



Top: Looking across the reef where the HMNZS *Manawanui* sank off the south coast of Samoa on 5 October 2024 (image by author, 9 October 2024). Bottom: Nature looking back. I'm watching you, human (image by author, 28 August 2023).



World Blong Yumi

ROD BARNETT

With this poem I explore the many nuanced considerations of geography, geopolitics, community, insiderness and outsidersness that grapple with and influence each other throughout the multilayered space that is the Blue Pacific Continent. I unfold a narrative that works through a moment-by-moment attentiveness that does not – cannot – grasp the whole. It's told by a persona that recognises scholarly omniscience comes at the cost of embedded agency and connection, and so refuses that singular perspective and invites a kind of complicity from the reader. We are watching ourselves through a screen or representation. But are we really just figures on some screen, ever distanced from the immediacy of life, cajoled to see it in a certain way through a narrow choice of gazes and actions, anthropological, quizzical, touristic and/or complicit? The poem offers a string of place-specific images and characters, tourists, yachties, industrialists, government representatives and, yes, even locals interacting across the big sea landscape resource that is the Pacific Ocean. The title, in Bislama (a pidgin English specific to Vanuatu), comes from graffiti on a wall in downtown Port Vila, Vanuatu.

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World Blong Yumi

Cattle wander among coconut palms, a low,
lowing quiet slow movement lateral among the verticals,
dun, red, russet, cream, steering mildly, swaying in motion
with the swinging palms. Charismatic megafauna, yes?

Oh I don't know, but on the lowland terrace between seas
and trees a comb parts hair into rows as a blue-green cock
crows on the road where yet another SUV parts people
from their histories. Your buds in, you watch through

custom blinds. One voice only in your mind, the stark
terroir of coral soils and mangrove knees – the sandalwood
now gone with the French, the English and Chinese.
Though no longer present to my present concept of the good

it reminds me of the 80s: yachts, backpacks, a certain easy
smile, misplaced info in the gardens of trainees. Somewhere
north or south an icefloe calves, new clouds of expectation
sink soft into the coral sand. This morning our high

purpose was to keep the pale skies clear of them, while over
lunch a satisfaction crept between phases of maybe, yes
no, tomorrow – absorbent, diffuse, minutely considered.
Behind you a man shin-deep in warm tide water with his

umbrella, a spear and a net, calling softly to his brother.
On the far side of the world bright hard men and women
pick a future for whānau, fish, you, me, Martina, Juan, Marie.
I can't believe it, you shot the shark? No one's actually

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going to care ... but what about the guy who chopped down
the tree? Don't worry there's no him inside him, no basic care
there. At least the flowers are still floating to the lawn, the system
working still. Down the beach, folk are shopping in the rocks.

Haven't you heard? The shark is dead. Let's chop off its head.
Lemme put my shorts on and I'll join you at the water's edge.
Bring the bush knife, grab the bag called Bon Marché – the blue
one by the door. Watch out for the cat, it's got a bird. I'll

help you drag the fish, we'll slice right through the frame:
a few steaks and throw the rest back in the sea.
The sharks will take care of their ol' frère and we'll
have poisson frais for tea. Meanwhile two women,

one man in the SUV. They ford a crystal stream and point
across the river flats to, hey that's you and me. No that's
a doctored photograph. Someone has AI'd us, that's not
my dress. You're right that's not my graphic tee.

When rain falls on banana leaves it's so much better.
Out in the weather here on the weather coast banana leaves
are shredded, but we've got to get that old guy to agree.
The steers move through the palms quite gracefully.

Hey look that white heron's riding on the dark one's back.
That's me. Well, we don't want your aid. Spend it on a weight-
loss programme for your foreign sec-rat-ree. We got ginger, crotons,
spider flowers, and twice-voted happiest nation on earth.

Sandalwood gone, reefs bleached, sea lapping at the
recliners below the pool all good. Happy insects, happy lizards,
happy butterflies all folded into a maze of closed allusions:
the wandering duck whistling in the pond at the end of the lawn.

A dentate-shaped carinated vessel in the case, in the museum
when the breeze gets up. So cool. Pigeons, doves rise up, swifts
and rails all in the sky above the sky who watch and come and come
bring magic to help us live a wide free wingblur coast plain life.

Tankyu tumas. We are the happiest people in the world.
The unsubtle self-importance, unconscious insolence
of proprietary expats in the evening when the breeze gets up
and bluecoats come ashore across the reef: bankers, brokers,

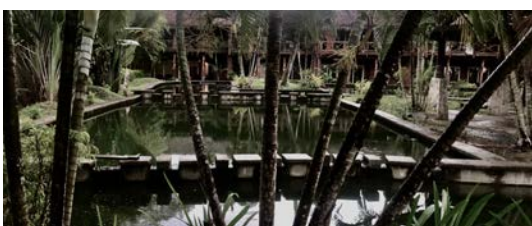
agents, south pacific loafers. We watch red eyes among the pandanus
white on black, the silent mouth, face on face, 'the duty
of man is to protect his land'. They'd sold themselves but
somehow had not got the cash. You hold out your closed

hand. It opens, petals unfurling, with a thumb so long it it's
like a fifth finger. A rhinoceros coco palm beetle crawls along
your wrist, you gently put it on the sand and invite me
to stand on its hard black shell, the carapace it brought from PNG

on the barges with gravel funded by you-know-who. There is a them inside them. There is a them over there too, in the restaurant where some dumb leaders sign security and climate declarations. Where Canberra politicians all agree

to fund a new airport proposal and the Chinese come back in their SUV. An old guy with a grizzled beard paddleboards over the lagoon. I want to be like him. Ribs showing through my skin. An obscure truth rolling in the water lapping on the sands, dream on you say.

Temporary surrenders that become magnificently destructively all-encompassingly permanent and after the establishment of this condition get worse. Dream on you say. Raise the blue Mr Harrison, we'll force them windward, but we'll have to fly. Aye aye sir, the blue it is.



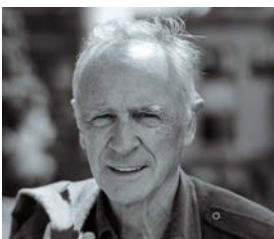
(a)



(b)

Figure 1. (a) The resort is where the biz is done. It's an ambivalent, empty landscape. (b) A sense of menace and disquiet prevails. What, really, is going on here? (Images by author, 4 October 2024.)

About the author



Rod Barnett (Ngāti Raukawa) is a landscape architect who has crossed disciplinary boundaries throughout his career. He has collaborated with artists, architects, scientists and urban planners on funded design research projects in locations as far flung as the coastlines of Tonga, under-served communities in rust-belt United States cities, and the stone alignments of Carnac, France. Barnett's firm, Kaihanga Awawhenua [Riverland Design], is a landscape architecture practice dedicated to the open-ended, self-organising and productive curation of planetary environments. He puts Te Tiriti o Waitangi first in all of the practice's projects, and everything is driven by its generative power. Wherever he works across the world, the values and practices of Indigenous peoples are Barnett's compass and his guide.

Head of the School of Architecture at Victoria University Wellington, Barnett has attracted international recognition for his publications, won awards for urban landscape design, and while in the U.S. for an extended period achieved the national Design Intelligence Award for most admired design educator (2012). His book *Emergence in Landscape Architecture* (2013) led to a teaching position at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and in 2017 Routledge published *The Modern Landscapes of Ted Smyth: Landscape Modernism in the South Pacific* (with Jacqueline Margetts) in which they place Smyth's work in the context of tropical modernism. Currently he is researching the whakapapa of the black sands of the west coast of Te Ika-a-Māui, the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand.