“I’m a burnt tongue, crying for the promised river.”

A conversation with Daley Rangi

by Anne-Marie Te Whiu

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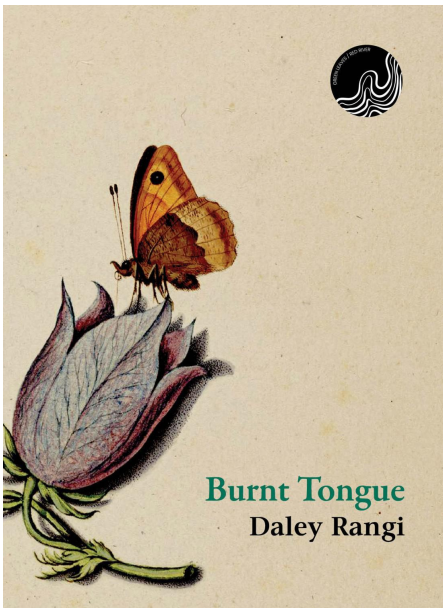
Daley Rangi performing in *Takatāpui*. Photograph by Sophie Minissale.



Daley Rangi performing in *Lipstuck*, a live participatory work about the history of lipstick. Photograph by Daniel James Grant.



Daley Rangi in development of a protest performance. Supported by PICA/pvi collective.



Daley Rangi, *Burnt Tongue* (Delhi and Perth; Red River and Centre for Stories, 2023). Cover Design by Dibyajyoti Sarma.



Daley Rangi in development of a protest performance. Supported by PICA/pvi collective.

To punctuate the exciting new release of their searing debut poetry collection titled Burnt Tongue*, antidisciplinary, Takatāpui artist Daley Rangi (Te Ātiawa) has a kōrero with* Contemporary HUM*'s newest Associate Editor, Anne-Marie Te Whiu (Te Rarawa). Taking place on Gadigal lands on the country often called Australia, where they both live and work, their conversation spans the chaotic process of working across mediums, and the grounding value of Queer elders and creative role models. Among themes of cultural violence and*

disconnection, Daley reflects on their first collection's role in reconnecting them to te reo Māori; though it's not always the ripe fruit they might hope for.

Published by Red River and Centre for Stories and edited by J Eh Kaw Thaw Saw, Daley Rangi's debut poetry collection, *Burnt Tongue*, is a gathering of powerhouse poetic storytelling, unabashedly articulating self-determination, community, and rotten (or) forbidden fruit. To say I'm a Rangi fan is an understatement. After being email-introduced by Victor Rodger a couple of years ago, I got a little closer to their mahi (work) last year through the Poetry Month project at Red Room, of which I was a co-producer. Earlier this year, our ancestors finally brought us kanohi e te kanohi when we were each selected by Carriageworks as one of ten artists to be given a studio for 12 months at the Clothing Stores.

There is something lightning-like about their practice. How they choose to express themselves artistically is a beautiful gift of generosity and humility. Their poetic voice is unapologetic and bold, without any of the brashness that can sometimes accompany these qualities. Rangi holds space for complex subjects with sophistication and wit, never being reductive, always opening up the conversation with gratitude and aroha (love). Rangi, like many of my favourite creatives, is extremely adept at exploring self-expressionistic art in multiple forms, including as a theatre practitioner, most recently performing their one-person piece *Taka tāpui* at the Sydney Opera House and as Assistant Director for *Fen ces*, recently performed by the Sydney Theatre Company.

Having read the digital version of *Burnt Tongue*, I am peachy keen to hold this collection in my hands. It was a pleasure to speak with them about their new book and the contemporary and ancient threads that tie it together.

ANNE-MARIE TE WHIU It's so great to be having this kōrero with you! Let's start with where you grew up, where you're from and where you're living now.

DALEY RANGI Tēnā koe!
Ko Taranaki tōku maunga
Ko Waiwhakaiho rāua ko Waitara ōku awa
Ko Tokomaru rāua ko Aotea ōku waka
Ko Te Ātiawa tōku iwi
Ko Ngāti Te Whiti tōku hapu
Ko Daley Rangi tōku ingoa.[01]

As I introduce myself with my pepeha, there's always a push and pull, an anxiety, whakamā (shame) rising, an internal questioning: "Is this how I say it, how I write it? Why am I so scared?" I thought it worth mentioning, as this confrontation of shame, and internal and external histories, often forms the base for a lot of my spoken and written poetry work. Right now, it's a beautiful, sunny day here on Gadigal Eora country, near Warrang, where I currently reside; a place otherwise known as Sydney. When I was younger, my whānau (family) moved from Ngāmotu New Plymouth in Aotearoa New Zealand to Whadjuk Noongar country, and a place called Boorloo, or Perth, on the west coast of lands and countries known as Australia. Now, out on my own, on the oceans of the unsure, I've made my way here to Sydney, to a literal and metaphorical in-between of one 'home' and another. It's almost as if I'm undertaking some long journey back to Taranaki and all that entails.

AMTW Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down and share some thoughts. It really is special to be hearing from you at this important moment in your artistic journey. Your waka (canoe) is taking you to some incredible places.

DR I'm delighted and daunted in equal measure. I've been very lucky to be surrounded by inspiring artists, activists and found whānau, who've buoyed me on this journey. I never thought I'd be a writer, but here I am. It happened. But it didn't occur in a vacuum. We can't stay afloat without community, however we choose to engage with that concept. I think it's important to acknowledge that everything I write, explore, dream or uncover has been done so before, by many ancestors and kin. But while something still needs to be said, I'll say it. Pass it on. Remember.

Ka mua, ka muri—walking backwards into the future. It's one of my favourite proverbs and reminds me to embrace time as an endless river, where what was, what is and what could be are all intertwined. My projects wax and wane in what they're responding to, and what forms they crave, and I utilise the term antidisciplinary to refer to this. What I want to say always informs how I want to say it, or even whether I'm the one who should say it. To give an example of the chaos of my practice, I'm currently writing a horror play about mosquito-borne viruses and deforestation, I'm creating an obscene live-performance work about cannibalism, capitalism and real estate, and also building a discomforting interactive game about civil disobedience and passive resistance. That last word there is probably the soft thread you can pull on to understand what I do. Resistance and resilience, and how complex these two things are and continue to be. How we not only survive, but thrive, in the face of violence—a word that has fathomless connotations and contexts.



Daley Rangi performing in *Lipstuck*, a live participatory work about the history of lipstick. Photograph by Daniel James Grant.



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AMTW Congratulations on your brilliant debut poetry collection, *Burnt Tongue*. I love how you open the manuscript by offering mihi (acknowledgements) to people, moments, ancestors and more. You use the dedication "for the extraordinary and the mundane." Can you please share where this thought came from? Does it tie back, perhaps, to the lens through which you view art; these two strands—extraordinary and mundane—sitting side by side?

DR I see them as one and the same. I don't know whether it's quite how I view art, but I know I sense it as connected to survival; the remembering, the endurance, the fortitude of something we once nearly forgot and needed to make tangible. Storytelling is just the passing of knowledge, after all, which is both extraordinary and mundane. Extraordinary in its significance, and mundane in that we must continue to do it as part of our day-to-day, all of us. It's survival itself, stories.

All stories that I experience and engage with change my life in small ways. It's like death by a thousand cuts, but instead life by a thousand hugs. Again, it's a push and pull. Every single poem or piece of art and, by extension, every story, every person, every other life, will change my own in some way. I know it sounds obnoxious to say that, but I try to find some beauty or truth in everything I consume, even if it's really against my values, morals or ethics.

Perhaps I just want to find a way to shift perspective and practice towards self-determination; untethered from the restraints of colonial whims and whiles, and in search of something more beautiful, more kind, more human, more ancient. Despite the violent tones I often paint with, I make work about care, connection and community. I'm really not interested in hyper-individualism. That's never the answer. I'm often alone in body, but always feel communal in spirit.

AMTW You also beautifully acknowledge that *Burnt Tongue* is "for those fighting for the survival of language and land." Can you share a little bit about your relationship with te reo Māori (the Māori language) and whether there was any process, questioning or conversation with your editor and the publisher around the inclusion of te reo in your manuscript?

DR I had a lot of freedom with my writing, which is a blessing, so all decisions are really my own, and I take full accountability for every piece of ink chaotically plastered across those pages. My editor, J Eh Kaw Thaw Saw, is a writer himself, and offered a lot of support and understanding. I won't speak for

him, but will share that he also had experienced a lot of the cultural disconnection and displacement I unpack in the book, just from a different standpoint; which is to say that a lot of us storytellers are wading through the same murky swamp. We poets are pūkeko (wetland birds native to Aotearoa), so we must stretch our webbed toes wide, and trust in the process.

My relationship with te reo and this life-long journey to collect my own version of ngā kete o te wānanga (baskets of knowledge) are threads that I can't really encapsulate within the confines of this chat, or rather I don't feel equipped to yet. I'm not sure I ever will be able to. They're anchored in histories I am still learning, contesting, questioning and excavating. All I can do is access and engage with te ao Māori (the Māori world) with a full heart where I am able to, and pay utmost respect to my whakapapa (ancestral connections). After all, all we can be sure of is the land, the sea, the sky; the mountains, the waves and the stars. It's saddening how we continue to strain our collective relationship with these terrestrial ancestors, who have done so much for us.

I think my relationship with te reo Māori gains some clarity through my writing within the book, and within the title and lead poem itself. I'd require a whole other series of books to really distil my specific experience, but it's a challenging journey that most Māori have been, or are going, through. As much as this realisation rends my heart, it offers solace that I'm definitely not alone and, therefore, reassures me that my writing can maybe, in turn, offer some resonance and relief, or just reassurance, as other writing has done for me.

AMTW Following on from this, in the eponymous poem titled *Burnt Tongue* you write:

i'm terrified that the words will never fit in my mouth

crush my pen

under their weight

that it is too late

is the fruit yet rotten?

Have you come to a point in your journey of learning whether the fruit is yet rotten or forbidden?

DR The fruit can be both, depending on the season, or who claims to own the orchard. I've only just learnt of new ways to speak, new ways to reclaim myself, and new ways to challenge hierarchies.

AMTW Why did you choose poetry as your form of expression on these threads, when you have the theatrical form at your fingertips? How did poetry lend itself to this kaupapa (purpose) as your mode of storytelling?

DR With poetry, and similar knowledge baskets like whakataukī (proverbial sayings), which some of my poems feel closer to, I am getting rid of everything that doesn't need to be said. What I am left with is the truth. Well, not The Truth, but a truth indeed.

AMTW How do you balance multiple, tiered projects and your time and energy, when it comes to different kaupapa that draw on different artistic modalities? What advice would you give to yourself and others to navigate the creative process?

DR Be careful. I remind myself and others to take it slow and enjoy being alive. Don't force yourself to write. My best writing comes to me when I'm resting. Yes, there is truth in pain, but maybe it's actually in the shadow of that pain, the reflection, the refraction, in the trickling sands of time, thick in your blood. Sometimes they're deep in our bodies, our being. So be. Know that, as a writer, you don't always have to write for someone else, sometimes you can write for yourself. You don't have to sell your pain and trauma. Do what you need to do to survive, but don't lose yourself in the process.

AMTW What was the process like of writing *Burnt Tongue*? Can you share some moments when you struggled and when you felt ease and strength?

DR None of it is easy. Sometimes it feels like writing is all I can do, and it often burns. Much of the time it brings up sparks of whakamā, that hot, blistering shame. But instead of withdrawing from it, I try to write about it, take a risk. Tēnā te ngaru whati, tēnā te ngaru puku. There is a wave that breaks, there is a wave that swells.

A lot of what I write about is inspired by violence, both internal and external. I wish I had picked a better theme to wrap my pen around, but here we are. Maybe I'm wrong, and it's something else entirely. Can someone read my stuff and tell me what it all means? Please? I'm honestly utter shit at really getting to the juicy core of whatever fruit I'm always snacking on in my mahi. Maybe one day I'll finally reach the core, pluck the seed, plant it somewhere, and fertilise it with my remains. Maybe one day we'll all sit together and watch the sun rise on a better world, and maybe a word or two I once wrote is warm dust on that morning breeze.

I'm not special, either. Every person and, honestly, all beings, are instinctively born, hardwired, to engage with each other, to tell tall tales of what was, what is and what could be. I suppose I'm just providing a framework for that instinct, to have some deeper engagement.

It's less about making one uncomfortable, but rather about sitting in discomfort and learning from it. Utilising my own internal battles, lost and won, as archaeological sites in which to dig up some truths that relate to everybody, to hold us all accountable, me included—no, artists don't get to escape accountability.



Daley Rangi performing in *Takatāpui*. Photograph by Cassandra Hannagan.



Daley Rangi performing in *Takatāpui*. Photograph by Sophie Minissale.



Daley Rangi performing in *Takatāpui*. Photograph by Sophie Minissale.

AMTW There is a five-part poem titled “Takatāpui” woven throughout *Burnt Tongue*, which consists of cinematic snippets of vignetted stories that are so immediate and undeniable. It’s almost like each of them are fingers that are the hand of the manuscript. I love them. In “Takatāpui (Toru)” we read:

Hahaha, I’m
talking shit to myself of
course, just dreamin’ my
little dreams, I just be a
lil’ korikori in June, I still
gotta bloom.

Can you share a bit about which other Takatāpui writers, poets or artists you draw strength and inspiration from?

DR It’s cosmically funny and beautiful, the ways in which we Takatāpui storytellers stumble across each other’s works; this subconscious, vital mahi of being offered and offering kaha (strength), to each other and our kin.

In a recent example, I was lurking in the dressing room of The Studio at the Sydney Opera House, two hours out from performing *Takatāpui* as a live, solo theatre work. I’d written it, expelled this kōrero pono (true story) from my system, but it felt like I needed to bring it to aural and oral life, and so I had turned it into a visceral, disco-tinged storm of story and sound. It’s coming to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, to the Basement Theatre, in the weeks before Matariki if anyone is interested!

It was very much theatre made to haunt and to heal, and after a season on Whadjuk boodjar, in Perth, this was round two of performing it and, to be candid, at one of the most outwardly intimidating venues this land has to offer. I was cloaked in mānakanaka (apprehension). I was worried about how it, and I, would be received. This was one of the most cavernous, self-expressing—or rather, self-exposing— things I'd made, and there I was, this lonely kaiwhakaari (performer), armed with only a microphone, a vocal processor and a killer pair of heels.

I received a supportive text message from a fellow storyteller —"Check this out, I think you'll like it"—and a link. It was the music video for Jen Cloher's "Mana Takatāpui," released only the week before. I think I watched it ten times in a row to begin with— the first in gobsmacked silence, the other nine on the floor bawling my eyes out. Wehi nā! It's stunning.

"Aroha, mana Takatāpui, kei roto i a koe …"[02]

It was full of such Queer joy, a soft yet powerful waiata (song), careful and caring. It became my nightly warm-up to dance around my dressing room singing along to this. It was heartening to see another person somewhat displaced from Māoritanga (Māori culture) and te reo Māori making their way back home, in the literal, metaphorical and ancestral senses. The video also stars so many gorgeous humans who have paved the way for Takatāpuitanga (the culture of same-sex relationships and other Queer identities within te ao Māori) to exist in all its vibrancy: all the joy and all the rage. Watch it here, it honestly says more than I ever could.

Dr. Elizabeth Kerekere is in the music video. She is a key figure of inspiration, and, like Jen Cloher, I'd based the title of my work on Elizabeth's monumental research and activism, which culminated in a vital resource titled *Takatāpui: Part of the Whānau*. It's available online here. I don't think I could ever thank her enough for the guidance and assurance and strength it provided me. I'd also be remiss to not mention Georgina Beyer, who we sadly lost in March this year when she joined her tūpuna (ancestors); a wahine toa whose staunch refusal to back down has done multitudes for bodily integrity.

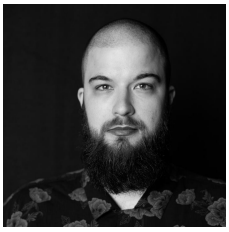
I leave you with my own remnant, a recording I made of the eponymous poem from *Burnt Tongue*. We thrive only due to the resistance and resilience of those countless ancestors and kin; may they finally rest, but be ever with us in stories.

Footnotes

01. This is a pepeha; a statement of ancestral connections to humans and other beings in the environment that positions the speaker in a web of relations.

02. Jen Cloher, "Mana Takatāpui," track 5 on *I am the River, the River is Me*, Milk! Records under exclusive licence to Marathon Artists, 2022.

Biographies



Daley Rangi (Te Ātiawa) is an antidisciplinary artist and storyteller generating the unpredictable—speaking truth to power, reorienting hierarchies and investigating injustice. They've made a lot of art—not all of it good, but most of it interesting. They are neurodivergent, which appears to infiltrate their work. Speaking of, their practice has, thus far, tackled ecological sovereignty, disability ethics, ideological virality, contested histories, Queer labour and the infinities of identity. For them, self-biographies are all at once discomforting, superfluous and crucial, in constant dialogue with colonial systems. Daley, like their practice, is inspired by ancestry and still searching for answers.



Anne-Marie Te Whiu (Te Rarawa) is a poet, editor, cultural producer and weaver based on unceded Gadigal lands in Australia. She has edited works such as *Solid Air: Australian and New Zealand Spoken Word*, *Whisper Songs* by Tony Birch and *More Than These Bones* by Bebe Backhouse. She is dedicated to platforming the creative output of Indigenous peoples around the world and is especially interested in the rigour of the artistic collective. She was previously the Co-Director of the Queensland Poetry Festival and was a recipient of The Next Chapter Fellowship through The Wheeler Centre. Her writing has been widely published in journals, books, sites and magazines such as *Another Australia*, *Sport*, *Te Whe ki Tukorehe* Volume 1, *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Australian Poetry*, *Tupuranga*, *Debris*, *SBS*, *Running Dog*, *Ora Nui*, *In*ter*is*land Collective* and *Contemporary HUM*. She is an Associate Editor of *Contemporary HUM*.

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