, reoccurring element, but is also found within the household of Mr Brown, a palagi relying on Lili’s help as a keigefaigaluega, through the flowers in his vase:

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18 House girl (246)
There was a vase of teuila\textsuperscript{19} on the table there in the middle of the kitchen.

‘Ei! Why do you think palagis put flowers in their houses? Aren’t there enough flowers outside to look at?

....

‘Maybe because they don’t go to church on Sundays, so they try to make their houses look like one. Or maybe he can’t afford to buy real flowers. You know, \textit{plastic} flowers—what a shame!’ (8)

Moa and Alofa pluck out abnormal western customs and question why foreigners seek to merge their homes with the natural world, why the natural world outside isn’t enough, and why foreigners would deign to keep unnatural plastic flowers inside—of all things. This curiosity and shock reflects an unfamiliarity with the separation between home and earth, an unfamiliarity with objectification of land which is centered in indigenous ways of knowing. Alofa and Moa’s inexperience works comparatively with that of African experience of land and colonization:

“If the European presence in the New World represented the techniques of civilization by which Nature is utilized... by which man enters into a relation of land-labour-capital, the African presence represented a paradox and contradiction... [For the African] land was always the Earth, the centre of a core of beliefs and attitudes, [out of which] would come the central pattern which held together the social order. In this aspect... the African slave represented an opposing process to that of the European, who achieved great technical progress based on the primary accumulation of capital which came from the dehumanization of Man and Nature” (Wynter qtd. in Dillon, 202).

\textsuperscript{19} Samoa’s national flower.
In *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849*, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon uses Sylvia Wynter’s “indigenization” of the African presence to identify a relation to the earth which exists outside of commercialization, “as one of man to earth” not “labor to land” which “slavery seeks to eradicate” much like the Pākehā invasion, conversion, and nuclear fallout in the Pacific (202-203).

One character in the novel, Siniva, is pitted as the fool of Malaefou, as the old witch of the island; Siniva, Alofa’s aunt, is despised by the community for cutting her ties from the Filiga ‘aiga and from their village. Siniva left the village to seek knowledge of the world, knowledge outside of what she could know about her village, and for this she was punished, shunned. Siniva, however, upon return to the island, felt and expressed deep love for her people and her island—her western exploration had animated her passions for Malaefou. And yet for the villagers, Siniva became a doomsayer of sorts, encouraging indigenous people to revert to the idyllic Samoan traditions, to abandon all of their western influences for they can only end in the death of all Samoans. Siniva, in her last moments, cries for a return to ‘where we once belonged’—and through her suicide she finds her only way to return to the earth, as she is found, drowned and washed up on the beach where “eels were living in her eyes… and she was smiling too”:

Suicide—it is the only way. For isn’t that what we’re all slowly doing anyway? Each time a child cries for coca-cola instead of coconut juice the waves close into our lungs. Each time we choose one car, two cars, three cars over canoes and our own feet, the waves close in further. Further and further… Each time we order fast-fast food we hurry the waves into our lungs. We suffocate ourselves—we suffocate our babies and our reefs
with each plastic diaper... and a nuclear bomb, too, once in a while. Drowning our children with each mushroom cloud, [with] Love Boat... Rambo... everything polyester. We kill ourselves slowly. Every day, every Sunday. Each prayer to Jesus means a nail in our own coffin. Each time we switch something ON… means a nail in our coffin… we eat Death and we are eaten by Death, too. Symbiotically we live side by side (237-238).

Siniva’s suicide note, and Alofa’s insisting that there are so many more who came before her, solidifies much of the impact that colonization, commercialization, and environmental disintegration has on indigenous mental health. Her note repeats what at first seems like a threat coming from the ocean: as Samoans drift further from traditional experience of indigeneity, “the waves close into our lungs” and “close in further.” Siniva here is reflecting on her close indigenous ties to the ocean—as we suffocate ourselves with trash, waves and reefs and the earth suffocate as well because they are inextricably linked. Siniva feels as though samoans need to be one with the earth with no separation. Siniva’s note, however, produces the opposite reaction for Alofa. Upon reading the suicide note, Alofa is silenced, and writes: “Alone. For the first time I am alone. I am alone. I am ‘I’ in its totality— ‘I’ without ‘we’… without Moa, Lili, girls, boys…. I am.” Previously opposed and out of touch with any concept of individualization (“Nothing was witnessed alone. Nothing was witnessed in the ‘I’ form—nothing but penises and ghosts. ‘I’ does not exist, Miss Cunningham. ‘I’ is ‘we’…always.”), Alofa is alone and steps, for the first time, outside of herself as the village. Upon Siniva’s death, there is a language shift for Alofa, and the last line punctuates the infiltration of this westernized frame: “I began walking… walking-walking… away from Siniva’s grave… walking now towards Malaefou, towards the new gathering place where ‘we’ once belonged” (239).
AN INDIGENOUS BILDUNGSROMAN

In “The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism,” Mikhail Bakhtin identifies the bildungsroman, a genre which places an emphasis on “becoming,” as being situated between two social classes and focused on upward mobility and interiority and Goethe’s concept of emergence (30). In Italian Journey, as Bakhtin expounds, Goethe spends an inordinate length of time speaking on the earth’s mass as being mobile and pulsating, identifying the weather or different aspects of the background as a way of visualizing emergence of the hero of a bildungsroman, as if the “pulsation [of mountain ranges] determines the more superficial movement and alteration of human destinies and outlooks” (58). Bakhtin reasons that in many coming-of-age stories, a sense of place and time can be symbolic of growth, or as a challenge to growth. In “Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the Bildungsroman in Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street and Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John” Maria Karafilis identifies the bildungsroman as is a novel that relates the development of a (male) protagonist who matures through a process of acculturation and ultimately attains harmony with his surrounding society” and notes that “many women writers of color, both ethnic American and postcolonial, use the Bildungsroman precisely to ‘affirm and assert’ the complex subjectivities of their characters and, by extension, themselves” (63). Following Karafilis’ conception of the uptake of the genre, I would typify each of the text in this essay as a type of indigenous bildungsroman which have modified the form to best “negotiate the different societies in which they find themselves” and novel ways in which the protagonist develops (64).

While many of the texts in this project uptake indigenous forms of creation and meaning making and upend western canonical traditions (i.e. bildungsroman), Where We Once Belonged
particularly surpasses this intention. Figiel uses su'ifefiloi, a form of traditional Samoan storytelling akin to vignette-style prose, to "talk back to Western anthropological studies on Samoan Women and culture" (cover copy). In using this particular format, Figiel (in a brief undertaking) addresses complications with western canon, with western 'research', and grounds her prose in a wise youthfulness. The contradictory phrasing, combining the concepts of youth and wisdom, is essential in this story; Figiel allows the for the aging earth/indigenous wisdom and the child-like presence of the thirteen-year-old Alofa to guide the writing, the format, and the overarching narrative. The short, fragmented nature of the text carries with it multiple associations/meanings outside of and within the uptake of indigenous formatting. these collected vignettes, all written from the perspective of Alofa, emerge as a form of memoir/elegiac piece/diary. Casting aside traditional expectations of diary formatting, the narrator includes only a singular date on the final page of the text (April—December 1994), the rest of the text might as well be Alofa sporadically placing her passing thoughts on the page. Time moves fluidly on the page, leaving the reader to speculate what—if any—time has passed between one vignette and the next, between one sentence and the next. Rather, it seems that the novel is not a diary of one Samoan girl, but of all Samoan girls.\textsuperscript{20} Time is not relevant or relative in this novel, but as a representation of all Samoan girls, time is mixed/backwards/forwards/multidimensional/multifaceted.

To better illustrate this claim, which is divided in two parts: that the story is about all Samoan girls, and why time matters (and what does it matter?), we must begin with a brief understanding of what an indigenous concept of time means (this, however, is complicated and

\textsuperscript{20} In \textit{Diary of a Teenage Girl}, by Phoebe Glockner, the acknowledgements/foreword by the author introduced the text as a book for all girls, and that the primary character—though written by her as a reflection of her past experiences—was not in fact her, but all girls.
relies on factors such as cultural roots of time, industrialization, and divisions as a result of colonization). In his essay “Exploring the Cultural Origins of Differences in Time Orientation Between European New Zealanders and Māori,” Kevin D. Lo identifies that one of the original implications of clock time orientation is a “level of industrialization” which “New Zealand did not undergo… in the same way that in the United Kingdom and the United States did” and therefore Māori individuals are more influenced by event time (109). Not only this, but western civilizations center their perception of time in a framework of mobility in the present, whereas "indigenous people groups such as the Māori are, on one hand, future oriented because of their emphasis on conservation of natural resources and the desire to leave more for tomorrow or for the next generation [yet] there is also strong evidence of a past time orientation for Māori. Past time orientations emphasize tradition and time-honored approaches” (110). While identifying an indigenous concept of time may seem extraneous, it helps to clarify the su'ifefiloi format as a representation of indigenous ontology—that indigenous lives are connected with the earth and communally focused. As all indigenous lives are connected throughout time in this way, we can envision that when Alofa uses the pronoun “we,” that she is addressing all Samoan women, back and back across time. This, too, is evidenced by Figiel’s dedication page:

For the women

(who are always a step ahead)

And the girls

(who know everything there is to know)

Already, from the dedication page, we can see that Where We Once Belonged defies traditional expectations (both western and indigenous) of a coming-of-age tale. Figiel evokes Samoan tradition and centers the story around women’s experience and “growth” in the world. However,
this growth does not use nature as symbolism, but rather is an experience of the world through nature; similarly, there is no mobility for Alofa, nor landscape change, but rather a reframing of what the landscape around her is saying.

One of the significant aspects of this coming-of-age tale is the way in which sexuality, sensuality, gender, and nature are expressed throughout the text. We’ve already come to terms, in the first 3 pages of the novel, that the story is one of becoming a woman, but what we haven’t establish is how womanhood, sexuality, and nature collapse into each other. Afi, the young girl who is victim to the sneering and whispering by Alofa and the world, is consistently berated throughout the novel. While speaking in their ant voices, Alofa, Moa, and Lili whispered about her dirty clothes, her tatty dress, and above all, her smell: “Like a flying fox hanging from a cave—from a cave—so was her scent. She smelled of bats… a hundred bats put together. Bats lived in her armpits, in the crotch of her panties.” The girls expressed their anger towards Afi for being a woman, a woman that was imbued with nature stitched into her clothes. The girls couldn’t understand how the men of the town wanted to live in the crotch of her panties, and it wasn’t until after Alofa’s sexual awakening via a porn magazine in Mr. Brown’s house, that she understood. After meeting Afi on the bus, without Lili and Moa to join her,

Suddenly I was next to a cave of bats. They attacked my eyes. They attacked my teeth. They attacked my nose. The bats forced their way up my nostrils, all the way to my brain. And I found myself running in the forest. I was running and running, and I came upon Afi. And Afi was standing there too in the forest, her arms stretching to the sky.

Birds flew out of her belly button. Bees and Ants and other small insects danced between her fingers, in her armpits, on her toes. Moist, too, was the fern on her nipples, on her neck. And a small river fell from the triangle of her pubic hair.
Yes, there I was suddenly confronted with Afi’s scent. She now smelled of gardenia…

even though it was not gardenia season (19)

While Afi scent originally had seemed so repugnant to Alofa, her burgeoning sexuality shifted this disgust to pleasure, pleasure found in the bees and birds, ants, and bats on the body of another girl. Through an awakened sexuality, Alofa reorients her senses and her connection to the natural world she was so accustomed to, so assured by. Not all sexuality in the text is framed this way, however; Lili is considered by the town to be a “bad girl,” a frivolous girl who “sleeps with anything that moves… does ‘it’ with Mr. Brown… that she’s a slut. We are warned constantly of her… against her… as if she were a pest, as if she was the animal on one of those typical warning signs on the fences of people’s houses or nailed to a tree:

Warning-- Dog Bites. Enter At Own Risk.

Lili, the youngest girl to get the moon sickness, falls victim to the colonial eroticized trope of indigenous women who would freely offer any sexual favors to Europeans; she, already a woman, has sensuality pinned onto her, and cannot escape from it. She is branded as the unwanted parts of the earth, the invasive species which will wreck the island and its community. It is only through the individual process of Alofa’s awakening that we see a positive connotation towards sex and sexuality.

An essential aspect of the engaging vignette format is the ability of the reader to better identify with the characters and the text because the primary character/narrative is not alone in her identity—because Alofa’s identity is collective, this diary is a collection of memories, images, etc, floating through time and space. One of the collective identities that we get to engage with in Where We Once Belonged is a character who, through existing in this text at this time, completely transcends the concept of a western bildungsroman—particularly with regards
to gender, sexuality, and a western relationship to the binary and epistemologies. Sugar Shirley is a transgender character, specifically she is Alofa’s cousin, whose story arch features no “coming out” story (a theme which typifies queer narratives). Working in the early 90’s, one would assume that a non-trans* author would not have the proficiency to write a queer character without some lengthy expository about their transness, and yet Figiel succeeds at grounding Sugar Shirley in a natural status of being a trans-feminine character.

While this language might be anachronistic to describe Shirley, it is useful when thinking about how vastly different western ontologies and media respond to gender-defiant people. Her transness seems to be absorbed in the community as a natural identity for Sugar Shirley: “No one dared call her a him. She was rarely called Fa’afetai—only by the faifeau and the old people of Malaefou. She was Shirley, and everyone called her Shirley, or Shirley girl, or sugar Shirley. No one dared call her a him. No one. But someone did… once.” (53) Although this identity is challenged by the author’s narrative choice to flip between male and female pronouns throughout the chapter, there is a clear support and joy around Shirley who “was the only one allowed to [tease the elders]. She was the only one who made them all laugh-laugh-laugh with some of the wildest jokes ever.” (52). She is not only accepted into her community regardless of her gender identity but is cherished and celebrated. This character challenges western ideas of transwomen’s relationships with their communities, and by offering a character like Shirley to a distinctly indigenous audience, Figiel opens the terrain for what queer indigenous relationships have looked like for indigenous communities, and what that can look like in the future. While this move is essential for improved indigenous health (as supporting and accepting trans-individuals of all communities leads to significantly less mental health problems for indigenous transgender
communities), Sugar Shirley falls victim to a common experience of transwomen—sudden ‘accidental’ death

Everyone [was] too busy scooping palolo into bowls or sacks. No one heard [Shirley’s] cries for help, when a wave hit him and pulled him towards the reef in the mist of that palolo excitement. His body, all purple, was found the next day on the beach, blown up twice its size. Crabs were already living in his mouth. (56)

The village, wrapped in sadness, mourned Shirley and this tragic accident, which occurred only a day after she fought with a newly married wife, new to the village. This intrusion, saturated in western gender expectations, colonized her body and sent her off to sea. Here the western, transmisogynistic society infiltrates the natural imagery and blends in with the narrative. The impact is clear, as the ocean—that has kinship to Shirley and other Malaefou inhabitants—is enacting violence through this lens, through the intrusion.

*Where We Once Belonged* does not follow one of the traditional formats of the bildungsroman; it does not identify maturity through travel and acculturation of male characters, but rather explores what it means for women to experience their culture throughout time, to fade away from the society she is already familiar with and to remain stuck there, knowing there is no hope of escaping alive. The transition here is not upward, but sideways. Alofa survives the book, but leaves it walking into a new plane of knowing and existing. Where the bildungsroman generally ends with some form of satisfaction for the main character (though this may imply death), *Where We Once Belonged* does not believe it owes its readers this, simply because this is the life Figiel’s readers lead; this very well might be the form of growth that young samoan girls experience, and Figiel refuses to pull the punches here.
CONCLUSION AND FURTHER WORK

*Deep Water Talk, Where We Once Belonged*, and *Tangi* are all texts that are deeply entrenched in an expression of love, loss, grief, and joy at the world and at nature. These texts are not, and will never be, the only pages written by pacific authors that will address the indivisible nature of these themes and the inextricable sorrow and delight one might feel after reading them. That being said, these texts are the tip of the iceberg; the driving force of this essay, yes, was to identify the different ways nature can reveal the insidious impacts of colonization and climate change, but through this essay readers will gain access to texts which have been out of print for decades. Most of all, this paper has sought to change, and attack, the romantic visions of indigenous texts, for a much more suitable indigenous reading overall. By highlighting the interconnectivity of the indigenous experience, I hope to influence readers to shift and challenge their conceptions of life, literature, and the natural world. And, If it isn’t clear by now, I’m not sure whose paper you were reading: this project is far from over. Further work on this project will include a deeper look into natural themes surrounding queer indigenous literature, examination into resilience narratives, and overall bringing more indigenous text to the forefront of scholarship.
APPENDIX A: Scientific Data, Charts, Etc.

**Figure 1a**

Billion-Dollar Disaster Event Types by Year (CPI-Adjusted)

**Figure 1b**

TOTAL NUMBER of reported Natural disasters between 1900 and 2018

**Figure 1a: Billion Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Time Series.** In the explanation of this graph, NOAA’s climatologists note that “In 2017, there were 16 weather and climate disaster events with losses exceeding $1 billion each across the United States. More notable than the high frequency of these events is the cumulative cost, which exceeds $300 billion in 2017 — a new U.S. annual record. The cumulative damage of these 16 U.S. events during 2017 is $306.2 billion, which shatters the previous U.S. annual record cost of $214.8 billion (CPI-adjusted), established in 2005 due to the impacts of Hurricanes Dennis, Katrina, Rita and Wilma” (NCEI 2018). It must be noted that only US disasters are accounted for in this graph.

**Figure 1b:** Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT) shows global trends by continent in the number of natural, climate-related disasters from 1900-2017. This graphic gives us a better understanding of how these disasters are rapidly increasing, particularly between 1977 and 2002.
### APPENDIX B: Tradition, Literature, Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maori Words</th>
<th>English translation via NZ dict</th>
<th>Notes on use/translation within Tangi</th>
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| Whanau      | 1. (verb) (-a) to be born, give birth.  
                2. (noun) extended family, family group, a familiar term of address to a number of people - the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members. | Here it seems as though Ihimaera is using this secondary definition, but the actual definition implies more about familial connection than his simple description of “My home” |
| Aue         | 1. (verb) (-tia) to cry, howl, groan, wail, bawl | |
| Haere ra    | 1. (interjection) goodbye (said to someone leaving), farewell! bye, bye-bye. | |
| Tangi       | 1. (verb) (-hia) to cry, mourn, weep, weep over.  
                2. (verb) (-hia) to sing, make a sound.  
                4. (noun) sound, intonation, mourning, grief, sorrow, weeping, lament, salute, wave.  
                6. (noun) rites for the dead, funeral - shortened form of tangihanga. | |
| Tangiweto   | 1. (verb) to fret, cry.  
                2. (noun) crybaby, sook, sooky-bubba. | |
| E           | 1. (particle) Used before people's names of one long vowel or two short vowels when addressing them, with terms of address, and with nouns used as terms of address. | |
| E noho, (ra, e ma, etc.) | 1. goodbye (said to someone staying), farewell, bye, bye-bye. | |
| To manawa, e tuku manawa | Manawa is defined as “heart” or “breath.”  
Taku is defined as “my” or mine. Therefore, the phrase means “your heart/breath, my heart/breath” | In context, the translation that most makes sense is “heart” |

The maori translations are not available in a glossary format in Tangi like they are for WWOB.
Works Cited


Figiel, Sia. Where We Once Belonged. Kaya Press. 2006


