

Roimata Toroa

Tears of the Albatross

Natalie Robertson

In Te Ao Māori, the Toroa (albatross) is sacred. Roimata Toroa, albatross tears, is a widely used tukutuku pattern. Derived from the Te Tairāwhiti Ngāti Porou story of Pourangahua, the pattern speaks of the misadventures of travelers who take shortcuts in haste to get to port. Pourangahua was an agriculturist who traveling a return journey to Aotearoa to grow kumara, gifted to him by Ruakapenga, a tohunga and learned scientist. Lent two pet albatrosses, Harongarangi and Tiungarangi, by Ruakapenga, Pourangahua is given strict instructions on which hazards to avoid, the care of the birds, and a karakia to give thanksgiving for their safe return. In his hurriedness to see his wife Kaniowai, Pourangahua takes a shortcut, runs into a taniwha (a denotation of hazards), and forgets the karakia and fails to care for the birds, leading to their grief and eventual demise¹. Realising he has dishonoured Ruakapenga, Pourangahua tries to cover his mistake, by belatedly doing the karakia, but it is too late. The damage was done.

In late 2011, I was following the news in the wake of the MV Rena's grounding, a Liberian-registered container ship that hit the Astrolabe Reef, off the Tauranga coast, a full speed on October 5, at 2.14am.² The Transport Accident Incident report MO-2011-204 states that 'After departure from Napier, the master learned from notes on the chart of the unfavourable currents. He then authorised the watchkeepers

to deviate from the planned course lines on the chart to shorten the distance...' The captain Mauro Balomaga and navigational officer Leonil Relon in charge of MV *Rena*, took shortcuts in haste to get into Tauranga Harbour by 3.00am. Clearly, they didn't follow instructions that would allow for safe passage across the ocean. In doing so, their actions led to the loss of the lives of masses of sea mammals and contaminated kaimoana. Taking shortcuts to meet commercial demands is now widespread in the 'forgotten space' (Sekula & Birch, 2012) of the industrialised sea.

For local iwi Ngai Te Hapu, Te Patuwai and Ngai Te Rangi, the wrecked *Rena* ruined the mauri, the life force, of the reef, known to them as Te Tau o Otaiti.³ By mid-October, the ship's hull split in two, releasing heavy fuel oil. On October 11, the vessel became a total loss.⁴ It is recorded as New Zealand's worst maritime environmental disaster, spilling hundreds of tonnes of oil into the ocean, as well as containers of hazardous materials. On 12 October 2011, I saw a news image of a dead, oiled albatross—my tears fell. The largest seabird in the world, the wingspan of the *Toroa* is over three metres. Notable for living for decades *Toroa* travel vast distances, ocean wanderers that can cover as much as 190,000 km a year. They are also vulnerable to habitat and climate change, some fishing practices and slow reproduction rates. Imagine those wings, perhaps a metre long each, diving on a

magnificent downward arc, to retrieve a fish, and finding itself mired in sticky oil. With the oil clinging to those wings, the weight would be too great to rise out of the oil slick. The distressing image of the oiled *Toroa* prompted me to head to Papamoa a couple of days later with fellow artist Alex Monteith. Aligning with Greenpeace, we obtained media passes to get access to the cleanup site at Papamoa and the Oiled Wildlife Care Network. Along with hundreds of volunteers, we were briefed on appropriate care on the beaches to avoid toxic oil contamination spreading. For two days, we documented the military operation of the beach cleanup, witnessing the goodwill of fellow people to clean up the tragic results of the *Rena* grounding. I gave a selection of photographs to Greenpeace for publication.⁵ They continue to appear on Greenpeace affiliated websites around the world.

Five years on, the rusting ruin of the *Rena* is still on the Otaiti reef. Like Pourangahua, the MV *Rena* master was apologetic, but it was too late to save the *Toroa*, hundreds of penguins and thousands of other birds whose food sources were destroyed. The damage continues to this day.

Natalie Robertson

(Ngāti Porou; Clan Dhonnachaidh)
Senior Lecturer, School of Art and Design
Auckland University of Technology

NOTES

¹Sources include Ruakapanga Marae, Ūawa, Pine Taiapa (Teara), Pine Taiapa in Joan Metge (1998). *Time & The Art of Māori Storytelling. New Zealand Studies*, 8(1), 3-9.

²Container ship MV *Rena* grounding on Astrolabe Reef, 5 October 2011
www.taic.org.nz/inquiry/mo-2011-204

³<http://frontiersabroad.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Talia-Steiger.pdf>

⁴www.taic.org.nz/inquiry/mo-2011-204

⁵www.greenpeace.org/new-zealand/Global/new-zealand/P3/publications/GreenpeaceNZ-2011-Annual-Report.pdf

⁶<http://www.greenpeace.org/new-zealand/Global/new-zealand/P3/publications/GreenpeaceNZ-2011-Annual-Report.pdf>

REFERENCE

Sekula, A., & Birch, N. (2012). *The forgotten space. A film essay on globalisation and the sea.*