On trusting your influences

Poet Tayi Tibble discusses perspective, writing for your readers, and what it means to be coming-of-age.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2664 words.

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You've wanted to be a writer since the age of eight. Do you remember what sparked this decision?

I think two things. Writing was the one thing I would get praise for at school. I was quite shy and a people pleaser and I didn't get noticed for anything else, so it disproportionately affected me, obviously. I really liked stories, too. I remember being young and most of my cousins, all the kids my age, they would just play. But I always wanted to sit around with my grandparents, my nana especially, and hear her stories. I feel like I was almost being trained to listen, so I could write about them one day and pass them on.

Have you tried writing prose?

When I was a teenager, I did. I'd write a lot of fiction and short stories and novels. I haven't had a proper attempt at it as an adult writer, but I do really want to. It's one of my aspirations. I think having so much space and time to really go at a set of ideas would be really satisfying. I am trying, but it's really effing hard. I'm having to learn things like structure from writer'a TikTok. My brain is wired to write poetry these days. If I write a boring sentence, I immediately become frustrated.

Editing fiction can be especially difficult. How do you edit your poetry?

I actually really love editing poetry. It's my favorite part. I love how you can change just one word and it suddenly elevates the line or even the whole poem. When I'm writing poetry, I'm looking and reading through and I'm really interrogating each word and trying to figure out: Is this the best word? Is this exactly what I'm trying to say at this moment? And I do a lot of reading aloud because cadence and rhythm are really important to me. I try to feel where the lines are sitting or where the stresses are, where the hits and the rhythm are. I also like to use those read-aloud functions on the computer because I feel like if it can still sound somewhat bearable with this monotone voice reading it, then that's probably going to be alright—it's the final test.

Do you have a certain kind of voice or accent that you select with the computer?

I select Australian because it's the closest to finding a New Zealand read aloud voice. There's this Australian robot woman called Karen that I use.

When do you decide to pepper te reo Māori in your poetry?

When I use te reo Māori it's probably more for voice than anything. It's like, would I say the word in English or would I say it in Māori? I speak a lot of te reo Māori, but I'm not fluent. Lots of people here in Aotearoa, Māori or non-Māori, will incorporate te reo Māori in lieu of certain English words, so it feels natural to use it interchangeably. But then at other times, I might use it for the sound. The marriage of consonant and vowel sounds in te reo Māori is really satisfying for me. So sometimes it'll be for the sake of rhythm but also meaning

as well, because a lot of our language in te reo Māori doesn't actually have a direct translation to English and there are lots of layers of meaning in our words, each phonetic will have its own meaning.

For example the title, *Rangikura*, "rangi" means sky or heaven as it is related to Ranginui, our legendary sky father, and "kura" means red or scarlett. *Kura* also means school or getting an education so, to me, Rangikura means "learning from the red sky," which Māori would understand as observing *tohu*, looking and learning from signs in the natural world. "Ikura" is a term we use for a woman's menses. I like that meaning being in the title because the book has a theme of girlhood. In that way I'll use te reo also because I find it more layered and poetic.

I'm completely obsessed with your poetic imagery. I'm thinking specifically of the glow-in-the-dark stars in "Can I Still Come Crash at Yours?" How do you choose objects in your poems and what kind of objects resonate with you as a reader?

When I was a kid, I would be attracted to lists of objects or items in books. I remember reading this one Jacqueline Wilson book when I was eight and it had a list of all these different lollies this character was eating and that imprinted on me. It was so satisfying to read all these English lollies I'd never heard of. I think my attraction to objects is almost like a feminine impulse. All the girls I know have always had attachments to certain items and collecting. Have you seen that trend going around? It's like girl clusters or girls who cluster, that kind of thing. These little clusters of ordinary but talismanic objects.

I really like Sofia Coppola and Petra Collins and Nadia Lee Cohen. I was inspired by these artists who really emphasized femininity, and they always were focused on items and objects. I'm also interested in world-building and world-building my world that's hybrid te ao Māori, but modern. And that's why I feel like peppering these physical items and objects is important to me. I love physicality in poems and having a sense of groundedness because some of my poems deal with concepts of colonization and the effects of that, or the spiritual aspect of Te ao Māori. To balance that, it's important to have some concrete ideas in there as well, some stick-on stars or a broken iPod.

I noticed the world-building, especially in the poems about early girlhood, like listening to *Born to Die* on a desktop computer without internet and "skulling" 10-dollar Kristov. What interests you about girlhood?

I think of *Rangikura* as kind of being a coming-of-age narrative. I'm interested in that phase of life because you're coming into adulthood, but you're also coming into awareness and your social conscience at the same time. The characters in this book are discovering their positionality in the world as wahine Māori and also their consciousness about why the world is like this and why the world is like that to them, exploitative and predatory. It was the phase of my life where I, and surely other women, felt the most vulnerable. You're becoming a woman, but you don't have access to your own money or have your own ideas fully formed. *Rangikura* is a coming-of-age narrative that's supposed to be a metaphor for colonization and the climate crisis. I associate the kind of desecration of the earth and what's happening with the environment to the kind of disrespect and desecration of Indigenous women. And I wanted to put the climate anxiety I was feeling into the anxiety of being a young and vulnerable woman.

Your poems speak to American culture—endless reality TV shows, a stepbrother asking if he should destroy a Beavis and Butthead gift, etc.—but I also read your essay in *Newsroom* where you talk about the world of Māori influencers, musicians, and stars. I'm curious about this divide between cultural icons while you were coming-of-age, or if you even consider it a divide.

I personally don't consider it a divide because I'm in both worlds, but I'm also aware that Americans might not know much about our pop culture and music, and the things we have here. Maybe I'm generalizing, but I feel like Americans don't really know much about anywhere else in the world.

I love American pop culture. The level of celeb worship and enthusiasm is so different from NZ culture. It's something I'm definitely interested in and I'm passionate about. But at the same time, I do think of American pop culture as the second colonization of Aotearoa New Zealand. I feel like American pop culture has more influence,

at least among my generation, than the legacy of Great Britain or anything like that.

It's funny because I feel like I walk in both worlds pretty easily and confidently, and I feel comfortable existing in sort of the axis point of them. My friends and I use the terms "modern Māori" or "bougie native," as terms for being a contemporary Indigenous person who enjoys pop culture, music, dressing up, going out for dinners in a way that has an element of reclamation, of taking up space while still being Māori and representing our ancestors and tradition. I do acknowledge that there's obviously tension there. American pop culture is so predicated on capitalism, colonization, exploitation… I'm trying to think of a gentler word, but I can't. You know, exploitation and displacement of Indigenous people and the slave labor of Black people in America. Obviously, these things are quite in contrast to our values and the way that we operate in Te Ao Māori. But I do think that the tension that that creates, for me, as a person and as a writer, is really interesting. I use contrast and juxtaposition a lot in my writing. I like a clash.

Your poetry mentions astrology a lot, and I know that you run an astrology column, too. How do you use astrology as a tool, both in your writing and in your life?

In my life, I like it as a shorthand for analysis, but also, it has some sort of esoteric resonance for me as an Indigenous person. We Polynesians are traditional star gazers. We navigate the world through looking at the stars and other elements in the environment. That's why I think astrology made sense for me, that you would look at the stars and draw meaning from their location in the sky. That was not a far leap from what I already believe in, coming from navigators. And obviously, I like it for the fun, girly pop nature of it, comparing charts and looking at synastry.

In poetry, I'm more attracted to the language of astrology and how that can be used. I just love a lot of the language around astrology, like the planets, the symbolism and even the names of the signs. For example, I have a poem in Rangikura that I could have called 'I'm determinedly destructive when it comes to my desire' but instead I called it 'Mars in Scorpio.'

You went to graduate school for an MA. What'd you learn there?

I definitely learnt to write even though I always thought I was the man. I got in by submitting these really silly, aesthetic poems I was posting on Tumblr. I think I was lucky to get in, but I remember on the first day of class, my teacher asked, "Are you going to take this seriously? Are you going to be serious about this?" I was like, "Yeah, I'm paying all this money and I signed up to do this," all indignant. But no, I did listen to her and I learnt real quick.

My poems before I went to study were really self-indulgent and didn't really mean anything when you poked through a certain aesthetic veneer. What I learnt mostly was to be more generous to the readers. That really stuck with me and I take that forward. But also, I hadn't really written about my Māori identity, or the cultural state of Aotearoa before I went and did that course.

It was about six weeks in and I wrote this lyric essay about Indigenous hair, and I got a really positive response to it and everyone was saying, "This is what you're supposed to be doing, this is what you should be writing." And that really changed the trajectory of my studies that year and also for my career, and the things that I'm still writing about. I was really lucky in having a good experience in doing my MA, but I know not everyone does, especially not Indigenous people.

I came at the right time where some native writers had gone before me and made vocal the issues they had with the MA program and the way it was structured. By the time I came through, people were more open to my perspective and prepared to look after me. The MA program has a prize at the end of the year for the best manuscript. It's pretty evil and I don't really think they should do it because it makes the year weird and competitive, but I won mine and I was happy to win. It fast-tracked me getting published here in New Zealand. Suddenly all the publishers knew me and were interested. The MA was significant as it gave me a lot of institutional support.

You also teach others. What do you want your students to come away having learned?

I try to press perspective. I think it's the most important and powerful thing that a writer or artist can have. It's better than talent or even discipline. If you write from a place where only you can write from, that's when you're going to hit the good stuff. Usually, I end up tutoring or teaching Polynesian or brown girls, so I always tell them it's about honoring your history, your heritage and your whakapapa but whakapapa can be a range of different things.

It can be your actual ancestors and your culture, but it also can be even just the types of art you consume or the music you liked as a kid, things like that. When you believe, trust, and enjoy your influences and let them color your work, you'll make work that's really special and impactful.

The course I usually teach or lecture is called "Turangawaewae, A Place to Stand, Ways of Writing about the Land." It's about the different ways that Māori address and talk to the land, whether it's through personification of the natural elements as gods, or the way we introduce ourselves by naming all the rivers and the mountains and the physical landscapes that we come from. I use that to get writers to consider place and their positionality and relationship to the land. Place is really important to me in my writing.

What are you working on now?

The poems I'm writing right now all focus on the ocean. I just finished writing this long lyric essay about the Pacific Ocean being a highway, talking about my times traveling over in the US as well as our pacific voyaging history. It's called Te-Moana-nui-a-Kiwa: Ocean Memory. That's going to come out in April with Alta Mag, as a little pull-out book. I'm just really obsessed with the Pacific Ocean at the moment. My first two books have been really focused on Indigenous identity as a Māori, but this next one's more focused on being Māori in the context of being a Pacific Islander. This one's very Polynesian.

Tay Tibble Recommends:

My e hoa from Aotearoa, Rebecca K Reilly also has a book out in The States, *Greta and Valdin*. She's crack up.

Westman Atelier Complexion Drops—My friend Harry put me on and I was hesitant because he has the most perfect skin anyway, but now so do I because these drops are infused with glamour magic or something.

I've been repeating Yullola's *Monastery of Love* album—very ambient and unique with some swag.

Having lunch from a bakery. My current obsession. NZ has a lot of bakeries and I've only just started appreciating. Cheap and cheerful and convenient because I need a sweet treat all the time. I like a strawberry tart.

Luca (@lucidluca on IG) is a tongan painter in Aotearoa who paints the dreamiest portraits of south seas pacific wahine. I just bought a print of their painting "Hinewai" and it's so ataahua.

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