

# A Strange and Hopeful Proximity\*

Isobel Cairns  
& Abby Cunnane

Isobel Cairn's poem *Ages* was the starting point for this conversation with Abby Cunnane, which took shape as an email exchange about language, writing and reading, and their relationship to change: making change, coping with, and thinking about change. Perversely – in the context of a publication and a project that deals often with great distance – Isobel was writing from her First Avenue flat in Kingsland, Auckland; Abby was often writing from her flat on Haslett St a few streets away. But writing seemed more appropriate. Isobel studied philosophy, psychology and creative writing at university, and currently works as a research assistant in public health at the University of Auckland. Abby is a curator who works at ST PAUL St Gallery, and writes both inside and outside of that role.

## Abby Cunnane

I remember first hearing that poem aloud, and I'd been reading that day about our government's offer of residence to Tuvaluan people displaced by rising sea levels (this has since proved to be a highly selective process), and more about Kiribati Atoll in the Pacific, which is likely to be completely uninhabitable by the end of this century. I'd been reading a lot of numbers – apparently something like 630 million people world over live within nine metres of sea level;

in New Zealand about 65% of us live within 5km of the coast – and feeling depressed. Like the calculations, the ‘hard science’ on one hand, and the popular reproduction of this on the other hand, is still so hard to relate to people’s actual lives, and to the small and larger changes that are happening all the time. I’d been thinking about what it would feel like for your island to be sinking. And then your poem made me think about proximity – like this is actually happening here too – and collective vulnerability being something we all have to believe in in order to be able to change.

Isobel Cairns

Funnily enough, the poem didn’t start out being about climate change – it was just about a one night stand, and about being in physical places (other people’s rooms) that are entirely new and will most likely never be seen again. Anyway, not about climate change, until that’s kind of what it turned into. And then what came out of it was a lot of thinking about connection – exactly that connection you are talking about with the numbers, when big picture becomes small picture – yet how do we go about fitting the biggest picture stuff in with something so real and small as some of those moments feel.

I’d been thinking for a while about how strange it is that our generation, for all that we seem clued up about climate change, don’t really take account of it in our actions. By that I don’t necessarily mean mitigation, like thinking about our carbon footprint or being involved in politics, but simple adaptation – because if scientists are right, then in twenty years things will look a lot different. Where are we going to live? How are we going to get around, where will our food come from? Maybe young people aren’t that great at thinking about the future.

AC

After you read I remember there was conversation about how to use the word 'sex' in a poem, something like that, who could do it etc. Somehow this conversation has stayed in my mind as being about the precariousness of all relationships, like the words we use need to be negotiated all the time, they're never quite enough. Is that something you think about?

IC

Ah ha, no! That's actually not something I've really thought about. I do remember that conversation though, although I remember it much more as a sort of technical discussion – like when writers discuss whether you can put technology in your work, you know, having characters on cellphones and that kind of thing. How about you – do you mean words within a relationship need to be negotiated, or words to describe the relationship to people outside it?

AC

I think a lot about how language works – both within relationships, and describing them to the outside world. I guess a lot of that talking and thinking about the future happens inside of relationships, like you need to imagine things collectively, because it's hard to do on your own?

IC

I don't feel like I spend a lot of time thinking in relationships with others – I'm quite a solo person, and feel most myself when I'm alone – but if you're talking about the 'gaps between people', then yes, language is very important.

AC

There's this idea with written things that they offer a final or concrete take on something, and yet really, it seems to me that the whole deal with language is that it's elusive, and that every metaphor asks to be qualified by another. I think language is really important in the discussion around climate change. There's this phrase 'stranded assets' that gets used to talk about reserves of oil and coal which are still in their natural state, not yet mined and transformed into money – it makes me wild, but it's pretty suggestive right? I've also been on the National Party website recently, trying to figure out what they are committing to in terms of climate change and the environment more generally, and I found this whole new language there – 'bluegreen' policy, alongside of all the usual economic jargon: 'investing' in the environment, 'making use of its resources' etc. They keep referring to *our* oceans, *our* kauri, *our* waterways. Tell me, when you were working for the Green Party was there a lot of discussion around language, and how to establish the right tone? I feel like the relationship between tone and visual imagery is something contemporary political language exploits really effectively. Did working with politicians change the way you use and understand language?

IC

Oh, yeah, definitely! Maybe that's why I don't think of language so much when I'm writing, or in relationships – it's more like work to me. Language in that context is hugely important. It's part of something that gets called 'framing' – how do you talk about something, what is the problem, then what is your solution? It's been driving me crazy recently, because academics can be terrible at presenting their work to non-academics – and fair enough in some ways,

because one of the things that is so admirable about intellectual work is its dedication to ‘truth’, or if not that, ‘quality’ or ‘rigour’. But I miss that attention to clarity and simplicity I saw when I was working in Parliament, where there was much more attention paid to not just what was presented but how.

AC

Do you think there’s something particular to writers and other types of artists, in their ability to translate across discourses – academic to popular, political or strategic to something more practical, or more poetic or abstract? (I’m always kind of amazed that everyone expects to ‘get’ art, which they don’t expect from other professional or highly specialised discourses.) Maybe it has to do with the often really discursive processes involved in the research that writers and artists undertake. I just read something that filmmaker Briar March said after making her documentary on Takuu Atoll: ‘I see the act of filming like a ritual that creates some impact.... There was something very egalitarian about it... it wasn’t like the scientists were these expert witnesses sitting in an office somewhere. They were there in the community just like another character in the film. Everyone’s viewpoints were heard on the same level.’<sup>1</sup> Working with this kind of methodology, I think maybe artists and writers develop ways of talking about what they’re doing that are somehow unique, and a skill in looking at things from an oblique angle perhaps?

IC

I’d like to think that’s what writers and artists can do! Perhaps that’s almost the definition of good writing, at least, to me – when I think about pieces of writing

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1 Briar March, talking about her film *There Once was an Island* (2010) in ‘Climate, Atoll and Change’ with Lyn Collie as part of the *Now Future: Dialogues with Tomorrow* series (Wellington, 2010).

or art that I really love, there's almost that ray of light, shining clarity or something, and it comes from looking at something in a new way – but maybe it's more that it makes a link that you hadn't seen before, and that can come from translating. I love when you get a flash of something political where you hadn't seen it before. I think though that when art, or anyone really, tries to be overly political it can backfire – people are turned off, look the other way, or the political questions get turned around and it becomes about whether art can be political or whether it's exclusionary, and it's not that those questions aren't very important, but you don't want to keep knocking into them all the time. I like it more when politics and art sidle up to each other subtly, it's more powerful that way.

AC

When we first met you were finishing a philosophy degree. I assume this informs your thinking around climate change somehow? Does it provide a kind of space to discuss this problem which often gets left to scientific or political or journalistic languages? Do you think it's possible to write directly about climate change, in a way that isn't somehow aesthetically unsatisfactory?

IC

There's a bunch of literature in philosophy on the separation between aesthetics and ethics, these two type of values; I don't think you can expect art to result in people changing their behaviour in any way. What would be more interesting – what I would like to see – is more of an exploration of what climate change will mean for us. How do we understand ourselves in a new, changing world? I can't really put into words what I mean by this, and I mentioned it earlier, but I think I'm talking about the difference between mitigation and adaptation. I find adaptation

more interesting, both politically and aesthetically, and I feel that it's the side that's been (more) overlooked.

When we had those depressing presentations about climate change when I was working for the Greens, what struck me most was how relatively easy it would be to build those predictions into our current plans. There's a motorway they're putting in on the Kapiti Coast north of Wellington, which is hideous in its own right, but it's going to be built through a flood plain and will likely be really vulnerable when the water table rises. To me that was more scandalous than the fact that they would still be building motorways when we're running out of oil, leaching carbon, etc. – that they're building something that won't even work in its own right, that isn't even a good example of what it's supposed to be.

AC

We were talking (outside of this conversation!) about how people psychologically deal with change, and what you were saying about evolution and innate biology seemed really relevant... Maybe can you touch on that here?

IC

People dealing with change is a whole big area of psychology. It's so hard to distinguish ability to change from wider structural stuff though, which is why I quit psychology. Basically, and this sounds too simple, people's adaptation will rest on their perception of the seriousness of the threat, and their ability to adapt to it – like whether they can afford to, whether they have the capacity to – but also their beliefs about how well they can adapt to it. Do they believe that their attempts to avoid disaster will be successful? So it's dangerous, in the case of climate change,

to tell people about how serious it's going to be without also telling them that they can do something to make it better.

And also, when it comes to climate change, there's a whole bunch of cognitive biases operating that are related to our biology and evolution. The idea is that our brains are operating a few thousand years behind this complex and crazy society that we've built (although I kind of hate the 'Paleolithic brain can't cope with modern world' discourse, because it is associated with so much gross stuff – evolutionary racism, sexism, paleo diets, CrossFit... provides too much of an ethical 'out', I think!). Anyway, there's a bunch of biases – brain shortcuts that make us more efficient, ways in which we see the world inaccurately – which make climate change seem like less of a threat than it is. Human brains are basically set up to pay more attention to things that are closer to us in time and space.

There's the availability heuristic for example<sup>2</sup>... That one states that we are geared to pay attention to things that we've actually experienced before, because they're more 'available': easy to bring to mind. These brain flaws mean that it's extra hard, cognitively, for us to deal with the idea of climate change, so at that very basic level, underneath all the politics and the capitalism and the terrible systems that we see, we're not set up biologically to deal with it. Maybe this is where writing can help? What do you think?

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2 See Robert Gifford, 'The Dragons of Inaction: Psychological Barriers that Limit Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation', *American Psychologist* vol.66, no.4 (2011): 290-302. doi:10.1037/a0023566.



AC

Yep, I'm a believer – I don't think that writing (or visual art for that matter) can actually change things, but I think it can make available, to borrow your terminology, a wider spectrum of possible actions for the individual. And this can be really simple, through allowing us to visualise what might otherwise be impossibly abstracted from the everyday. To me it comes back to proximity, and writing can bring things close; that's been my experience as a reader anyway. There's this part in Nigel Clark's essay 'Acquiescence: Fluid Realities and Planned Retreat' which talks about Kiribati's recent establishment of a new marine reserve (it's massive, 410,500 square kilometres, and contains coral reef ecosystems unparalleled anywhere else on the planet), at the same moment as its people are facing the end of their home on the island.<sup>3</sup> Reading about that gesture – which in transactional, cost-benefit terms makes no sense – makes you suddenly, abruptly aware of the fact that people and small actions are still really significant, that absurd acts of generosity happen. And if that's true then maybe the radical denial of self-interest can happen in other ways too.

So I think that reading is a political act – what you read, and how that infiltrates your thinking and conversation and whatever happens next for you, on a modest scale. There's that Kafka thing about reading being 'the axe to shatter the frozen sea within us', like it's what has the potential to break us. Maybe it's a structural particularity of reading, because it's something you generally do alone, that what you come across in that form can seem very intimate and specifically addressed to you. Something like that?

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3 See Nigel Clark, 'Acquiescence: Fluid Realities and Planned Retreat', in Eds. Christina Barton, Natasha Conland and Wytson Curnow, *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture*, iss. 4 (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2010), p.57.

Returning to writing, I don't think its political or action-generating significance is just that it has the capacity to impart information, or 'paint a picture', something like that. There's also the way that words work to bring disconnected things together. Like the meteorologist and your nephew Noah, and the puddles freezing and ice skating and climate change. All those things existed outside of the poem but they only make contact there. It's a version of your art and politics 'sidling up' I guess, but I also think it's the way brains make new connections: laterally rather than in terms of forward logic.

\*This phrase is borrowed from Nigel Clark's essay 'Acquiescence: Fluid Realities and Planned Retreat', 2010. He uses it in the discussion of a possible relationship between a planet in volatile environmental flux, the economic logic driving global debates about the environment, and the idea of hospitality or generosity on the part of its human inhabitants.