

## A library of islands

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I have a lovely library of books in my shed, many of which were gifts from writers, friends, old managers who are also friends, acquaintances and crushes. Surrounded by books of poetry, prose, fiction and non-fiction, it feels ironic that I struggle to find words with which to start an essay, article, response, celebration of the work of Sarah Hudson. Because I want them to be the right words, to be of the right weight to hang around my neck or to tumble out of my mouth as I read them aloud. Words that might sit alongside the decades of *Landfall* sitting on one bookshelf, the prestigious publication that luminaries have written for, or nestle amongst the beauty of poets I've long admired, or seamlessly sit within scenes from the shelf of plays that I've carried with me from flat to flat to storage to the house that became home. Those were the right words, where are mine?

Sarah messages me from the Seto Island Sea where the installation of her work for the Setouchi Triennial is complete in the decommissioned school site she's being exhibited in. "Oh, it looks so good, like a library of good stories!", I reply in response to the image of three horizontal shelves and a trail of rocks in its foreground. On these shelves, are individual paintings, some framed and some not but each has a story to tell. Sarah has told me about these stories, painted with whenua from Moutohorā, and indigo gifted from Shikoku.

At home in my shed, I choose a couple of books to prompt some thinking, they're both inscribed on the inside with my aunty's name in her familiar scrawl, 'J.M.Cunningham'. These I inherited after she died: *Maori Proverbs and Sayings* by Murdoch Riley, and *Nga Kokako Huataratara: The Notched Plumes of the Kokako* by Arapera Hineira Kaa Blank. Among the book of whakataukī, I find a section dedicated to Wairaka, among the most well-known of Ngāti Awa tīpuna and whose actions to save those aboard te waka Mātaatua gave its name to the township Sarah has lived in for most of her life, Whakatāne. The area where te waka Mātaatua was pulled ashore by Wairaka is in the same place that Sarah's video works *Belonging* were shot, with Moutohorā resolutely in the background. I struggle to find the words to describe the emotion in knowing both the kōrero of Wairaka and how well-known it is, how cool and trippy it is that we can walk the whenua she walked and view the landing place of the waka, and conversely how this is not the same for Moutohorā. A close yet distant island, always in view. Moutohorā is an island synonymous with the identity of Whakatāne and yet about whom the history is much less accessible and known.

To learn, I take a painting from Sarah's library. Framed in wood painted a deep red, it is the shape of a mouth you might see on a wheku, or a pou. If you look again it looks like a smiling mouth or a flattened loveheart. Within two of these framed paintings are letters, one spells out RAMARI and the other contains the initials HH. Sarah tells me of how one of her whanaunga, Ramari Stewart, lived on the island for many years as part of a longitudinal study into the local dolphin population. This study took place in the 1970s and was one of the first of its kind as a long-term study. More importantly, Ramari was one of the first uri of Ngāti Awa to have lived on Moutohorā in recent times, her hapū of Ngāti Hokopu having had their access to the island interrupted.



Sarah Hudson, *The Stones Remember and I Listen*, 2025, detail. Photographer: Sarah Hudson

I choose another book, this one an oral history from my Koro Jim who was advising on a clam restoration project in Foxton, one of many things I never knew he was part of. As oral histories are wont to do, the *kōrero* ranges all over the place, reaching back in time to his childhood and forward with brief mentions of his *mokopuna*. Every story comes from somewhere else, doesn't it? For Māori, it comes from the land and the sea, our *tīpuna* and our gods – carved, corporeal, imagined. At one point Koro Jim and the interviewer touch upon history, Koro's response being, "And history kills us eh." There is no question mark, it is a full stop. Further on, they discuss the protection of the *taiao*, and the assumed nature of arguing with the Crown for the right to rectify the harm done to the *whenua*. Here he adds, "I'll argue it out in a Court anyway." I imagine it said in his straightforward and nonplussed manner, after all this is what we're used to. I imagine a line between the two quoted *kōrero*: the fight and the death.

The initials HH are those of Sarah's father who lobbied for many years for Ngāti Awa to have access to the island, and for the island to be returned to the *iwi*. HH never set foot on Moutohorā, but his story is painted in *whenua* from his island. The paintings featuring these names are from a series titled *The stones remember, and I listen*. Among these are *tīpuna* whose features have been pulled from memory, at least that's how I see them, emerging from the page, or submerging into the inky blue of the indigo watercolours. Memories, histories, *kōrero* that are present yet foggy. The reality of our *whānau kōrero* residing in archives, as HH's *mahi* to have Moutohorā returned does, is an uneasy realisation that the archive is not a space of neutrality, that our *kōrero* is not stored unencumbered. Instead, metadata will be attached that catalogues and categorises the hard work our *whānau* have done to the point where they could be a passing mention. A whole person carrying a whole history of a whole island is a mere mention.

However, Moutohorā is not a whole island. Sarah has shared with me how the *motu* has been dynamited before, and that boulders from the island reside at the Whakatāne river mouth. For most Ngāti Awa, touching these rocks and looking at Moutohorā is the closest they will ever get to visiting the island. There are many more tragic stories about this site in Whakatāne but I'm loathe for them to become a paragraph in a text, a list of bullet points or a crash course in history. Every single aggression on the *whenua* deserves its own hearing. It is enough to hear an island has been dynamited, it is

enough to learn a people have been denied access to their whenua. These are the histories we know and inherit and pass on, and remember.

So, I come to Arapera Blank's poetry. Born and raised in Rangitukia, she spent much of her adult life in Tāmaki Makaurau and the aforementioned collection ends with 'Rangitukia Reminiscences – Soul Place' and is an ode to her tūrangawaewae. Down and along each stanza, Arapera remembers her birthplace, from the hills covered in native trees to the homes of her whānau: here a school house, there a historic pā, at each corner the town is marked with her memories. This is a snapshot into a period that is often nostalgically referred to as 'simpler times'. But it isn't the simplicity that is so resonant in this poem, it is the closeness with the land upon which their township is built and thrives that feels so familiar and yet so far away. It is easy to imagine what that upbringing was like though it doesn't reflect my own, in these imaginings of someone else's memories there is such joy and such hope for another way of living, a tīpuna way of living. This is so propulsive that I can see why HH kept trying, and why Koro Jim gave his time to so many committees and court cases. Arapera ends her poem with:

Thus we are inheritors  
of interwoven dreams,  
whose paua-shimmering music ever  
echoes on the wind.

Sometimes our dreams are nightmares by another name, the dream being that we want the simple times of access to whenua and the reality being that it is severed. Here I return to *Belonging* and Sarah's grasping, knowing hands crawling their way along the rocky shore. With her body buffered by insistent water, she holds on, elsewhere she is kept afloat by another rock which bobs along the water, defying the gravity that would sink it. Staying afloat is survival, and to do so our bodies instinctually and quickly adapt to keep our heads above water. There are well-known metaphors sprinkled throughout these sentences and mai i te ao Māori, the most well-known would be 'he toka tū moana'. This whakataukī is often translated to refer to someone who is able to endure tides of challenge, that those can wash over them and the person will remain steadfast. But with *Belonging*, a new meaning emerges: the rock wants to be there, it has learned how to stay, or maybe the rock was there first? In my mind this is the resilience of Sarah's hapū of Ngāti Hōkōpu who remain despite their access to Moutohorā being interrupted or toxic waste being dumped in their takiwā. They remain despite many significant toka being detonated so the river mouth can be widened for rich people's boats to moor in front of their marae.



Sarah Hudson, *Belonging*, 2025, Video still, HD Video, colour, sound, 10min , Videography by Nicole Hunt

Recently I spent some time in Tāmaki Makaurau in the suburb Te Hau Kapua, known as Devonport. In my time there, I stayed on a maunga called Takarunga and from the top of this maunga I looked at what remained of Takararo and tried but failed to find what remained of Takamaiwaho, these latter two maunga having been quarried to oblivion over the course of 80 years. When the quarry shut, the quarry leftovers were turned into lovely stonewalls that line the neighbourhood, or they were made into roads or berms. Before I learned this, I'd spent many days walking Te Hau Kapua and marvelling at its beauty not knowing that these were the exploded remains of a maunga. Near one of the suburb's beaches is also a nondescript carpark which, as it turns out, is the site of a settlement that is comparable in age to the pā at Wairau Bar. Learning this history made it hard for me to see Te Hau Kapua the same again, I was furious that this history was allowed to be invisibilised. In this fury I felt the words about history killing us because I know that these are not the only quarries that have eaten maunga away.

Also in Sarah's library is *In my teeth, the DNA of cliffs, the taste of old stories*, sculpted mouthpieces and adornments made from Megijima rocks. Each component was hand selected by Sarah in what she has termed a 'tactile archive'. This term is a delightful oxymoron in that archives, at least those which I earlier critiqued, are usually unable to be handled or are mediated through the wearing of gloves. This work is in reference to the mnemonic practice that saw our people placing something on their tongue, a pebble for example, to aid in the memorialisation of whakapapa or kōrero tuku iho. With taste, I think of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work drew connection between food and memory. In her book of personal essays, and inspired by the work of Nietzsche, archivist Flora Feltham sought to recover memories from a traumatic period of her teenagerhood by eating the food she was eating at the time. This exercise uncovered more of what her and her brother didn't remember: how they paid for food, who did the shopping, what their day-to-day life looked like. This returns me to the way in which the archive memorialises lives by capturing the big events and accomplishments people partake in while erasing the quotidian how, why and who they did it for.

Who did HH do this work for? What compelled him to do it? As I learn more from Sarah's library, a mystery emerges. This isn't a mystery that requires a monocle or even a tidy ending. *In my teeth, the DNA of cliffs, the taste of old stories* also makes reference to the stone walls that Sarah discovered in Megijima and knows to exist on Moutohorā, it is enough for this mystery to consider that when these



walls were built, none of those stonemasons were to know that an artist from the town named by Wairaka would make a connection between them. These stone walls appear toothlike to Sarah, teeth that she refers to as 'visible whakapapa' as they are our bones on display. Bones on display, like a library of kōrero that the reader may select a book from but only those who have been granted access by Sarah will know how to read.



Sarah Hudson, *The Stones Remember and I Listen*, 2025, installation view. Photographer: Sanuki Street