



# **COUNTERFUTURES**

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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

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# It burns

Cassandra Barnett

**M**Y BEING IS a meeting place of rivers. Like many, I claim whakapapa along both trajectories: the Left and the Indigenous (specifically, Māori, specifically, Raukawa ki Wharepūhanga, specifically, Ngāti Huri); and others too of course. But I do not claim authority over either of these ‘sources’. I am only drinking, as the earth does, since their streams pass me through me. Sustaining myself. Surviving. The rivers pass through; I am one of a million braids in their descent; a tangle of relations, and I drink only what waters they are pleased to bring me. Sometimes no water at all. I am a still-learning, still-colonised Māori, and an intuitive rather than theoretical Leftist. I cannot write this.

But somehow this question burns so I’ve said yes. For you, I will rise up from my bed, will fracture myself and fly off,

split, along these trajectories you name, seeking separated, pure waters. I am not the Left; I am not the Indigenous. But let me reach upstream through the many pools, their still surfaces reflecting stories back at me. I cannot bring Indigenous theories of art, nor theories of the Left; my brain is research-tired and refuses to do that kind of work. But I have the images, figures, mental abstractions pressing in on this weary mind as I travel upstream. I have the words of fellow writers who have shown up to guide me. And I have stories. With these I shall explore this question of the Left, the Indigenous, art, and their relations—and why the question troubles me so.

## Some abstractions

Our duty is to take care of our abstractions, never to bow down in front of what they are doing to us—especially when they demand that we heroically accept the sacrifices they entail, the insuperable dilemmas and contradictions in which they trap us.<sup>1</sup>

## The Indigenous

I'm not Indigenous; I'm Māori. Māoritanga is a ground; it holds us. We start from our tūrangawaewae, our standing place (or places), and from our whakapapa, our ancestors, the genealogical strata forming the ground beneath us.

Ko Wharepūhanga te maunga, ko Waikato te awa, ko Raukawa te iwi, ko Ngāti Huri te hapu, ko Pikitū te marae though I didn't set foot there until I was in my 30s, ko Rauti te tupuna kuia. (I have uttered, and altered, these words many times. Add-

1 Isabelle Stengers, 'Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism,' *Subjectivity* 22 (2008): 50.

ing, subtracting, adding again. Starting long before I ever made it to Pikitū. Yet I have never uttered these words there, ‘at home’. Indeed, my home-making requires away-from-homeness too.) Long before Rauti there was Mahinaarangi; before Mahinaarangi there was Whakaotirangi; before her Hinenuitepō, goddess of the night; before her Hineahuone, the first woman, made of sand; and before her Papatūānuku, earth mother, connecting us all.

I te taha o tōku whaea, nō Ngāti Airihi ahau. Ko Country Antrim te rohe/whenua. Ko Kathleen, Alice, Annie ngā tupuna kuia. Long before them there was Sheela-na-gig. Before Sheela-na-gig there was Mary. And before her there was Danu, earth mother, whose people were also ‘first invaders’.

What has this to do with art, with the Left? Nothing, everything. It is where I start, where I am, joining dots, grains of sediment, clumps, rocks, bands, friends, fellows, whanaunga. Whakapapa is layers, not lines, not branches of a tree. I start in the Waikato, with tupuna nō ngā hau e whā, ancestors from the four winds, and I am part of *their* relating.

Indigenous art in Aotearoa means Māori art first and foremost, but we share our indigeneity to Te Moana Nui a Kiwa with our Pasifika cousins, and work and struggle and love alongside them as practitioners of Indigenous arts.<sup>2</sup> Like them, we seek and hold the ties that bind. We make whiri, raranga, muka, tāniko, tukutuku, telling stories; they do likewise, with tīvaevae, tapa, hiapo, siapo, ‘ie tōga. We knit, we bind, we hold, keeping blood and other ties strong. We unite in our experience of colonised spaces, in our efforts to occupy space differently. We bring kai. We whakamana each other. We commune. Like our Aymara

2 I have written specifically about contemporary Māori art and its relation to ‘global’ contemporary art in Cassandra Barnett, ‘Te Tuna-whiri: The Knot of Eels’ in *Animism in Art and Performance*, ed. Chris Braddock (London: Palgrave-McMillan, 2017). However, the generalised indigeneity question provokes a different line of enquiry.

and Chechuan cousins, ‘working to live, not living to work’.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Indigenous communal systems in Aotearoa and around the globe cannot be equated or assimilated with each other. That said, across the ties of whakapapa we are also creating new communal happenings from our solidarity in struggle, and our strong connections to each other and the earth. In Wellington, for instance, Māori and Pasifika arts workers foregrounding community and relationships—whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, wānanga, talanoa, ta/va—include collectives Mata Aho, Kava Club, and Fresh and Fruity.

I say ‘our’ and ‘we’ because I wish to prioritise the ‘we’. Yet I, a working solo mother far from either whānau or tūrangawaewae, am an occasional participant, occasional contributor, occasional beneficiary of these communities and our communals, having withdrawn—when not writing—to domestic duties. So little time to attend wananga, to weave or cook, to drive up the country to the marae, to join working bees and whānau hui, or even just visit my parents, who live elsewhere again. My ‘we’ is sometimes on shaky ground. It is an art, and I need to work on it.

### The Left

A long-armed asterisk, the Left reaches outwards. The Left is inclusive, open, commons-minded. The Left advocates for workers, for the socially vulnerable, for the culturally disenfranchised, for the sexually marginalised, for the sick, the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the children, the marked. It allocates ministries, ministers, administrators, policies, actions. The Left advocates sometimes for the arts, the poor arts, starved of life by their institutions, and by the Right. And sometimes it advocates for *us*,

3 Walter D. Mignolo, ‘The Communal and the Decolonial,’ *Turbulence: Ideas for Movement* 5 (2009): 31.

so sometimes we vote Left too. It's not the Left's fault. The pieces have been made, and someone has to pick them up.

Its eyes see, its ears hear, and its heart bleeds. The Left is ethical, compassionate, empathetic. It worries and cares. It knows when it is better off. It acknowledges its privilege, wields its rationalist intersectional awareness with not only empathy but guilt, rage, righteous indignation, the moral high-ground . . . and sometimes, apologetically, paralytically, the moral low-ground. The Left is all conscience. The Left knows. The Left is both rescuer and victim. Always-already the underdog. It is one way of holding onto some power.

We underestimated how pervasive a culture of victimhood was in our practices. To this day, we spend more time talking about the results and impact of neoliberalism and capitalism than we do confronting, surrounding, and isolating it wherever we can. Being a victim is righteous, but it changes little.

. . . Victimhood ultimately hinders our collective capacity to hear immigrant and refugee voices, to move beyond charitable approaches to a place of real solidarity. . . . [It] reproduces the hierarchy that continues to paralyse us with many of the same voices, no matter how well-intentioned, doing the talking.

Love could still fill us up with respect, energy, and collectivity; it's a key ingredient of any true liberation.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes, in the name of the Left, radical love falls upon the diverse vulnerabilities jigsaw; communities de-fragment.

And beyond utopian abstractions, victim/rescuer mentalities, rationalism, dualisms—beyond its own source materials—the Left has been known to harness more Indigenous and

4 Dave Bleakney, 'The Righteousness and Ineffectuality of Victimhood,' *Turbulence: Ideas for Movement* 5 (2009): 28.

pre-capitalist images of grassroots collecting, organising, protesting. It has also borrowed spiritual, energetic, organic, sustainable, ecological, pantheistic, folkish, queer, communal, nationalistic even (not to mention digital and futurist) inflections for its radical-politic. Despite such moments, any *Left*-grounded respect for diversity, multiplicity, difference, and singularity is ultimately not built on Indigenous ground. As the Argentinian de-colonial scholar Walter Mignolo, writing about the Indigenous and the Left in Bolivia and Colombia, observes: The Latin Left's 'present "recognition" of, and alliances with, indigenous struggles is obviously a sign of a convergent trajectory, but a different trajectory nonetheless. Their trajectory drinks at the source of other experiences and other genealogies of thought'.<sup>5</sup> He clarifies by refusing any equivocation between the commons and the communal:

From the European perspective, the communal may sound like socialism or communism. But it is not. Socialism and communism were born in Europe, as a response to liberalism and capitalism. Not so the '[Inca and Aztec (nor Māori and Pasifika)<sup>6</sup>] communal system[s] . . . they themselves pre-existed the capitalist mode of production. . . . The communal cannot easily be subsumed by the common, the commune, or communism . . . one cannot assimilate what ultimately are two very different projects with a common enemy: the local, neo-liberal elite.'<sup>7</sup>

Mignolo asserts that any communal future must draw (un-nostalgically) from non-capitalist lineages, be they Indigenous or otherwise:

5 Mignolo, 'The Communal and the Decolonial,' 30.

6 My addition.

7 Mignolo, 'The Communal and the Decolonial,' 30.

It is the other memories of communal organisation around the globe which predate and survived the advent of capitalism, which make possible the idea of a communal system today—one not mapped out in advance by any ideology, or any simple return to the past.<sup>8</sup>

For Mignolo, clearly, the Left is too entangled with capitalist history and cannot provide a healthy framework for the future.

And it's true. With its roots in the binary logics and Enlightenment trajectory of European thought, the Left gets snagged, trips up, chokes at certain points. When the ecological becomes the social, when rivers or rainforests are granted personhood, when 'alien' knowledges and definitions cross its path, when believers enter the room. It is more accustomed to bundling 'superstition' up with the Right's irrational faith in a 'natural hierarchy'. Can the Left move beyond defensive modes of relating on the one hand (including the quarantine approach of 'surrounding and isolating' the Right), and altruistic or charitable modes of relating on the other? Can there be a non-dualist Left, or at least a post-dualist Left?

A relationality in the negative, dualistic sense presupposes the terms of the relation in question, whereas the creation of concepts entails a traversing of dualisms, and the establishment of a relationality that is affirmative—i.e., structured by positivity rather than negativity.<sup>9</sup>

Can the Left traverse the Western dualisms, stumbling onto different, 'unknown' territories, different grounds of relating? Can it fall right over, finally landing us 'elsewhere'? Even an elsewhere that was right here all along? As Kate Linzey writes:

8 Ibid., 31.

9 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, 'Pushing Dualism to an Extreme,' in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, eds. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 127.



Neoliberal economics have unified society by providing a global definition of what is real (measurable, quantifiable, empirically verifiable). The overcoming of neoliberalism . . . will not occur in a simple rejection of a real (common) world, but in disproving that such reality is global.<sup>10</sup>

What would a solidarity-Left do? It would open to what is global: ‘imagine a planet of communal systems in a pluri-versal, not universal, world order. . . . A pluri-national state must be more than just the left in power’.<sup>11</sup>

## An art story in several phases

### August 2017—Communing

I arrive at the City Gallery Wellington exhibition opening, *Colonial Sugar*, harried and tūreiti, out of time despite my sharp awareness of the kaupapa and the tapu of these works by Jasmine Togo-Brisby (as well as Tracey Moffatt). From breathless parking to breakneck running, from impatient querying of front-of-house staff to charging upstairs and whooshing in, to a packed and sweaty yet calm and still hall, whose damp warmth absorbs my rude haste, my puffs and pants. Exchanging smiles with half-strangers, I ease myself into the thicket; a full house: sitting, standing, leaning, every face straining forwards to catch the words of the four women holding the space up front. I have seen Togo-Brisby’s work ‘Bitter Sweet’ before and know what to expect: a carefully composed pile of golden, sugar-moulded skulls, spot-lit and glistening in a darkened room. Arguably, the

10 Kate Linzey, *Common Good*, exhibition text (Wellington: The Engine Room, 2017), xx.

11 Mignolo, ‘The Communal and the Decolonial,’ 31

installation converses with numerous global art histories—vanitas still lifes, memento mori, the ossaries of Iberia. But, holding my breath with the crowd, I am here to listen to Togo-Brisby's kōrero, the work's kōrero, *their* kōrero.

As I settle in, Togo-Brisby's recently arrived mother, Christina, is describing life in Australia as a third generation South Sea Island Australian and how accustomed you become to invisibility. She invokes her grandmother; recalls how for her the past, their whakapapa of slavery on sugar-plantations, was a sad, buried, unspoken thing. But Togo-Brisby is changing that. Her work honours those tupuna's lives, activates a practice of whakamana for all who died in slavery—to tell it in a Māori way. And we listeners are included in their tears, a story-letting, a keening communing. Curator Nina Tonga asks the questions as only a sister can. Togo-Brisby herself is modest of word, letting the work, the tupuna, her whanaunga, do most of the talking. But her t-shirt hollas it loud—*Straight Outta the Pacific Slave Trade*—a fabulous-in-the-face-of-white-supremacy visual pepeha.<sup>12</sup> Here, in Wellington City Gallery, four full-power wāhine toa publicly revise their histories, far from invisible in this moment.

And here—unlike the glitzier downstairs openings, where I feel wannabe, on the verge of a call-out, misplaced, difficult—despite the heaviness of what is being told, I feel at ease—called in to a belonging. Christina says: 'It's not like this in Australia. I never feel this sense of community you have here', and work is done in the saying aloud and hearing of someone's truths. I feel witness to a sharp, time-quaking meeting of the generations of invisible suffering with the sudden arrival of visibility. Witness to the nameless tupuna hovering around their sugared effigies in the next room, and present now in these living faces

12 To invoke one of TJ Tallie's weaponized fashion 'looks,' see <https://clockworkblackblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/26/fabulous-in-the-face-of-white-supremacy-wednesday-september-21-2016/>.

in this room. Witness to the brave flood of relief and triumph at this proven survival or disproven destruction. This throb of connection is the art. The room is warm with feeling, hot with tears, tingling with the aroha of hearing and being heard; tingling with the uplifted joy of a fresh affirmative empowerment beyond all resistance, beyond all struggle, beyond all fight. No hostages.

But ‘I’m not Indigenous’, Togo-Brisby says. ‘I don’t know what that feels like. I come from a slave diaspora’.

Perhaps we can speculate that the communal Togo-Brisby and whānau have created here—based in a cultural memory that ‘predates capitalism’, but not mapped out by ‘any simple return to the past’—is one version of the future communal that Mignolo imagines. It certainly fits with the communal Edouard Glissant imagines:

For though this experience made you, original victim floating towards the sea’s abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.<sup>13</sup>

And perhaps also with those sought by Isabelle Stengers:

Reclaiming is an adventure, both empirical and pragmatic, because it does not primarily mean taking back what was confiscated, but rather learning what it takes to inhabit again what was devastated. Reclaiming indeed associates irreducibly ‘to heal’, ‘to reappropriate’, ‘to learn/teach again’, ‘to struggle’, to ‘become able to restore life where it was poisoned’, and it demands that we learn how to do

13 Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 8.

it for each zone of devastation, each zone of the earth, of our collective practices and of our experience.<sup>14</sup>

And in each (Togo-Brisby, Mignolo, Glissant, Stengers) I hear echoes of the kind of affirmative, plural (multi-iwi, whakapapa-based) ‘communal’ that te ao Māori also reflects back at me. We are not the same; but there is overlap, unity in the healing of pain.

### October 2017. Believing

After the communing and the aroha, something else is doing the rounds. A word drifting up from below: *unsafe*. Coming down from *Colonial Sugar* I step cautiously over the threshold into the exhibition, *Occulture: The Dark Arts*. Occupying the City Gallery’s entire ground floor space, *Occulture*, too, is a gathering. A gathering of witches, sorcerers, shamans, astrologers, visionaries, pagans, artists; of Aleister Crowley, Rosaleen Norton, Fiona Pardington, Marjorie Cameron, Curtis Harrington, Kenneth Anger, William Blake, and more. A gathering of the visual artefacts of their practices, from paintings and drawings to videos and assemblages to literary arts, with a heavy emphasis on esoteric symbolism. A gathering of imagery from (mostly) the Western occult imaginary (often invoking pre-Western, pagan traditions, but haunted by the long shadow and influence of Christianity, which renders the pagan elements dark and dangerous). A gathering also, perhaps, of magical forces produced by these practices, held now at the City Gallery in potent tension. Unsurprisingly, things start tingling, a low burning hum—the *fire*—as soon as I enter the space, and again when I think of it now. *Is it safe?*

This first visit, I manage only the left-hand rooms, stalling at Fiona Pardington’s voodoo-esque shrine of relics, talis-

14 Stengers, ‘Experimenting with Refrains,’ 58.

mans, fetishes, and body parts—including a human skull. *Is it safe?* Later she adds a narwhal tusk. Pardington is known for her reclamation of ‘orphans’ (mokomōkai, hei-tiki, huia). I get this, but the treatment doesn’t gel with me. It does hinge well with the other practitioners in these rooms, with their preferences for arcane iconography, exoticised remains, and a kind of badly-processed, unresolved death; for taonga suspended in orbit, far from home. The emphasis of this show is on aesthetic effects, not spiritual efficacy; and on egotistical individualism, not communal spiritual wellbeing. Indeed, the artists/auteur-genius-producers of these artefacts are probably the primary objects of display. Any committed collective negotiation of spirituality or wairuatanga is a distant shadow. Personal boundary-transgressions are rife; but tapu and noa (or other Indigenous spiritual frameworks) are barely in play—and the curators are not worried about their community’s safety.

I know people—atheists—who have had nightmares after visiting *Occulture*. Others (including Togo-Brisby’s Mum Christina, a devout believer) have needed karakia to cleanse themselves. I don’t have nightmares, but I do, after viewing the left-hand rooms with their conjurings of dark spirits and human remains, feel unclean. Polluted. Contaminated. And called out, or just refused, in my own ‘superstitions’; a refusal that then wanders mockingly upstairs. I too feel the need to cleanse—with nowhere to wash in sight.<sup>15</sup>

15 In the video ‘Sugar Slaves’, screened at *Colonial Sugar*, Selwyn Liliu is united for the first time with his cousin Monica, an Australian South Sea Islander descendant of one of the islanders stolen into sugar plantation slavery. In this scene, Selwyn addresses the camera directly, hailing us, and asks ‘Why did you white men do this to our people?’ The viewer feels that the camera-person is not exempt from his challenge. It is not a mediated, abstracted challenge about ‘white people’; it is utterly direct, live, real. I feel, in echo, the question being asked of the curators and the institution too. Why did you put us upstairs? Why did you pair us with an exhibition as unsafe, as lacking in the protocols of tapu and noa, of reverence for wairuatanga, as *Occulture*? Did our presence serve your purpose?

Such aesthetic flirtations with dark histories and spirituality are not without political effect. They can briefly puncture state-sanctioned secularism. They model strategies for disrupting the neoliberal status quo, thereby positioning the host institution as endorsing such disruptions. They extend space, time, sympathy, a moment's mainstream representation, to some communities marginalised by that status quo. These might be called Leftist effects. But the puncturing is, mostly, muzzled by the pacifying institutional framework, and soon becomes a foil for a neat zipping-back-up of what is 'right' and 'true'.

So I shift, as I roam, from thinking about safety (because it burns and I want to swiftly leave these rooms) back to questions of relating, of being-with, of 'community'. *Occulture* pivots on this gathering and hinging together of two communities of practice: art and magic. Some of those shown are primarily self-identified artists. Others are primarily self-identified magicians, witches, shamans. (And *a few* are concerted 'collaborations' between the two, led by savvy globalisation artists—or woke workers of the pluriverse.) But I think the underlying dichotomy is a slightly different one. *Occulture* consciously gathers together 'believers' and 'knowers' in several configurations. Believers, I am told, dressed up and came out in force for both the opening and subsequent events. And artist-believers were featured, from Crowley and Norton to (I'm guessing) Pardington and Mikala Dwyer. Knowers (institutional labourers, the art-going public, many contemporary artists) also attended the public programmes. Some of the artists' work shown in the other rooms also exude a knowing air.

I'm borrowing this dualistic formulation from Stengers, and I wish to follow her in undoing it:

Here we are in modern territory, with the territorial 'great divide' refrain—they believe, we know—a territory that only extended with what has named itself 'postmodernity' but should rather be called 'hyper-

modernity', since the postmoderns know that the moderns believed.<sup>16</sup>

. . .

Shall we be part of a milieu that 'knows better', or defines itself as those who 'no longer can' connect with such practices? . . . Shall we be just 'tolerant', maybe theorizing the 'return of spirituality' as a contemporary phenomenon? In both cases, the choice is to be part of a milieu that *refuses* them the power to have us thinking and feeling, a milieu that claims it has no need or use for what they propose.

The alternative is not conversion. It might rather be to accept that they may make us think and feel and wonder about what sustains us, and maybe also about what leads us to think we do not need sustenance. The witches' challenge is not a matter of belief.<sup>17</sup>

What kind of relations, what kind of communities, are possible between artists and witches, knowers and believers, Leftists and Indigenous peoples, Leftists and diasporic peoples?

## Knowing

But I was shifting. Back to the entrance hall. To Dane Mitchell, New Zealand commissioned artist for the Venice Biennale, 2019. Mitchell, collaborator with shamans and astrologers. Mitchell, who was given the grand entrance space. Mitchell, who is clearly not a shaman or astrologer (though he likes them, and would like some of what they've got for his art), nor, my puku says, reading his coolness of touch, is he a believer. Mitchell, whose ambivalence aligns nicely with the ambivalence of the exhibition as a whole. An ambivalence that says, in that enlightened European way: we are *fascinated*. We are not afraid; we will host. But we will not be infected; we are inoculated. Certainly, I don't feel dirty anymore in Mitchell's space. I don't feel much at all, beyond

16 Stengers, 'Experimenting with Refrains,' 41.

17 *Ibid.*, 50.

a quiet attraction to each refined form and material, and a curiosity about their provenance. And despite a shaman's involvement, I don't feel much that addresses me in my 'indigeneity' (let alone my Māoritanga)—except, perhaps, the suggestion that you should not give your secrets away lightly.

As I dawdle amongst Mitchell's black and white silk hangings, stanchion-constellations, and elegant glass and earthen orbs, I ponder the form of togetherness here. If you are an artist who covets the power of magic, but does not believe in it, nor in your own ability to produce it, then you collaborate with those who do believe. But you hold your power. You put the 'magic' in aesthetic frames, art-material frames, behind glass, out of reach, muffled, muted, mediated; turn it this way and that, for the nonbelievers—who are never burned anyway—to appreciate too. Trap it. Keep it clean. *Put your name only* above it, beside it, around it.

How to relate to the others? To the 'marginal', the 'disadvantaged', the 'disenfranchised', the 'strange', the 'dangerous'? If they clearly are *not you*, what form of relation might you propose? Within it, what standing-place may I find? Have we pieces, pre-divided, that must now be joined somehow, presented somehow (the shaman's breath, the clay and glass, the orbs and spheres and vessels, the artist's hands, the magical gestures, the blank silk 'canvas')? Or do we find ourselves closer to the heart of things, already inside of something? Closer to the fire that burns? If 'we' somehow identify more with the shaman than the artist, do we feel ourselves also behind glass here, being looked at, being 'helped', or even 'helping'? Not mocked, not exoticised, no. But contained. Stopped. Stopped.

Of course, I would like safety from the fire (especially those fires threatening spiritual decay and darkness). But I never asked for safety *without* fire. Perhaps I want safety within the fire, on terms relevant to the fire in question. I still want to be



touched, still want to be hailed. I still want to know I'm alive. So long as we look from an immunised side at a quarantined 'magic' (and its practitioners), persisting in the askance, apart, objectifying position of enlightenment epistemologies (now percolated throughout the structures of late capitalism *and* the defensive, charitable Left), we will be neither addressed, nor touched, nor burned, nor healed by it. Belief has its rewards.

I don't want to take hostages. It's bigger than Mitchell. And his work is also subtle and sensitive, and, despite my misgivings, collaborative enough to leave room for doubt. Is the shaman's breath contained? Mitchell seems to avoid the controversies hounding other contemporary New Zealand artists who have worked across cultures more provocatively. Luke Willis Thompson, John Ward Knox, Francis Upritchard, and Rohan Wealleans have all been verbally slain by Indigenous voices wishing to stop them from opening more wounds; wishing to awaken them to the ways in which their artworks—featuring aestheticized 'danger-forces' appropriated from cultural contact zones—are experienced as *actually* dangerous by Indigenous peoples. Such denouncements are evidence enough of the hurt inflicted, but tend not to impact how the artists are rewarded for their 'riskiness' in the global contemporary art system. They dance around fires that burn us, hardly getting singed.<sup>18</sup> This is why the question burns me: because it ignores the double consciousness it foists upon me. But the hurt matters. Hurting others has to matter. Why not feel into your *own* pain, instead of poking mine?

18 Of course there are massive differences between these artists' interests, practices, skills, and efficacies. But their common assumption needs re-stating: non-Western (non-capitalist) cultural properties, experiences, and practices are *still* fair game for exploitation by capitalist systems, including contemporary art. Even when that art is self-critical (as Thompson's work surely is), it is still an exploitation, a parasitism. I should acknowledge here that I devoted a chunk of my own PhD thesis to interpreting Upritchard's work in a fairly forgiving frame of mind. I, just-awakening in my riverbed, held a different position then. In highlighting this, I hope to draw us closer to the national sickness—the cognitive dissonance, the cultural stalemate between the faithful and the critical—that afflicts us.

## Stewarding

We already suffer, are already endangered; everything we do is laced with our pain. It is even the source of our strength. But that doesn't mean we hold onto it, fetishising it as the occultists do. Our needs are different. And we have processes for transmuting this pain. When you approach with us the heart of our common pain and feel it too, and become with us, you become part of the healing. You enter into solidarity. This is perhaps too romantic, not concrete, not messy enough. But it is also true. How do the Left and the Indigenous relate? Like a cloud of impermeable atoms passed through by a woven fabric? Or like two hands scarred by the same fire?

The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?<sup>19</sup>

Both Luke Willis Thompson<sup>20</sup> and John Ward Knox<sup>21</sup> have (like Fiona Pardington) brought others' dead into their art, assuming a stewardship for which their art expertise surely has not trained them. A kind of counter-cultural, unceremonial stewardship that does not love those dead like an uri would. It preserves aesthetic structures that do not take our pain seriously. What choice but to refuse it back?

If there are to be magical forces, if there is to be wairua, if we are to be offered 'art' that reaches beyond the profane or

19 Jack Halberstam, 'The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,' in *The Undercommons: Black Study and Fugitive Planning*, eds. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013), 10.

20 Gravestones in *Sucu Mate/Born Dead*, 2016.

21 Human bone in *Bodies of Water (Rising)*, 2015.

te ao mārama, the world of light (and beyond ‘global capitalist contemporary art’)—as *Occulture* surely purports to—shouldn’t those forces themselves be ‘curated’, by their own tohunga? Shouldn’t their cohesion and efficacy be facilitated by sincere acts of faith in, and within, their worlds of meaning? Shouldn’t their communal processes be given their share of space? Shouldn’t the whānau or equivalent be invited in? Shouldn’t the limits of global contemporary art be acknowledged? If these things can’t be done—and some communities’ health doesn’t matter—then why should the art be done?

But they *can* be done. This could be the institution’s role: to humbly cede space for plural cultural practices, such that no one’s cultural safety is precluded. It may require a re-thinking of the way installations occur, especially group ones, so that no flattened homogenisation of cultures can occur. It is something, in fact, that the communal, multi-iwi structures of te ao Māori (and many other Indigenous peoples) often already achieve. Wherever you are, follow the kawa (protocols) of the hau kāinga—the home people. The artists and their communities would be hau kāinga here, for as long as they have the space. When Togo-Brisby tells me of the moment she realised she could have Nina Tonga for her interviewer—that they would get to fully hold that upstairs space, that she and those she guards would not be objectified, interrogated ‘from the outside’—her relief is still fresh, palpable.

*Occulture* came close to truly involving the relevant ‘experts’ and making space for the work’s communities in its public programme events, including the ‘Night of the Witch’ and artist performances by Simon Cuming and Jason Greig. It is rumoured there was, eventually, a karakia for Pardington’s human skull too. But on the whole, as an installed group exhibition, *Occulture* reproduces an environment of detached critique that pre-emptively curtails the powers of magic practitioners,

spirit workers, or tohunga. And the authority-affect of the institution denies any need in us for such sustenance.

Of course there is one kind of sustenance that the gallery doesn't refuse: aesthetic sustenance. At *Occulture*, Fiona Pardington's altar of fetishes is one answer to Mitchell's intimate-detachment aesthetic; an answer that holds a charged pain and darkness. But the standout counterpoint to both is Mikala Dwyer's enormous, vibrant, live, and direct spell-painting, 'Balancing Spell for a Corner (Aleister and Rosaleen)'. It seems to redistribute the energies in the space through its sheer aesthetic power, mobilising and dispersing them. Dwyer's clarity echoes Mitchell's, but she opens where he closes. Not a globalisation artist but a woke worker of the pluriverse. Dwyer's art-magic doesn't lean on anyone else's touch or knowledge, tropes or histories, deaths. Her work relates with the others in the space, but in no way depletes their energies, their efficacy, the sanctity of their own communals. It reaches out to fold in, resonate with, encompass and be encompassed by all the energies in the room. This mutual encompassing is the key. The effects combine in your senses and your heart, not in your head. Such is the encompassing I experienced upstairs too. This, not the litany of skulls, is where above and below come safely together. A mode of being-together that is not adhesive, additive, askance, exploiting, parasitic, or containing, but both takes-inside-oneself and expands-oneself-to-be-with-all-the-differences; a being-with and a being-for that loves.

## What's left? Healing

Māori, like most Indigenous peoples, want to heal, to stitch things back together. Be it Māori Marsden's 'fabric of the universe', the health of our communities and communals (whānau, hapū, and iwi), or the wounds of our tupuna. We want to balance (whakautu) the energies, and to keep things moving. Our healing knowledges are vast. So a recipe—a spell if you wish, or a new-old karakia—is being made. Pain is a part of it: shared pain, transmuted pain; not stagnant, held pain. And a refusal that is qualitatively different from standing and fighting back. Sometimes it falls over, and tears shit down as it goes. Sometimes it dissolves everything in its inclusive embrace. Sometimes, in refusing what is, and traversing all parts of a dualism, it beams itself off the grid, off the map, back to where it was all along—chanting on. As others have written:

We must refuse . . . that which first refused to us and in this refusal reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility.<sup>22</sup>

It will be a place where refuge is not necessary and you will find that you were already in it all along.<sup>23</sup>

A homogenised cultural identity is overwhelmingly detrimental for all global citizens in that it serves to omit and suppress potentially empowering world-views and insights. In a contemporary context it becomes difficult to separate economic globalisation from cultural globalisation because its focus on commodity contributes toward a homogenised global consumer culture.<sup>24</sup>

22 Halberstam, 'The Wild Beyond,' 12.

23 Ibid.

24 Richard Tawhanga, 'Plastik Tikis: Māori Identity and Art in the Globalised Melting Pot-Roast,' *Masters Dissertation* (Whitecliff College of Arts and Design, 2009), 15.

I believe that an indigenous ontology can also have positive outcomes for non-indigenous communities inhabiting indigenous spaces because these spaces become rich with opportunities for cross-pollination of cultural identities and ontologies, which I posit, have the capacity to positively reshape globalised societies.<sup>25</sup>

From a liberal individualist perspective, we are all distinct units, but from Papatūānuku's perspective, or from the perspective of one embracing Papatūānukutanga, we have always been one system.

...

Why should a louse surviving on the surface of my skin be categorised as parasite and I should not, when we are both crawling on the skin of a larger ecology and surviving there as best we can?

Through Papatūānuku I can sit on the beach, and know that my self is not in the louse's guts inside the louse, nor in the louse inside my hand, nor in my body inside Papatūānuku, nor in Papatūānuku herself, but distributed at every possible point throughout that system.<sup>26</sup>

How do the two abstracted, discontinuous streams I was following upstream relate? When we join our own pain and love to the spell-karakia. These streams come from mountain peaks, but the mountain peaks come from underground. Their passings-through graze me on both sides with the hard, ossified grit of something hotter and deeper. The fire belongs to Mahuika. I am not the Left, I am not Indigenous. I am a granddaughter. *He uri tēnei o Papatūānuku.*

We need a pluriverse, yes. But not a bird's eye view of the jigsaw. We need to hold to the differences, the sin-

25 Ibid., 16-17.

26 Emilie Rakete, 'In Human—Parasites, Posthumanism, Papatūānuku,' in *Documenta 14 Reader*, eds. Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk (Documenta, 2017), 2-3.

gularities of our pain's trajectories—but through them, connect. Find in them safe, healing ways to traverse our pluriverse. Make art the occasion of transformative communal happenings. Prioritise the public programme. Within your institutions enact real counter-globalisation practices, resist homogenising internationalism, facilitate self-determinative community practices.

I want to think less about flying, more about earthing. I think now that the way is down, through the cracks and fissures and fossilised arteries. I think we are the glue. We must touch with scarred hands the scarred faces that at one time were a single band of sedimented rock.

The coalition unites us in the recognition that we must change things or die. All of us. We must all change the things that are fucked up and change cannot come in the form that we think of as 'revolutionary'—not as a masculinist surge or an armed confrontation. Revolution will come in a form we cannot yet imagine. Moten and Harney propose that we prepare now for what will come by entering into *study*. Study, a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you, prepares us to be embedded in what Harney calls 'the with and for' and allows you to spend less time antagonised and antagonising.<sup>27</sup>

I return to Wellington City Gallery one more time, wits about me, tools sharpened, and . . . there at last is a bowl of water, with its pare kawakawa. This is not an 'institutional' bowl of water, so I'm told. A Pākehā employee took it upon himself to source and install it. The community widens to include all who will step over the line to join it. All who will act with faith.

27 Halberstam, 'The Wild Beyond', 10-11.

I rinse my fingers. The fire fizzes and recedes, seeping away, leaving only a warmth—and then a coolness. And the streams, and the solid ground beneath me.

*Haumi ē, hui ē, tāiki ē.*



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