

PHOTOESSAY

Challenging the Pacific 'blind spots' through images

Photoessay: A unique feature of *Pacific Journalism Review*, compared with many other journalism and media research journals, has been a particular focus on photography and documentary. Contributors have been eclectic and varied, ranging from activist photojournalist John Miller (Ngapuhi), who charted the new wave of Māori assertiveness from the first Nga Tamatoa protest at Waitangi in 1971 and who offered a research portfolio on the Ngatihine Land/Forestry legal dispute in Northland Aotearoa, to Ben Bohane's 'Melanesian mythical places with unreported conflicts', to Kasun Ubayasiri's 'Manus to Meanjin' study of refugee migration, to Filipino Fernando G. Sepe's stunning but shocking portrayal of President Rodrigo Duterte's extrajudicial 'war on drugs' (in reality a 'war on poverty'), through to Todd M. Henry's Tongan 'Gangsters in Paradise' and the realm of kava in New Zealand. At least a dozen portfolios have been published by the journal and this article examines and reflects on some of the highlights. The photoessay is completed with a portfolio of protest photographs from the seven months of Israel's War on Gaza.

Keywords: activism, blind spots, decolonisation, documentary, Kanaky, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, photoessays, photojournalism, Tonga, War on Gaza

DAVID ROBIE and DEL ABCEDE

Asia Pacific Media Network

THE Pacific Islands have long been a refuge,' wrote celebrated Vanuatu-based investigative photojournalist Ben Bohane in the introduction to his extraordinary 2013 collection *The Black Islands*, 'for eccentric foreigners and castaways too, who often fell into one (or several) of these categories: mercenary, missionary or misfit.' Adding to his message of how the region was a magnet for mystics and mayhem, he wrote:

As a photojournalist who has lived and journeyed through these shimmering islands, perhaps I am a crude mix of all of the above. I was drawn

to them because they still seemed like mythical and remote places in an increasingly familiar world, while many of its conflicts were largely unreported. There were family connections too.

So beginning in 1994, I ran a naval blockade to cover the war in Bougainville and soon found others too, wars the rest of the world had conveniently forgotten: in East Timor, West Papua as well as Bougainville. Then there were riots in New Caledonia, civil war in the Solomon and coups in Fiji ... (Bohane, 2013)

Ben began his long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* research journal (and thus the Pacific Media Centre) with an illustrated investigative article in 2001 about the complex divided loyalties within the Fiji military following the George Speight attempted coup debacle in May 2000. He characterised the crux of the divide to be between the ‘professional’ soldiers, typified by then Commander Voreqe Bainimarama (later coup leader and ultimately elected prime minister), who believed the military should stay out of politics, and the ‘politicals’, who sought to ensure the supremacy of indigenous Fijian rights.

He followed this up with two powerfully evocative portfolios of photographs published in 2006 (Bohane & Dean) and 2014 (Bohane) editions of the journal. In the former, Ben featured some of his photos from the Bougainville war, which started in 1989 in response to an environmental crisis over Panguna copper mine;

© BEN BOHANE



Figure 1: A raskol from the Kips Kaponi gang in his Port Moresby hideout, Papua New Guinea, 2005. Featured on the cover of Vol 12(2) in Ben Bohane’s portrayal of ‘spirit and war in Melanesia’.

a troop deployment of Australian troops (and other Pacific forces, including from Fiji and New Zealand); the controversial arrival of 43 West Papuan refugees in 2006 and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the Solomon Islands the same year (Figure 1).

Bec Dean, curator of Ben’s original *Black Islands* exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney, noted that the photographer’s long-standing journalistic focus in the region had been to explore the connections between *kastom* and resistance movements. As she described it, *kastom* is a broad term ‘derived from the Tok Pisin (Melanesian pidgin) for “custom” used to describe dynamic new religious movements with a traditional and spiritual base’. As Ben himself described it:

As an Australian, resident in Vanuatu, I see myself as a Pacific islander and reject the grandiose claims of Australia being a ‘continent’. I believe that this notion has blinded Australians to the reality that we remain forever linked to other Pacific islands through the blood and songlines of our indigenous people and our historical and military legacy in the region.

Another influential photographer, this time in Aotearoa New Zealand, has also had a long association with *Pacific Journalism Review* and the Pacific Media Centre with his trajectory of civil rights, anti-apartheid, anti-nuclear, social justice, political transformation and indigenous struggle. John Miller (Ngāpuhi) received a Media Peace Prize Lifetime Award in 2003 for his contribution to the struggle for peace as a ‘sympathetic observer’. Recently his enormous archive—and he has a prodigious memory—on events such as the Springbok tour of 1981, the *hikoi* (Māori Land March), Waitangi protests and the 2006 tangi of the Māori Queen, Te Arikinui Dame Te Ataiangikaahu has been developed into an iconic collection. He has been a frequent guest lecturer for the Pacific Media Centre, and was one of the recipients of the first centre research grants in 2007 which led to the photoessay ‘Seeing the wood for the trees—Ngatihine’ published in 2011.

The first Nga Tamatoa protest at Waitangi in 1971 launched a new era of assertiveness in the struggle for Māori Treaty, land, and cultural rights. Such events as the Māori Land March (1975) and the occupations at Bastion Point and Raglan (1978) received prominent treatment in mainstream media of the day, noted *Pacific Journalism Review* (Figure 2). However, how well equipped were the then predominantly monocultural news organisations in understanding underlying issues behind such protests? John sought some answers:

My own interest in issues of media coverage comes from an involvement in a complex legal dispute over a Māori-owned land block 35 years ago, during which I had much contact with journalists of the day, at a time when the media landscape was much less ethnically diverse. Of the 41 or

so ‘mainstream’ journalists I had varying contact with over a 24 month period from 1976 to 1978, 36 were Pākehā, three were Māori (one of these a trainee) and two were Samoan. I was effectively presenting a minority culture issue to media workers overwhelmingly of the majority culture. I discovered that the subject was virtually unknown territory to these journalists. This was certainly a ‘blind spot’ issue. (Miller, 2011)

© JOHN MILLER



Figure 2: The fight for Māori land: A compilation of articles by Robert Jones in 1978 by photojournalist John Miller (Ngāpuhi) in a research project for the Pacific Media Centre and an early photoessay by PJR (Miller, 2011).

Social psychologist Emily Pronin first coined the term in research relating to the bias blind spot in 2002. While the research was primarily about the bias of the average person (85 percent of a sample of 600 people considered that they were less biased than the average American), it has a particular applicability to news media too. Situations abound where editors and news directors fail to provide coverage or analysis of issues, thus creating blind spots for their audience. Marginalisation by mainstream news media in New Zealand of the West Papua human rights crisis is an obvious example of this.

My own work has certainly focused on media blind spots and human rights, which has led to photographic exhibitions in Kenya (a social justice portrayal of Madagascar), Auckland (‘Faces of Africa’ and ‘Nuclear Exodus: The Rongelap Evacuation’, later turned into a television video broadcast on *Tagata Pasifika*)



© DAVID ROBIE

Figure 3: Heavily armed French CRS riot police confront Kanak pro-independence protesters in Nouméa’s Montravel suburb, New Caledonia, in 1984. This was featured on the cover of v19(1) ‘Media and democracy in the Pacific’ and in the 10th anniversary publication of the Pacific Media Centre (Marbrook et al., 2017).

and Wellington, and books including *Eyes of Fire* (1986), *Blood on their Banner* (1989), *Mekim Nius* (2004) and *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific* (2014) (Figure 3).

In the past decade, the Pacific Media Centre, especially through its publications, *Pacific Journalism Review*, *Pacific Journalism Monographs* and books, such as *Conflict, Custom & Conscience: Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre, 2007-2017* (Marbrook et al., 2017), sought to challenge blind spots, and offer a ‘voice for the voiceless’ (Robie, 2023). Journalism schools prioritise journalists as detached observers, keeping their distance. However, we need to examine our media role more closely and more critically. Does our journalism perpetuate human rights violations or conflict, or does it contribute to restoring peace and justice?

Nepali Times editor-in-chief and publisher Kunda Dixit, is the author of *Dateline Earth*, a critique of Western mainstream media and the control of news by multinational corporations reflecting the interests and preoccupations of industrialised countries. The original edition of this book (in 1996) was essentially before the rise of the internet and social media networking: ‘News was whatever happened in the US, Western Europe, Australia, and the periphery wasn’t deemed to be important.’ When the revised edition emerged in 2011, says

Dixit, the mediascape wasn't any better; corporate media control still persisted in the internet age, although by now it was also struggling to maintain a successful business model.

However, with the cybernet revolution, believes Kunda, photojournalism, especially of an investigative edge, is enjoying a resurgence. Kunda was keynote speaker at a 2011 'Investigative Journalism and Technology' conference at Auckland University of Technology, which later provided an incentive for the founding of New Zealand's Centre for Investigative Journalism. His inspirational exhibition of 'peace photographs' by a range of photographers featuring the 10-year Maoist civil war in his country created quite a stir. Some of the images, including the cover of this book, are featured in this collection and were drawn from his trilogy *The People War* (Figure 4). I wrote in a review about the influence of his works:

Dixit's prophetic view that issues such as jungle families sickened by mine tailings, peasants impoverished by global free trade, countries harmed by toxic waste and general environmental neglect were often ignored is now widely accepted in the region with a wider range of environmental and human rights reporting now a normative. Climate change has contributed to a paradigm shift. (Robie, 2009, p. 230)

PACIFIC MEDIA CENTRE

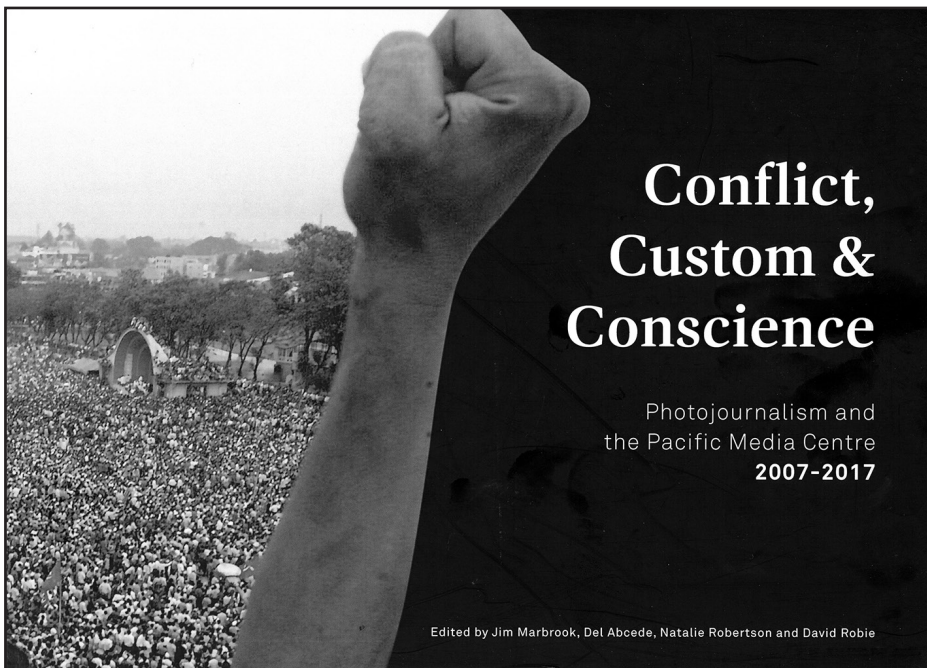


Figure 4: The cover of the 2017 photojournalism collection published by the Pacific Media Centre on the occasion of its 10th anniversary, partially inspired by the work of *Nepali Times* editor Kunda Dixit (Marbrook et al., 2017).

Many staff, students and volunteers affiliated with the Pacific Media Centre have achieved outstanding results in investigative photojournalism and documentary work, including Karen Abplanalp (2012), whose investigative feature ‘Blood Money’ in *Metro* magazine, forced the NZ Superannuation Fund (NZSF), which has an ethical investment policy, to withdraw from the American and Indonesian-owned Freeport copper and gold mine at Grasberg in West Papua. This feature won several investigative journalism awards. Del Abcede has chronicled the personalities, cultural diversity and initiatives of the centre for the past decade with empathy, depth and passion. Film maker Jim Marbrook’s feature-length documentary *Cap Bocage* on a New Caledonian environmental saga began its genesis with a small—and inaugural—seed grant from the PMC in 2007 (Marbrook, 2015). His initiative created the impetus for this book and he inspired a documentary dimension to the Pacific Media Centre’s work through Te Ara Motuhenga.

News media ought to be vigilant in countering elected despots who use their mandate to destroy the very institutions that allowed them to be voted into power in the first place, argues Kunda Dixit. When he spoke in Auckland, he issued a challenge which is just as valid today:

Let’s work on a paradigm shift in the way we in the media approach stories. We should strive to cover deprivation and the causes of social injustice, not just its effect. It means each of us having a conscience and using it—by striving to be fair in an unfair world. (Dixit, 2011).

Undoubtedly the most compelling, certainly the most shocking, photoessay published by *Pacific Journalism Review*, has been a 2018 series of 10 photographs taken at night by ABS-CBN photographer Fernando G. Sepe Jr of victims of then Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte’s state-sanctioned murderous ‘war on drugs’ which reached a peak at one stage of 32 people killed in a single day. According to Amnesty International, the more than 3,600 people slain in the killing spree already by 2016—more honestly a ‘war on poverty’—had exceeded the 3,240 people estimated to have been ‘salvaged’ (a Filipino term for extrajudicial killings) during the nearly 14 years of the dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos (Thompson, 2016). The editors of *PJR* expected to get some robust responses from academics and journalists after seeing the published photos (Figure 5). However, although the collection was downloaded more than 450 times, responses were muted. Sepe himself wrote in the abstract:

The photoessay *Healing The Wounds From the Drug War* was the trail of people’s lives that have been disrupted by this brutal campaign in the Philippines. It was about what happens to those people left behind after the killings. Some who survive end up in decrepit jails. The families of the

dead, mostly from the poor who get by in hand-to-mouth existence, end up buried in debt only to have their loved ones get a burial. But it was also a story of hope for those given a new lease of life by organisations willing to assist in the rehabilitation of drug addicts. (Sepe, 2018).

© FERNANDO G SEPE JR



© Fernando G. Sepe Jr.

Figure 5: Journalists take photos of a body discovered by a roadside near a garbage dumpsite in suburban Quezon City, Philippines, 10 February 2017.

Among more recent photoessays published by *PJR* since it left AUT University and began publishing with the independent Asia Pacific Media Network have been a unique and idiosyncratic collection of refugee poster montages, ‘Manus to Meanjin’, a study of polymorphic borders and Australian imperialism, by Kasun Ubayasiri (2021). He followed this with a study two years later of refugee migration with a series of stunning portraits.

Documentary photographer, photojournalist and visual storyteller Todd M. Henry has also had two powerful photoessays published by *PJR*. The first, ‘Gangsters in Paradise: the deportees of Tonga’ was based on the documentary of the same title (Henry, 2019). As a photographer with a tendency to focus on social issues and subcultures, he was keen to ‘start a conversation in Tonga itself regarding how this growing community can be better supported and understood by the wider Tongan public’. His later photoessay (Henry, 2022) was about documenting the use of kava in different parts of the Pacific, ‘particularly in Tonga and in Auckland where its use is popular among members of communities that consume kava as part of their cultural tradition, and more recently a growing non-traditional user group’.

This portfolio on these pages focuses on photographs that we have taken at various protests over the genocide against Palestinians in Aotearoa (Tamaki Makaurau) and Australia (Melbourne and Adelaide) that we have attended virtually weekly since Israel's War on Gaza began on 7 October 2023. Palestinian photographers and journalists have borne the brunt of this war with the highest death rate of media people in any war. According to Al Jazeera, 147 journalists have been killed in eight months, a phenomenal casualty rate compared with both the Vietnam War (63 killed in two decades) and Second World War (67 killed in seven years) (Robie, 2024a, 2024b). More than 36,000 people have been killed, two thirds of them children and women, and more than 80,000 wounded.

For the past eight months, Gaza's photographers, videographers and camera operators have been bearing witness, ensuring the civilian catastrophe unfolding in the enclave is not forgotten. With Israel barring entry into the strip for foreign journalists, Gaza's reporters have been the only ones to report on the crisis on the ground. They were rewarded in spite of their terrible sacrifice in early May when UNESCO named the Palestinian journalists covering Gaza as the laureates of the 2024 Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize (Palestinian journalists, 2024).

Our photo gallery pays tribute to the ordinary citizens and families in Aotearoa New Zealand protesting weekly for the past eight months for justice and an immediate end to the war.

References

- Abplanalp, K. (2012). 'Blood money': A NZ investigative journalism case study. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 18(1), 128-147. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v18i1.293>
- Bohane, B. (2001). Fiji military exorcise ghosts: Coverage of Crises 9. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa*, 7(1), 69-72. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v7i1.705>
- Bohane, B. (2013). The black islands: Spirit and war in Melanesia. Port Vila, Vanuatu: Waka Press.
- Bohane, B. (2014). Photoessay: Melanesian mythical places with unreported conflicts: A portrait. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa*, 20(2), 142-161. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v20i2.170>
- Bohane, B., & Dean, B. (2006). Ben Bohane's portrayal of spirit and war in Melanesia. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa*, 12(2), 161-174. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v12i2.161>
- Dixit, K. (1997 & 2011). *Dateline.earth: Journalism.as.if.the.planet.mattered*. Manila, Philippines: Inter Press Service; Bangkok, Thailand: Interpress Service.
- Dixit, K. (Ed.) (2007). *A people war: Images of the Nepal conflict 1996-2006*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Publication Nepalaya.
- Dixit, K. (2011). Real investigative journalism in a virtual world. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa*, 17(1), 12-19. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v17i1.368>
- Henry, T. M. (2019). PHOTOESSAY: Gangsters in Paradise: The Deportees of Tonga. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa*, 25(1&2), 278-291. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v25i1.489>
- Henry, T. (2022). PHOTOESSAY: Visual peregrinations in the realm of kava. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koakoa*, 28(1 & 2), 206-221. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v28i1and2.1252>
- Marbrook, J. (2015). Cap Bocage: Tracing the militant voice of environmental protest in New Caledonia. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 21(2), 110-124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v21i2.122>

- Marbrook, J., Abcede, A., Robertson, N., & Robie, D. (Eds.) (2017). *Conflict, custom and conscience: Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre 2007-2017*. Auckland, NZ: Pacific Media Centre.
- Miller, J. (2011). Seeing the wood for the trees: Media coverage of the Ngatihine Forestry Block legal dispute 1976-8. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koako*, 17(1), 175-193. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v17i1.378>
- Pronin, E., Lin, D. Y., & Ross, L. (2001). The bias blind spot: Perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(3), 369-381.
- Robie, D. (2009). 'Impartial'? No, this is a tribute to a people's suffering. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 15(2), 230-234
- Robie, D. (2017). Voice of the voiceless: investigative photojournalism. In J. Marbrook, D. Abcede, N. Robertson, & D. Robie (Eds.), *Conflict, custom and conscience: Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre 2007-2017* (pp. 10-13). Auckland, NZ: Pacific Media Centre. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjm.v0i7.17>
- Robie, D. (2023). FRONTLINE: 'Voice of the voiceless': The Pacific Media Centre as a case study of academic and research advocacy and activism. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koako*, 29(1 & 2), 205-229. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v29i1and2.1283>
- Robie, D. (2024a, January 26). Silencing the Messenger: Israel kills journalists, while the West merely censors them. *Declassified Australia*. <https://declassifiedaus.org/2024/01/26/silencing-the-messenger/>
- Robie, D. (2024b, May 5). Media freedom award for the Gaza journalists who have paid a terrible price in Israel's genocidal war. *Asia Pacific Report*. <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2024/05/05/media-freedom-award-for-the-gaza-journalists-who-have-paid-a-terrible-price-in-israels-genocidal-war/>
- Sepe Jr, F. G. (2018). PHOTOESSAY: Buried in debt only to have their loved ones get a burial. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koako*, 24(2), 146-157. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v24i2.453>
- Thompson, M. (2016, November 1). How Duterte's drug war taps into the Philippines' zeitgeist. New Zealand Drug Foundation. <https://drugfoundation.org.nz/articles/philippines-zeitgeist>
- Ubayasiri, K. (2021). PHOTOESSAY: Manus to Meanjin: A case study of refugee migration, polymorphic borders and Australian 'imperialism'. *Pacific Journalism Review : Te Koako*, 27(1 & 2), 269-282. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v27i1and2.1198>
- UNESCO. (2024, May 2). Palestinian journalists covering Gaza awarded 2024 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/palestinian-journalists-covering-gaza-awarded-2024-unesco/guillermo-cano-world-press-freedom-prize>

Dr David Robie is founding editor of Pacific Journalism Review. He established the Pacific Media Centre (2007-2020) and is now deputy chair of the Asia Pacific Media Network, publisher of PJR. Del Abcede is designer of PJR and photographer for Asia Pacific Report. An earlier version of this article was published in J. Marbrook, D. Abcede, N. Robertson, and D. Robie (Eds.), Conflict, custom and conscience: Photojournalism and the Pacific Media Centre 2007-2017 (pp. 10-13). Auckland, NZ: Pacific Media Centre.

davidrobie.nz@icloud.com



© DELABCEDE

Image 1: Ali, the 'Free Palestine' voice. Auckland, 2024.



Image 2: 'Would it be okay if they killed me?'. Auckland, 2024.



Image 3: 'All I want for Christmas is peace in Palestine.' Melbourne, 2023.



© DELABCEDE

Image 4: 'Free Palestine v Google'. Auckland, 2024.



Image 5: 'Free Palestine' traditional dress. Auckland, 2024.



Image 6: 'Tongans for Palestine.' Auckland, 2024.



© DAVID ROBIE

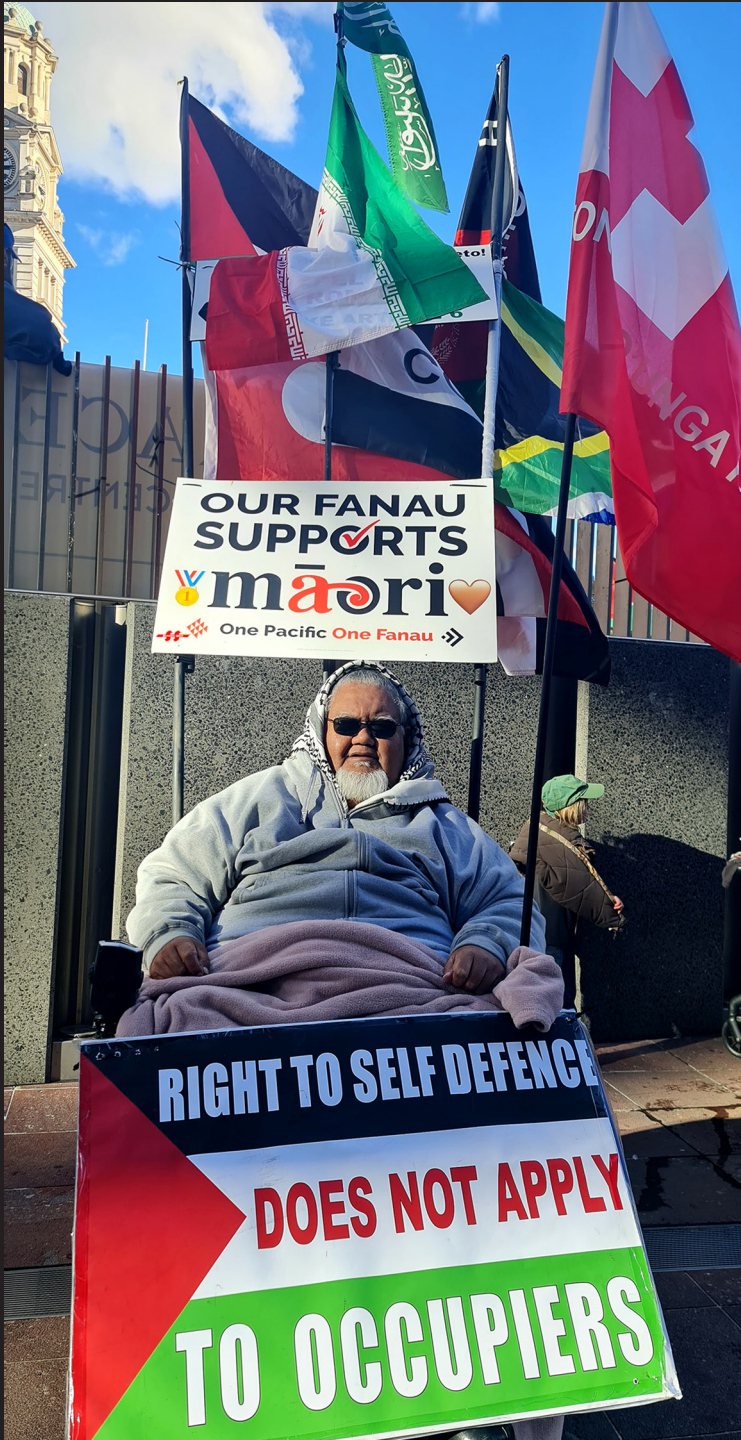
Image 7: 'Decolonise your mind', Auckland, 2024.



Image 8: Piggyback child protester. Melbourne, 2023.



Image 9: 'Never again means never again', Adelaide, 2024.



© DELARBEDE

Image 10: 'Right to self-defence does not apply to occupiers.' Auckland, 2024.



Image 11: 'Jews in solidarity.' Melbourne, 2023.



Image 12: 'No violence in our name.' Aotea Square, Auckland, 2024.



© DELABECDE

Image 13: 'Google profits off Israel's genocide—drop Project Nimbus'. Te Komitanga Square, Auckland, 2024.

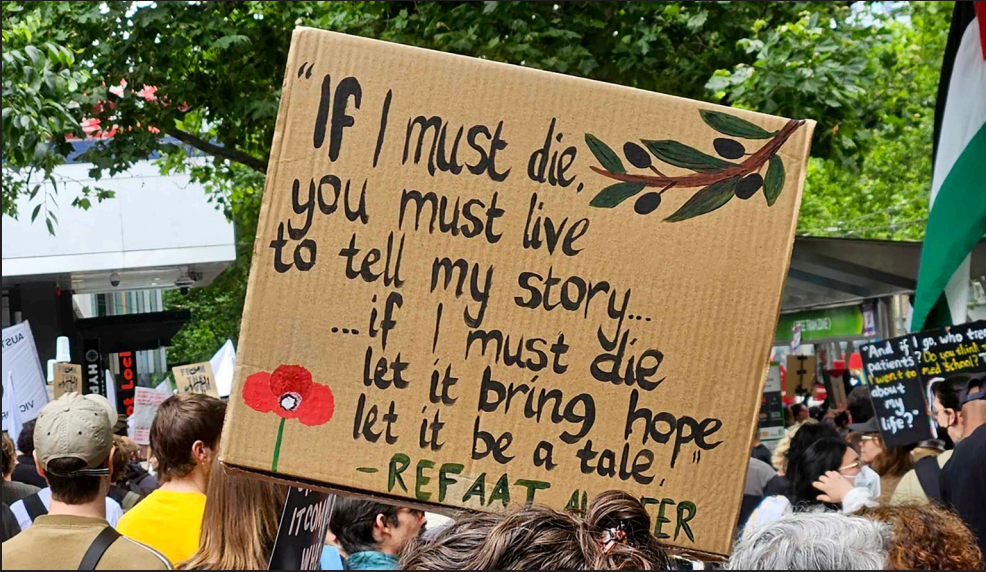


Image 14: 'If I must die . . .', poem by Refaat Alareer. Melbourne, 2023.



Image 15: 'You can't build a "holy land" on mass graves of children.' Queen St, Auckland, 2024.



© DELABCEDE

Image 16: 'Genocide Joe' mintage cape. Te Komititanga Square, Auckland, 2024.



Image 17: 'There is only one solution . . .' Te Komitanga Square, Auckland, 2024.



Image 18: 'Pasifika for Palestine.' Queen St, Auckland, 2024.



© DELABCEDE

Image 19: Palestinian whānau—'The right to return', Aotea Square, Auckland, 2024.