

Being and becoming in the Late Anthropocene

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Colonisation as an ongoing process continues to obfuscate the real identity of a culture “becoming” in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In writing about aspects of my arts practice I touch upon certain Hericlitean, Platonic, and Aristotelian frameworks in this context, along with related ideas of Bataille and Foucault. I also review our unravelling past as a subspecies to colonise (i.e., cannibalise) the “other”, as well as the environment; discussing binaries like the “special” myth that fuels acts of genocide; along with the colonial construct of “being”, in order to project fixed culture as prelude to disenfranchisement, dismemberment, and dispersal.

Key words: post-colonialism, genocide, “other”, formless, being and becoming, Aotearoa/New Zealand

Syn en wording in die Laat-Antroposeen

Kolonialisasie is ’n aanhoudende proses wat saamwerk om die ware ontvouing van kulturele identiteit in Nieu-Zeeland/Aotearoa te verdoesel. Waar ek skryf oor aspekte van my kunspraktyk, raak my gedagtes ligtelik aan verskeie idees in die denke van Heraklitus, Plato en Aristoteles. Hul teoretiese raamwerke word gesuggereer naas die van Bataille en Foucault. My skrywe reflekteer ook gedagtes rakende ons spesies se geskiedenis van kolonialisering en hoe dit ons as ’n subspecies help om te oorleef. Ons kannibaliseer die “ander” en ons omgewing; ons skeep binere konstruksies rondom “uitsonderlike” gevalle van volksleiding wat dan volksmoord van die “ander” verskoon; ons skeep mites rondom die “ander” in kontras met ons eie idees oor onself as synde “in plek” sodat ons die “ander” kan verplaas, kan fragmenteer, en kan ontmag.”

Sleutelwoorde: post-kolonialisme, volksmoord, die “ander”, vormloos, wees en wording, Nieu-Zeeland/Aotearoa.

Aboa constrictor doesn’t have to squeeze; it patiently suffocates its prey by taking up the slack each time the enfolded animal breaths out. This is how it operates. As an artist, I am interested in post-colonial theory in the larger context of how we operate as a subspecies in relation to each other and the environment.

The coloniser constricts “othered” cultures into tight definitions, re-projecting them back to themselves and to all the world as though they exist in a fixed state of “being”. In reality, culture never arrives; it never ceases to learn, in an ongoing process of adaptation and “becoming”. I see contemporary Māori and Pasifika artists giving voice to a rich amalgam of cultural identities particular to Aotearoa/New Zealand. But as I am an outsider, before I engage in this discourse, I must first locate myself to the reader.

I grew up inside the U.S. “othering” apparatus. When I was a child in the early 1960s, neighborhoods were still racially and culturally segregated; not by law, but by a quiet sort of grass root social enforcement. There was no thought or mention given to the First Nation people who had lived, hunted, and thrived there for centuries. My neighborhood was an upwardly mobile, fab, pre-fab, post-war, suburban ghetto, paved on featureless farmland, once primeval forest, surrounding the industrial city of Detroit on its arc to nadir.

It was nice, like a shiny new Teflon pan. Someday perhaps children growing up on Mars will replicate my childhood. We were shuttled to Hebrew School three days a week, after regular school and on Sunday. The designer synagogue we belonged to operated in many ways like a country club. In retrospect it seems like the school curriculum was organized as a gesture

of respite for our mothers, who landed on the wrong side of feminism. It was a good place to learn how to smoke.

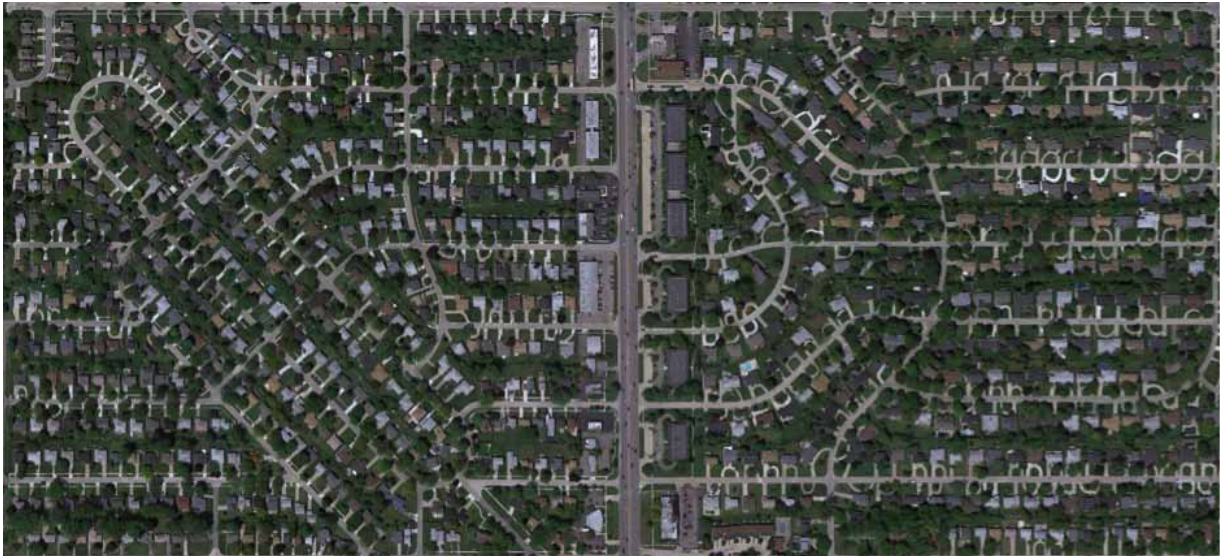


Figure 1
Still image capture from Google Earth, 2014.

This was a time of economic boom balanced by undercurrents of anxiety and guilt in the wake of the recent attempted genocide of our fellow Jews in Europe. (Genocide is the ultimate “othering”.) For our elders, there were conflicted feelings around the lack of timely intervention by our communities, and our leaders. Maybe this was just magic thinking, maybe not. One symptom of a generalised emotional and psychological malaise in our community, was the projection of films, shown to us repeatedly from about the age of eight, documenting the dead and near dead, “discovered” and “liberated” from concentration camps.

Regular exposure to graphic violence directed at your cultural subgroup can be distracting for a child. To my recollection, when any discussion ensued, the violence was squarely blamed on: specific cult figures; those operating under certain political rubrics; and/or people belonging to particular nationalities. The groups and individuals involved were characterised as being uniquely capable of these acts. Despite this simple algorithm I felt uncertain. I could never manage to resolve my cognitive dissonance.

To add to the situational complexity, some of our teachers at the religious school were themselves survivors of the death camps. In the psychological and emotional turmoil that followed, it may not have helped their healing process to put them in front of a room full of overfed suburban kids from never, never land, whose worldviews were largely informed by Warner Bros. Cartoons.

My childish perception was that our newly arrived teachers hated us. My adult view is that, despite everybody’s best intentions, my childhood perception was probably right. So they “othered” us, and we “othered” them, and if we did somehow manage to jump the hurdles of a normal psyche and identify culturally with the dead and dying, suspended as a final insult in silver halide shadows, perpetually re-performing their objectification and victimization; we “othered” ourselves from ourselves.

As I grew older and became aware of prior and concurrent genocides, and as we continue to witness highly focused efforts to destroy diverse human subgroups, I have come to understand how disturbingly unremarkable such efforts are for our species. If you take an even longer view and consider that we are the last surviving hominine on the planet, it seems like this behavior may actually be more *modus operandi*, than notable exception. It just wasn't recorded on film until last century.

One thing you can say about the leaders of the National Socialist Party is that they seemed extraordinarily certain of themselves. Our entire subspecies missed a critical learning opportunity when Hitler's act of mechanised cannibalism was revealed with the film documentation of his concentration camps. Tempting as it is, the danger of choosing to construct the narrative of a "special" genocide is that it reinforces the very same kind of binary thinking. One should never forget that "specialness" is at the heart of every etiological myth driving genocide in the first instance.

More disturbingly, from my own experiences in corporate culture I have to agree that these programmes of eradication operated as amplified and unbridled extensions of the same quotidian institutional violence anyone in the corporate world would be relatively familiar with. As Hannah Arendt famously wrote in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Report on the Banality of Evil*:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together (1963: 253).

When large-scale acts of violence are subdivided into many small acts, no perpetrating individual can manage to feel personally responsible anymore. It's the contemporary version of stoning. We have adopted and perpetuated the same convoluted system whereby the person pulling the trigger - while looking straight in the eyes of the victim - can still blame the bean counters, who can blame the boss (who always seems to go missing when the smoke has cleared).

Unlike the message I was given as a child, this behavior is not exclusive to National Socialists, Germans, Poles, or Ukrainians. It is behavior exclusive to no particular tribal or political subgroup of humans at all.

It is Our behavior. The behavior of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Even now, even here, in relatively benign and far flung places like Aotearoa/New Zealand, we are fully implicated in this now globalised behavior through complexly interwoven international political and economic systems.

I am implicated. In my 20s I lived and worked in Manhattan for ten years mostly at a studio that specialised in motion picture visual effects. I shot and directed tv commercials and visual effects for feature films. I fervently collaborated with the multinational corporate culture. I became an economic refugee of the financial crash in the late 80s, and unlike most of my fleeing film colleagues, I overshot Los Angeles in search of a better fantasy. When I said to my work friends I was planning to move to New Zealand, they looked at me as if I just told them I was planning my suicide.

Finding work directing television commercials in New Zealand and Australasia, I lived between Auckland and Wellington for a couple of years, before settling in Dunedin. After my

daughters were born, it felt impossible to justify work that required travel and long periods away. So I transitioned into the local economy, eventually teaching at the Dunedin School of Art.

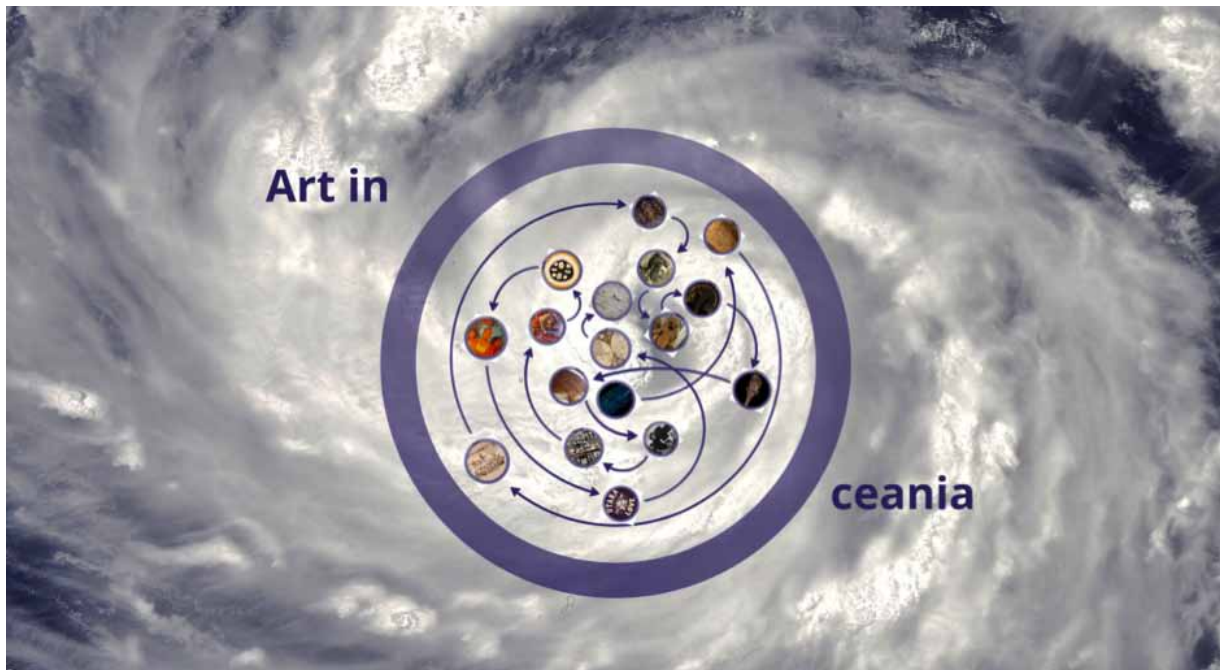


Figure 2
Key Frame from “Art in Oceania”. Dunedin School of Art web delivered course prototype, 2013.

Around 2010 I started collaborating with Peter Stupples on a development project to design a web-delivered course on the history of art in Oceania for our Head of School, Leoni Schmidt. Early in the project Peter and I flew to Auckland to interview a number of Māori and Pasifika artists who spoke about their practices. These artists included Rachel Rakena, Tracy Tawhiao, Lonnie Hutchison, Shigeyuki Kihara, Bridget Inder, and Reuben Paterson. Our intention was to record comments relating to particular issues, in order to present them as “video quotations” in the course lecture material - “talking heads” that would emerge between text and image. Thanks to the artists’ comfortable rapport with Peter, the interviews were rich with content and had relevance beyond the themes originally intended for the on-line course. I saw an opportunity to collate the material into a larger video “document” that would be valuable for our students at the Dunedin School of Art.

A vibrant informé emerges from the embedded cultural views expressed by these artists. Recurrent themes around colonisation arise; their diverse cultural identities are reflected directly in their arts practices. Their artworks locate our emergent culture far more accurately than the market forces that hold captive our eyes and ears through a variety of media. As I spent days listening to the artists speak while working through the edit, the name “Paranesia” coalesced for me from a gathering wordcloud¹.

(The artists in Paranesia all have practices based in Aotearoa/New Zealand and embody a multiplicity of cultures. Therefore, part of this discourse diverges from the current bicultural negotiation around the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi between the Māori tribal leaders and the British Crown, which remains the priority discussion, from a legal and material perspective, in Aotearoa/New Zealand at this time.) The title “Paranesia” was also a comment on the fixed proto-colonial misnomer of “Pacific” bestowed on one fifth of the earth by a wannabee conquistador

in a weather bubble. Personally, I prefer the word “Moana” as name for that immense body of water, as put forward by the artist, Siosia FP Tofua’ipangai, at a gallery talk in Sydney in 2009. However I only just read in the google flotsam that in late 2013, The Walt Disney Company, announced that they had co-opted this rubric for the title of a new feature-length musical cartoon.



Figure 3
Digital Video Document “Paranesia”. Promotional poster, 2012.

In Paranesia the artists interviewed illustrate the Heraclitian fluidity of real culture that sits in direct opposition to the Platonic obligato of rigid cultural performance; the expectation that fixes and sections culture into bite-sized segments for boxing, commodification and redistribution. Real culture never stops learning, adapting and growing; it never arrives in a “formless” process of Aristotelian “becoming”. Colonisation as “othering” performs a series of violent severances. It’s a framework strategically applied to first make alien, and then alienate people from their resources. It operates through a process of trivializing, distorting, and subsequently disintegrating cultural heritage; in the simplest terms: it’s a “smash and grab”.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand centuries of identity, knowledge, wisdom, and experience embedded in Māori cultural taonga (cultural treasures) are bottled and shelved, then switched with an ersatz cultural rebranding by multinational commercial interests. The remarkable thing is that after dumping real content their meager swap consists of pavlovas (a kind of meringue), buzzy bees (a friction-driven wooden pull toy), kiwiburgers (cow and beetroot, thankfully, not flightless bird), and hobbits. In order to keep the money and resources hemorrhaging out they construct and broadcast this drunkard’s view of Aotearoa/New Zealand with advertising onslaughts that make this culture look like 100 monkeys fighting over a pile of rags. Doubtless you could extend this boilerplate to virtually every economy on the planet. It all seems like

harmless fun, and we all thoughtlessly whistle the jingles while we disenfranchise our children for fizzy drink.

So on the one hand, we have the enforced myth of “being”; the insistence that labels can stamped on the fixed identities of the colonised body, like a frozen carcass on the chain of the mechanised abattoir; against the real life inform of “becoming”; the living, breathing, surviving, quotidian, of people engaging in new experiences, sifting through fresh data, informed by cross-cultural, contemporary, as well as traditional ideas; a post-modern vanguard voicing, and thereby driving, a perpetually emergent culture. To look at the work emerging from the artists of Aotearoa/New Zealand is to sense a flowing, dynamic cultural identity. It speaks of a unique mix of voices and place, despite the impediment to economic efficiency that difference poses to the multinational dispositif².

As a result of collating the voices in Paranesia, I have begun to include making “video documents” as part my arts practice. I define these as one-man-band micro-productions that operate within a writer’s budget. These are content-rich visual documents for select audiences, free of the invented narrative and production structures required for commercial distribution.



Figure 4
Still frame from “Confluence: The Art and Practice of Simon Kaan”. Digital video document, 2014.

Following Paranesia we thought that closely documenting the practice of one artist would add valuably to many of the discourses the first document touched upon. A locally residing artist named Simon Kaan came to mind immediately because of his extensive arts practice and his strong cultural ties. The Dunedin School of Art has a memorandum of understanding with Kāi Tahu iwi (Ngāi Tahu tribe) who are the local tangata whenua (“people of the land”). Simon has equally strong cultural ties with the local iwi, and the local Chinese community that established here in the Otago Region at the same time as European settlement; together these strong connections richly inform Simon’s practice which extends from painting and printmaking to electronic arts.

A digital video document titled, “Confluence”, coalesced without pre-scripting or a pre-defined narrative blueprint. It details in greater depth some of the ideas touched on in “Paranesia” as well as themes unique to Simon’s practice. This document illustrates a practice and a culture “becoming” through a production process that was also not predetermining.



Figure 5
Still frame from drawing project “Split-Level Colonial IV”. Single Channel Video, 2014.

While I was working on Confluence, a small architectural feature embedded in the face of the mudstone cliffs I have been driving past on my way home for over two decades started to demand my attention. I was aware that prisoners, including some taken in the Māori wars, constructed Portobello Road, which winds for 28km around the Otago Harbour, during the late 19th Century. I was also aware of ongoing disputes as to whether or not these forced labourers were held in the secured caves rudely fashioned beside the road they were forced to build. (There seems to be no argument that a disproportionate number of Māori prisoners died of diseases caused by hypothermia and exposure wherever it is they kept them).

The contemporary amnesia surrounding the caves is symptomatic, and pales in significance to the contemporaneous cultural lobotomies, legislated and performed by the New Zealand government, during the years that followed the military actions around the imprisonments. By simply travelling this road I am directly implicated in the processes of colonisation in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. I studied the cave faces, making a couple of drawing projects in a series I called “Split-Level Colonial” to begin to consider the forgotten processes that inhumed living cultures beneath the freshly paved world I was born onto.

Colonisation is highly staged. It asserts “being” in order to fix, arrest, dissolve, commodify, and capture every constituent part of the “other”. These small architectural insults are one of the many faces of that process. The lateral relationship of these abject spaces to the innovative

and world transforming strategy, arising from a peace loving community's response to state sanctioned incursions at Parihaka, only became clearer to me later.

Parihaka is a place in the Taranaki region on the west coast of Te Ika-a-Maui (The fish of Maui) or North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand where 1600 volunteer and Armed Constabulary troops besieged a peaceful community in 1881 during a state sanctioned land grab. The community chose to respond to the incursion with a disciplined pacifist strategy of non-violent, non-cooperation. Singing children greeted the soldiers with flowers. The acts of violence that were perpetrated upon the entire community were horrific. The men, young and old, were rounded up and shipped far away from the area to work as slave labourers. Despite the terrible cost this community paid for enacting this novel strategy, Ghandi recognised the power of it, and re-applied it to remarkable result.

Wherever these men were actually incarcerated, I have been told that the Parihaka prisoners in Dunedin were kept in strict isolation from all others, both Māori and European. Given the special care taken to keep these prisoners from communicating with others, it seems clear that somehow the apparatus was able to intuit great danger in the pacific strategy that was to lead directly to the dismemberment of a leviathan empire. Perhaps it already knew that the community at Parihaka had invented the only parry from which a colonising power has no riposte.



Figure 6

Composite still image from Ron Bull's workshop. Research documentation digital video, 2014.

In July of this year Simon Kaan invited me to film Ron Bull, Senior Lecturer Treaty Education & Training Unit at the Otago Polytechic, preparing a hangi for a workshop during their International Food Symposium. This process and its associated rituals follow Māori protocol, but the mechanisms are fully contemporary. This is not a staged reenactment, it is a view of a culture "becoming." Ron demonstrates a process of food preparation, but doesn't cleave it from its critical role as a nexus for group bonding and the strengthening of the social narrative.



Figure 7
Still image from “Kā Honoka” collaboration project. Research documentation digital video, 2013.

The somewhat disturbing, but well-meaning, origins of institutions like the Otago Museum still publicly promote the view that Ideal Forms are to be found tagged, preserved, and suspended in hermetically sealed vitrines. Although the contemporary institution, in its search for relevance, is clearly determined to enter a state of “becoming”, the proposition of fixed cultural identity is still performed in dated displays on show there. As such, perhaps despite themselves, these remain temples of “being”.

On the 8th of August in 2013 I documented a research trip to the basement of the Otago Museum organized by Simon Kaan for a group of Māori artists from Kāi Tahu iwi. There, two huge rooms are filled with diverse Māori cultural taonga stored in floor to ceiling rolling cabinets. The objects, held in safe storage by the museum, date from pre-European contact through to the early transitional period. The collection itself presents a hidden but unmistakable archeological record of culture “becoming”.

What the group encountered were everyday tools, weapons, adornments and ritual objects. Each intimate piece seemed to speak with the voice of its maker. Many of these objects were broken, irregular, unfinished, imperfect, quotidian. They felt far warmer and more accessible than the “supermodel” cultural specimens on public display in the “Tangata Whenua” hall on the museum’s first floor. The resonance of each unique voice added to the discourse as piece after piece was brought into the light, one box at a time. From an observer’s point of view, these encounters between artists and treasures reminded me of a film that documented the reunion of octogenarian siblings who had been separated since early childhood by war and politics. This was also a liberation; a vision of Aristotelian “becoming” inside the Platonic catacombs of “being”.

There is a robust bicultural discourse in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I grew up in a place where ghosts whisper from beneath the concrete but can’t speak; where a holocaust went unfiled. I find great hope in whatever shreds of justice that can be found in a treaty being recognised and

re-negotiated 175 years after the fact. For me, first and foremost, the fact that this discourse is happening here is the most remarkable thing about living in these islands. This culture is able.

Our brain evolved as our principle weapon in the race for survival on a robustly competitive planet. Highly developed neural networks allow us as individuals and collectives to identify and act on the “other”, including the environment, first by identifying non-self and then abstracting to misperceive discontinuity. As a species we are “winning” all the way to the systematic destruction of our own platform for living and every identifiable “other” in between. Colonisation, as an extension of this “othering” has robbed people of invaluable aspects of their past, but not of their present or their future.

Through federal regulations, German Senior School children are also taught about death camps (from a different angle than the one I described earlier) in history lessons, or actual visits to the remains of these institutions. I wonder if every 16-year-old in our subspecies shouldn't be given the benefit of a firsthand look at a local site where one of these events has transpired as a global inoculation against ongoing reoccurrences. (I doubt any contemporary human settlement sits very far away at all from an historic episode of this nature.) Perhaps controlling our behavior can only be possible through a blanket acceptance of our hard-wired intolerance of the “other”, as well as through mindfulness, vigilance, and healthy levels of uncertainty.

In the last 60 years it has become undeniably clear to us that our planet is itself only an island; the extraterrestrial options are looking pretty bad, and we are fresh out of “new worlds” to displace. We are incredibly fortunate to have centuries of hard-won knowledge that survives in the island cultures of the world like those of Moana - to begin to help us understand how to navigate this unforeseen predicament.

Notes

1. Green, David (2011: 56-67). philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” Michel Foucault 1980: 194–228
2. “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements,

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