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Part tree, part canoe.

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

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Shannon Te Ao

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Abstract: Using Australian artist and writer Ross Gibson's 'wayfinder' as a point of departure this essay discusses a range of recent moving image and performance works by Shannon Te Ao. *Follow the party of the whale* (2013), *two shoots that stretch far out* (2014), and *Untitled (epilogue)*, (2015) are among the works discussed in relation to Māori spatial and temporal conceptions such as *Te Kore* and whakapapa. These frameworks, alongside content referencing Māori lyrical traditions are implicated within a discussion exploring various aspects of the local, social and cultural significance of poetic forms found in waiata and whakataukī. Metaphor and ambiguity—as they are enacted in live performance, and lyrical modes—are identified as tools to promote a poetic sensibility.

1. *'Human nature demands space for free movement...'*

Epeli Hau'ofa

Australian artist and writer Ross Gibson has recently described, through both personal and scholarly accounts, his vision of the multifarious, fluid, and aqueous qualities embodied within social aspects of the Pacific region. These traits make up a performative attitude—driven by geographical and societal modes—to localised notions of place, collectivity, and connectedness. Gibson describes: 'a mobile social entity responsive to forces—natural and cultural—that urges collaboration and ceaseless travel... Part tree, part canoe.'¹

Gibson's social conception has informed aspects of a performative 'persona' that I have enacted in the development of recent artistic output. Through writing (poetry and prose), performance (live and documented) and moving image-based installations, I have attempted to explore and make manifest an artistic language that resonates with the ideal carried within Gibson's treatise. Gibson's 'wayfinder' is both 'grounded' and bearing roots—lineage perhaps—with the distinct ability to operate as autonomous within an ever-changing, nodal, social and geographical system. Using an evolving awareness of surroundings and circumstance, the 'wayfinder' finds due course via a combination of empirical knowledge and indexical awareness of, for example, developing weather conditions and disappearing landmarks—one's own evolving position or situation.² This trajectory of research has informed artistic output that describes aspects of a similarly *fluid* social embodiment.

Within recent moving image works such as *Untitled (epilogue)* (2015), *two shoots that stretch far out* (2013-14) and *Follow the party of the whale* (2013) I have attempted to present imagery that enacts a tenuous social agency. As will be discussed these, along with text-based output and live performances, have aimed to blur the lines between the melancholic and optimistic, empowered and despondent, and wild and free. Promoting dialogue within this domain may prompt reconsideration of any fixed mode of operation within the social, cultural and political context of the region, challenging normalised embodiments of a temporal and spatial consciousness.

Localised societal constructs relating to fluidity and the aqueous are not new. Gibson cites Albert Wendt's seminal paper 'Towards a New Oceania' and writings by Epeli Hau'ofa as earlier proponents of an aqueous or 'Oceanic' social understanding. Both

Wendt and Hau'ofa have explored issues arising from various interpretations of the geographical and environmental systems mapped within Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia—stretching to Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and Hawaii. Central to these themes are problematic definitions of *Oceanic* cultures. These relate to commonly perpetuated misconceptions of the 'Pacific region' as being a disparate constellation of societies, isolated by the surrounding immensity of the Pacific Ocean. These (largely externally) articulated definitions have embedded a notion of external dependency within common perceptions of Oceanic cultures. Seemingly simple examples of a belittling trope are enacted in divergent notions of the region as 'islands in the far sea' as opposed to a 'sea of islands.' Given the geographical idiosyncrasies of the region, these can incorrectly prompt a vision of a disparate accumulation of cultures that are in fact separated, as opposed to connected by the vastness of the Ocean.³ Active subversions of this pattern play a part in destabilising negative connotations towards the region's cultures and elevating a reflexive regional consciousness.⁴ Hau'ofa cites introduced cultural paradigms of Christianity and westernised bordering constructs as central to a vision of the region and its varied occupants as inferior and marginalised within their own environments. This kind of marginalisation presents an image of social embodiment that is alienated by the realities of the local environment.

This alienated position is countered by Gibson's proposition of a social entity possessing affirmative capabilities within a multifarious and fluid setting. Gibson poses that an accepted level of *precarious-ness* is embedded in how one might 'successfully' operate within the Oceanic context. Within several personal 'epiphanies' he asserts:

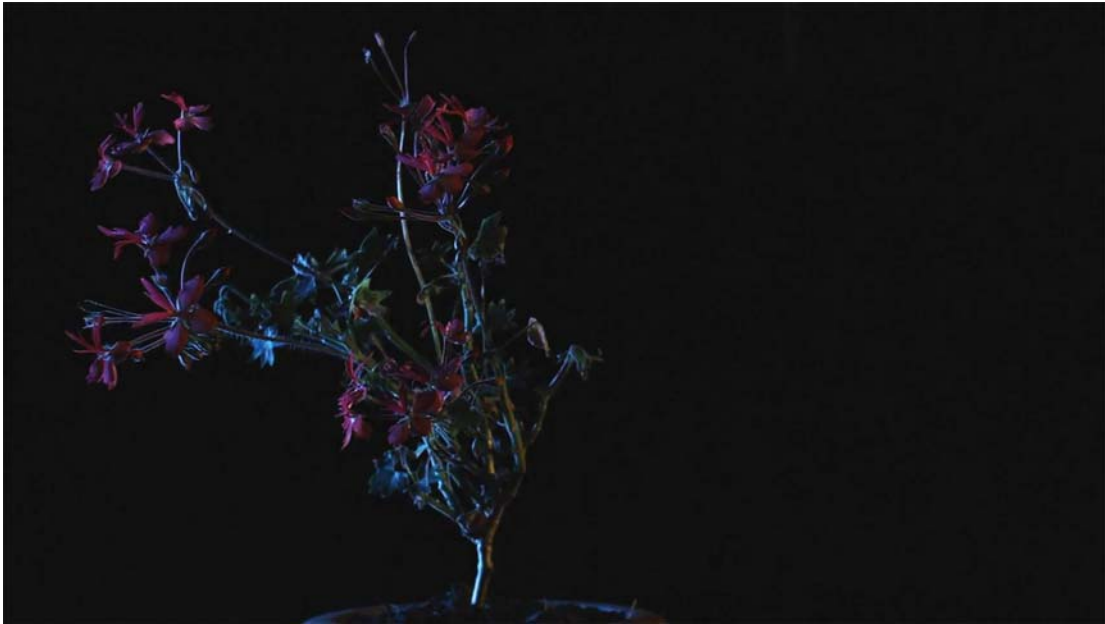
*'To be engaged peripatetically with a scatter of options and obligations distributed around the Pacific is demonstrably a cogent, good way of being in the world, a way supported by expectation and productivity, supported by patterns of social history as well as by tendencies in nature. Your culture might derive as much from a restless system of flows, I realised as from a permanent foundation in a place.'*⁵

For Epele Hau'ofa, the potential for cultures of the region to exploit such societal modes is fundamentally supported by the sea itself; he describes *the Oceanic* as connector and simultaneously a social ideal:

*'As the sea is an open and ever flowing reality, so should our oceanic identity transcend all forms of insularity, to become one that is openly searching, inventive, and welcoming.'*⁶

The societal domain Gibson and Hau'ofa posit presents as somewhat paradoxical if not contrary against the backdrop of a normative westernised context. However, it would seem that this paradox is being felt through shifts across the demography of contemporary New Zealand. Recently published articles discuss the evolving 'super diversity' identifiable within Auckland in particular but also across all national populations.⁷

To understand one's social position or agency within a framework that is perceived as tenuous raises questions about how we occupy time and space. As I will discuss further, paradox, ambiguity and tension as they are embedded within an aqueous 'vernacular' may also promote inclusive social and political gains.



Still from:
Untitled (epilogue), 2015
Digital video, colour and sound.
4:48min
Cinematography/post-production Iain Frenley

2. *Te kore*

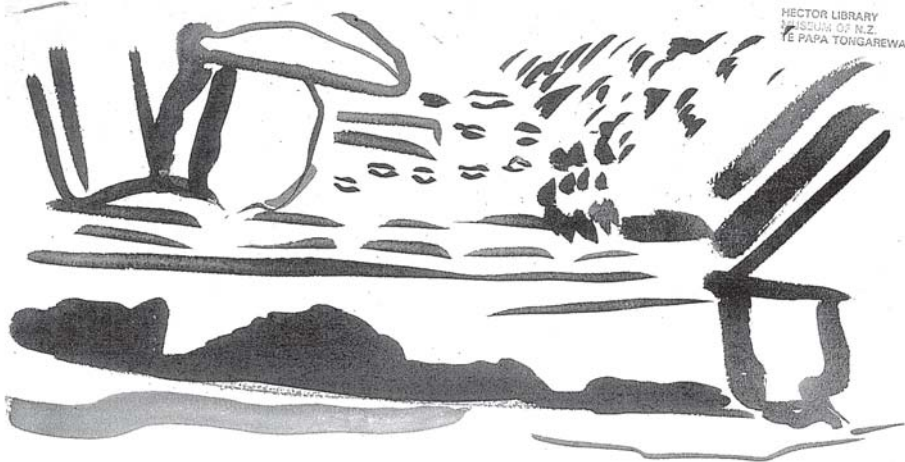
Simply put, the video *Untitled (epilogue)* (2015) depicts a small procession of domestic potted plants. Colourfully yet sparsely lit plants trail right-to-left as a voice-over recites fragments from a contemplative prose recounting a melancholic departure, locating the protagonist in an unidentified, yet troubled time and place.

The imagery is not intentionally ambiguous. On one level the work pays simple homage to three artists—painters, poets and writers active within different periods and contexts across New Zealand’s recent history—Joanna Margaret Paul, Katherine Mansfield and Noeline Arnott. However, as the amalgamation of my responses to a pool of archival material discovered during initial research into artist Joanna Margaret Paul’s life and practice, the film itself may unfold into a relatively concise and *pointed* narrative. As a direct reflection of Ross Gibson’s wayfinder—part tree, part canoe—the narrative as portrayed to the viewer aims to disrupt responses that are bound to the retrieval of limited, referenced historical and art-historical material. Instead, *Untitled (epilogue)* presents a single vision of an imagined social circumstance, tenuous in nature, while disrupting the viewer’s ability to determine a fixed or stable context.

The primary text that *Untitled (epilogue)* draws upon is a short story originally published in 1986 in the New Zealand arts and culture magazine *The Listener*. Written by Noeline Arnott, the short story *Relics from an Ancient Tomb* recounts the experiences of a travelling New Zealand woman as she awakens after falling victim to a sexual attack. Notably, Joanna Margaret Paul provided two ‘simple’ gestural watercolour and pencil drawings that were originally published alongside the story. This seemingly unexpected juxtaposition figures in a line of examples in which Paul contributed artwork in response or relation to existing written material.

When considering Paul’s gestural watercolour work as contextual device for the dark, traumatic content of Arnott’s ‘Relics...’ these two languages appeared initially disparate. But when considered in relation to certain localised social constructs, a more generative relationship might be articulated.

Also of significance here is the Katherine Mansfield short story *Prelude* which fragmentally plots a period of domestic upheaval and adjustment as a family re-locate during early twentieth century Wellington, New Zealand. Within *Untitled (epilogue)*



Relics from an ancient tomb

Short story by Noeline Arnott

EVENTUALLY I must leave this room, as a child come to term must leave its mother's womb, before sanctuary becomes entombment.

The dawn has broken, grey, beyond my window, redolent of coal smoke, shrill with the cries of the lamenting seabirds that wheel and soar among the chimneys and the distant cries of the first muezzin, summoning the faithful to prayer. Perhaps that is where Mohammed has gone, to prostrate himself before the God who has conferred upon him the superior status of male in a society that despises women, or at least Western women, of whom I am one.

I could, of course, have called for help when he attacked me, except that it would have been difficult to decide the precise moment when his insistence became an attack, or to know whether help, if I had asked for it, would have been forthcoming. Minding your own business is one of the surer ways of keeping out of trouble in a country like Turkey.

There had been a time during the evening when I had decided I would sleep with him. It was in the night club, watching the fat belly-dancer writhing her way through her tired routine, when I realised I had overstayed the 1.00am curfew which is another of the foibles of Management in this hotel. I decided then that if he asked me to share his bed I would.

"Relics from an Ancient Tomb" was winner of the 1986 American Express Short Story Award.

In retrospect that sounds like mere cold-blooded expedience, but in fact I liked him very much. He was — is — intelligent, humorous and at least as attractive as any of the men whose beds I have shared in the past, or who have shared mine. Not that there are so many of them as to be faceless or forgotten — in fact, they might be numbered on the fingers of one hand.

Sleeping with Mohammed did not seem to me then to require any special adjustment of taste or principle.

But when we got back to the hotel the door was still unlocked and I was so tired that sleep suddenly seemed more desirable than sex. So I said, "No, thank you, goodnight," and started to walk away.

Perhaps it was the way I said it. Perhaps I had already promised him too much merely by accepting his invitation to the night club. Perhaps the reverse side of Turkish hospitality is the reciprocation of favours for favours received. Whatever the reason, he followed me up the stairs and pushed past me into my room as soon as I had turned the key in the lock to open the door.

Perhaps that is when I should have screamed.

Or I could have given in to him graciously, or at least unresistingly, and might have enjoyed the experience. I still, even then, found him attractive. But some instinctive bloody-mindedness said that if I was going to have sex with anyone the decision was going to be mine. I had forgotten the simple fact of masculine physical strength.

Which is why, now, I can taste the

residue of blood in my mouth and feel the sour burning pain of violation in my crotch.

And lie here wondering what I should do.

Leave here, of course, but where shall I go?

I came to see Turkey and I have been in Istanbul for only nine days.

I could go back to Athens, where the Greeks hate the Turks, and feed vicariously off their antipathy, but satisfaction is not comfort. And in Athens I have fewer friends than I do here in Istanbul. Which is to say that there I have none, and here, if you discount the motley of fellow travellers with whom I rub shoulders, only the Misses Baer, Sophie and Anna, the German-Jewish sisters who befriended me last week as we queued together at the Topkapı Saray, and they are not likely to be sympathetic to someone who has been stupid enough to get herself raped by a Turk. I can imagine them listening to me in gleeful silence while they feed me fish and raki, as they did on my first visit to their apartment, and then recounting their own tales of women they have known during their 50 years of exile who have been wronged by Turkish men.

Or I could go back to England, which has been home for the past two years, except that England, now that April's there, provides me with a depressing vision of wet pavements and crowded trains and the need to hunt for another dismal bed-sitting-room like the one I have so recently vacated.

On the other hand, in New Zealand,

now, the leaves will be turning and it will be time to think about open fires and rain on corrugated-iron roofs and weekends at Whakapapa soon to come. And Norman Jones and Patricia Bartlett and my father, clamping his teeth around the stem of his pipe with a look that will leave me in no doubt as to whose fault it is if I've got myself done by a bloody wog.

So, on balance, it is better to stay than to run away, although not in this room, not in this hotel, not in this city.

The flushing of the toilet down the corridor is a reminder that if I want the bathroom before all the hot water has been run off and the hotel comes alive with people I would rather not see then I should move now. But the hot-water bathroom is on the first floor and my room is on the fourth and I hate the idea of having to walk down three flights of stairs. On the other hand I have never been so dirty, felt so dirty, in my whole life.

I am thankful that there is no one in sight to observe me as I make my descent to the bathroom, clutching the banister like a convalescent drunk.

In the bathroom I turn the taps on full and let the water, blessedly hot for once, flow over me, washing away blood, sweat, semen, humiliation. As it does another thought occurs to me.

What if I am pregnant?

It does not seem possible that new life might already be growing inside me, but it is a prospect that has to be considered.

My period is due in three days. I should be within my safe period. Except that, since I went off the pill, I have not been

Mansfield's childhood home provided the source of the potted plants which feature. Included in the work not only as a reflection of one of Joanna Paul's regular motifs but also as figurative, material manifestations of a tenuous social and bodily circumstance, perhaps resonating in various ways across the lives and narratives aforementioned.

Within Māori ideology, *Te Kore* may describe a point of nothingness—a void. Similarly *Te Kore* may propose a primary point of departure, a social paradox—without reference or resource—of fundamental autonomy and interminable potentiality. *Te Kore* and its variant 'Te Korekore' suggest that *what we see is not all there is*. This state, or state of being, exists beyond the realm of everyday experience and is commonly linked to narratives of creation, exploration and uncertainty, and through these mana, tapu and mauri.⁸

Within *Untitled (epilogue)*, *Te Kore* may be described in the foundational or even formational moment enacted by the voice-over. The perpetuated imagery is suggestive of an imagined beginning or even re-beginning. This prompts a series of questions relating to the significance of the simply cast potted plants that complete the visual information within the work.

Similarly, Paul's watercolours—alongside Arnott's fiction—prompt an interrogation of the marks and washes on a subjective and even emotional level. The combination complicates any 'simple' formal understanding of the gestural language. However, the formal qualities of Paul's works are suggestive rather than descriptive by nature. This proposes a provisional terrain, where things are alluded to rather than defined. Specifics are indeterminable within this realm but, given the nature of Arnott's original textual content, the marks suggest a foregone geographical circumstance (rather than landscape) that is indeed troubled, heavy and primal.

She said:

To use my life as tunnel

a place where talented people can happen through me.

Thinking about

how driving is the same as walking.

Minerals cluster to form islands.

Islands shift in the wake of large water mammals.

Thinking about moving.

From here to there,

freely and quickly.

3. Follow the party of the whale.

In *Follow the party of the whale* (2013), the audience is presented a short audio playback. The vibrational hum of rolling tyre across bitumen and gravel road locates the recording environment, easily recognisable as a moving car. The short vocal captured within was intended to foreground a notion of subjectivity embedded within the work. The recorded recital presents imagery that explores notions of social imagination, movement, political mobilisation and autonomy.

In making *Follow the party of the whale* my intention, along with that of collaborating cinematographer Iain Frengley, was to re-trace and respond to documented sites that the infamously displaced ‘ploughmen’ from Parihaka had completed work on during their imprisonment during the late eighteen-hundreds. We had been following our own research as well as the route of a commemorative hīkoi organised by local iwi in 1985. There was one stretch of road near Port Chalmers that we hadn’t yet visited. This drive would essentially complete the route for us.

Filtered through a personal (not necessarily autobiographical) experience, the various elements of the *Follow the party of the whale* reflect a fragmented, or composite, site. Not simply a geographical place—but a spatial and temporal location, imagined through the conflation of factual histories, embodied experience, and enacted forms of dissonance—a perceivable but tense social circumstance. Within the work, singular yet concertedly ambiguous statements propose responses to social and political events that embody reflections on historical fact and ideological refrains.

I found myself parading barefoot in a vacant and overgrown suburban section, not too far from Dunedin’s central district. The block itself, once used as a bowling green during the early 1900s, also sits at the centre of one of the country’s single darkest civil rights infringements—the unjust incarceration of more than one hundred Māori men—eventually resulting in the death of approximately half of those. Ambling across the cold, wet tarmac I am occupied with intaking fifty litres of soda water. I intermittently expel each mouthful and, in turn, take in more. I am invested in the singular, bodily experience; one’s ‘personal’ relationship to a multitude of conflated influence.

Within an essay introducing waiata, whakataukī and karakia attributed to the Parihaka ‘movement’, Te Miringa Hohaia recalls the narrative of Te Tātau o Te Pō and Te Whare

Hō Miru. This narrative describes the origins of the foundational relationship to waiata, whakataukī and karakia held within a conception of the Māori worldview. The central arc within the narrative describes the obtainment of a richer linguistic mode enacted through oral traditions. Rongomai and Ihenga travel down a hole in the Earth and are eventually forced to escape with knowledge that enables an expanded linguistic potential. The oral traditions grounded in this knowledge—found in karakia, waiata and whakataukī—as Hohaia describes were fundamental in stabilising a ‘strong classical language’. Through a formalised language—with poetics at its core—entailed potential for social solidarity, cultural extension and empowerment.⁹

The poetic potential embedded within aspects of te reo Māori remains synonymous with the history of Parihaka. Language promoted by Parihaka figurehead Te Whiti o Rongomai has been well documented for its charged political agency within one of Aotearoa New Zealand’s most visibly tenuous socio-cultural settings. Metaphorically laden language was central to Te Whiti’s writings, public address and other forms of dialogues such as interviews and waiata. This linguistic trait has been something that I have periodically explored within my recent work. *Untitled (Andersons Bay study)* (2012) for example, drew heavily upon one of Te Whiti o Rongomai’s most well-known proclamations in response to the forecasted plight of Māori during the late 1800s, stating in a discussion with the Governor at the time, ‘*Kua maoa te taewa’... ‘The potato has been cooked.’*¹⁰



Still from:
Follow the party of the whale, 2013
Two channel video, colour and sound
12:51, 2:49min (loop)
Cinematography Iain Frengley



Still from:
Follow the party of the whale, 2013
Two channel video, colour and sound
12:51, 2:49min (loop)
Cinematography Iain Frengley

4. *'Let the atrocious images haunt us.'*

Discussing society's approach to images that portray human suffering, Susan Sontag criticises the position of the incredulous or disbelieving viewer. For Sontag, the modern ubiquity of images representing atrocity, pain and anguish—specifically war—condemns any notion of shock in response to such imagery as morally or psychologically immature. Furthering this point, Sontag questions the ethical or civil value of a position that perpetuates a false sense of innocence through this lens. Viewers that maintain a preliminary response to such imagery in kind, maintain a preliminary responsibility or distance to a more critical reflection on the specific cultural conditions that inform the depiction in question and also the broader context of humankind's ability to inflict such atrocity upon one another.¹¹

Sontag also cites an active criticality toward images of atrocity as being somewhat contradictory to an unspoken function of images that has over time become embedded within Western society's collective psyche. That is to say, images are used to spark our memory. According to Sontag: 'Memory is achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. So the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our nature as humans.'¹² Photographs, for example, are often treasured as keys to maintaining the memory of a deceased loved one. Within this scenario, the function of the photograph and the image being portrayed has become indexical within a process of memorial that is historically inflected rather than one that might prompt a criticality in the present moment. However, allowed to expand beyond the specifically personal, the act of remembering frames 'too much injustice in the world' and so, the viewer, or the audience, maintains a generalisation of atrocity.¹³ To allow any reconciliation of this knowledge and any sense of peace, individually or collectively, we must forget or engender a reception that is too broad for specific injustices. The alternative risks an overwhelming displacement of one's own empathetic agency and political autonomy.¹⁴

The narrative to which *Follow the party of the whale* refers is arguably one the darkest and most turbulent in this country's early colonial history. Many aspects of the narratives around Parihaka remain contested and it is not a history unto which I embody clear genealogical ties. I am not 'from' the iwi of the region and most of my learning about the context has come through historical and art historical research. However, I *am* connected to the historical trajectory of social and political subjugation within which Parihaka remains significant. As a single moment within an ongoing

struggle towards political affirmation for Māori within Aotearoa New Zealand, this history will always embody landmark significance. To engage with it directly is to evaluate one's position in relation to the deeply tragic and unjust, and equally to a much broader political landscape.

The activity documented within *Follow the party of the whale* proposed a physical platform for discursive departure. Physical activity and language—in the form of short poetic texts and whakataukī—are the two central agents within the work. The performance is directed toward a specific narrative while its implications are more outwardly conflated. The physical action in the work prompts a cumulative image of duress while simultaneously eliciting a metaphorical tone. 'The whale' speaks to the tragic death of displaced 'ploughmen' from consumption during their incarceration and also to the optimism embodied in the mobilisation of energies toward non-violent activism.

American journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates' book-length letter to his son entitled *Between the world and me* explores the ongoing implications of negative racial perceptions within North American history. Central to the text is the relationship between the pain of African-American history within North America and its fundamental location within one primary physical manifestation—the body. Coates retraces various aspects of his own upbringing and formative years to his son; onward to his developing critical consciousness as explored through his eventual study and writing. As removed as the histories of African-American and Māori populations are—in place and social context—a number of passages describing the role of poetry within the development of Coates' own political consciousness and also poetry's potential within civil rights discourse prompts certain relevant assertions:

Poetry aims for an economy of truths—loose and useless words must be discarded... not simply the transcription of notions... Poetry was the processing of my thoughts until the slag of justification fell away and I was left with the cold steel truths of life.¹⁵

Here Coates speaks to the efficacy and political potential embedded within the poetic act. Writing and performance embodying a poetic sensibility can promote actual political gains. As it is for Coates' America, similarly the role of the poet within the history of New Zealand civil rights and the specific history of Parihaka remains pivotal. Through an engagement with immediate physical activity, historical fact, and political

consciousness, poetic modes of response can provide leverage with multifarious purpose. As a tool for outward political expression and protest, and also as receptacle for knowledge and its transference; poetic sensibility provides a vehicle for complex and conflated aims. As Coates continues to his son:

*'You must struggle to remember the past in all its nuance, error and humanity. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history... Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about this world is meant to be. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are actions over states, struggle over hope.'*¹⁶



Tame Iti @tameiti · 22 Nov 2012

If you TAKE everything from a man and leave him with nothing, you have inadvertently GIVEN him something very powerful.....a reason to fight



Screenshot taken from Tame Iti's (@tameiti) twitter feed.

5. @tameiti

I became interested in Twitter after being introduced to Tame Iti's feed. Iti maintained a stream of posts during his incarceration post-'terror raids.' I was sickened by the series of events leading to Iti's conviction along with Emily Bailey, Urs Signer and Te Rangikaiwhiria Kemara. Not to mention the other arrested parties and the large number of affected whanau, hapu and iwi, extending to supporters from wide and varying contexts.

The anecdote that I have heard from Iti, describes how he would use his phone call privileges to relay messages to his son who would then upload them to Iti's twitter feed on his behalf. I was taken by the fleeting ingenuity of the idea and also somewhat gripped with the notion that I could receive a 'live stream', from Iti during such a turbulent, public and political moment. There was of course, significant public coverage of the initial raids, trials and convictions. I wondered how I would respond to such a charged situation – social, cultural and political commentary in one hundred and forty characters. It seemed simultaneously savvy, dejected and empowered. The content Iti discussed ranged from direct commentary on his incarceration and ongoing course of appeal, as well as reflections on 'prison life' to include more evocative or suggestive, poetic language that embodied a brand of philosophical response to his situation.

In form and length, I likened Iti's tweets to the body of whakataukī that I had been exploring in other parts of my own research. Iti's tweets and the pool of whakataukī I had been engaged with represented a condensed textual form. Both required a mode of articulation that lent itself to expanding imagery through the use of poetic devices; metaphor and simile to explore conflated, embodied experience. Both are poetic forms that merge historical events and holistic perspectives. Within Maoridom, whakataukī, karakia and waiata consistently enrich the dialogue around social and political events as well as support their maintenance along historical trajectories.

I generated a pool of my own writing in direct response to Iti's 'feed'. These formed the beginnings of an ongoing series of writings—poetry and short-form prose that aimed to consider situations (imagined or real) exploring a multi-faceted response to a personally singular or subjective experience. These aimed to encompass not only aspects of site, body and mind but also framed a socio-political agency. Not just *being* but being with purpose.

The pool of writings generated informed a range of performative output with poetry and other forms of 'expressive' language at the core. Reading my own words became an important mode of experimentation. This mode of delivery was used to deploy imagery within a range of contexts.

Sleeping in the sun,
I can remember the names
of five thousand friends.
Brothers and Grandfathers
complain that they cannot
find their coats.
So I soak my head
in a bowl full of water.

Moe i te whitinga o te ra
I memahara nga ingoa o nga hea rima mano
nga tūngane mākaranipa
awarogawanga, tā ratou keti
kai puta taku matenga i roto i te epu
ki ime te wai.

Scanned test print 'bowl full of water' including annotated draft Māori translation by Rebecca Pickering.



two sharks believe they live in two jars, 2013.

Live performance held at Massey University. The performance alternated between the reading of short poetic verses and choreographed 'actions' using provisional materials such as bags of flour, party streamers and nails.

Image: Poa Boontoum



Apology, (to be performed in a greenhouse), 2013.

Live performance held within a greenhouse within the Massey University campus. Invited guests were offered hot water to drink during their attendance. A piece of poetry was delivered 'live' within the space of the greenhouse.

Images: Poa Boontoum





Ocean Ranch, October 2014

Departing Massey University Wellington Campus and travelling to The Island Bay Marine Education Centre, Wellington, participants were invited to take part in a tour of the facility and its various enclosures. All aspects of the tour were delivered in accordance with the regular operation of the Education Centre apart from the fact that the coordinator of the tour 'Jools', had agreed to modify his usual delivery of information to include profanities and 'colourful' language.



I stretch everything in the end (2013), an extended reading of my own poetry was delivered within an 'action-based' live performance employing fifty 'bucketed plants'. Weeds pulled from my sister's home garden were grown in old paint buckets for a period of months before the performance was to take place. The buckets were transported from her house to the loading dock, through the various galleries of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki and then to one of the rooftop atriums. At two separate points within the performance, a separate recital was delivered, amplified through a simple P.A. system throughout the immediate gallery spaces, broadcast to the audience who witnessed the recitals and the subsequent intervention unannounced.



In *Towards doing more* (March 2014, The Physics Room Christchurch) the audience was presented with the live production and recording of a performance centred on the recital of poetry. Seven repeated deliveries of a single poem were recorded, played back in 'real time' and then recorded again. The accumulative vocal recording ultimately rendered the recited material as 'indecipherable.' The resulting recording (23min 16sec) was then presented to viewers of the exhibition upon request.



Towards doing more, 2014 (installation view)
Background: *Fifty buckets of weeds pulled from my sister's garden (missing two)*, 2014.
The Physics Room Christchurch, March 2014.
Image: Daegan Wells

6. Ritual Space/Sculptural Time.

In common medical usage the term *commissure* refers to specific anatomical junctions where nerve tissues connect.¹⁷ In a comparative essay discussing intersections between the works of artists Joseph Beuys and Matthew Barney, Nat Trotman introduces the concept as a structural device that might prompt thought around the intersections between both artists' uses of objecthood and materiality as connective indexes within their respective works. Trotman proposes the *commissure* as a way to understand the implications of the role of the sculptural object as residual evidence of performative actions in relation to both Beuys' and Barney's oeuvre.¹⁸ Trotman cites Kristine Stiles' definition of commissures as objects that are initially delegated to:

*[A]ct as connections leading back to aesthetic concepts... They announce that it is never enough to simply look at the object of an action without entering into a committed relation, a situation where the object draws viewers back to actions completing the cycle of relation between acting subjects, objects and viewing subjects.*¹⁹

Stiles definition in this context presents a primary documentary function carried with the *commissural* object. Objects or materials in question are indexical to their making, activation or performative function. Trotman expands upon a limited understanding of Beuys' sculptural objects, integrated within live performance or otherwise, as merely commissural indicators. Through his (Beuys) use and *re-use* of certain materials, processes, and sculptural motifs, Beuys was able to enact in his work a register of the vernacular. Through performative devices such as extended duration, repetition, and cyclic events within his oeuvre, Beuys established his 'countertime' and 'counterspace'. He proposed that 'countertime' and 'counterspace' were enacted temporal and spatial zones that assisted in the imagining (and eventual manifestation of) enlightened political sensibilities. Within these, intuition as an agent of creativity and autonomy maintained primacy.²⁰ Beuys' metaphorically laden pool of material and objects were intended to transcend (via a system of association) a 'simple' action-oriented function to one that carried his ritualism to a more overtly political context. Trotman describes the tension manifest in Beuys performances as resonating with the 'amorphous' substances and materials central to them. The fat used by Beuys for example, related the conceptions of order and chaos and 'represents a delicate symbolic balance between opposing poles' pivotal within a redemptive social proposition.²¹ The multitude of tensions asserted within Beuys' performative oeuvre consciously enacts a 'commissural'

quality. Beuys was able to draw connective tissue between the various elements in his work. Facilitating tension not as a means to disruption, rather an activation of discursive lines between material, sculpture, audience and artist.

Trotman proposes that Barney's 'perversion' (rather than disruption) of this treatise is activated through the filter of the cinematic lens. Although both artists' work maintains an adherence to an idiosyncratic ritualism, each evokes divergent implications for the viewer within their particular, highly subjective social constructs. Matthew Barney's documentary (camera) application, most visible within his earlier action-based works, stimulates a social proposition, constructed via very different means than that of Beuys. Barney's earliest action-based video and sculptural installations, through their presentation of pre-recorded activity, displace a sense of spatial and temporal stability or fixity. Within works such as *Blind Perineum* and *Radial Drill* (both 1991), Barney's decision to show an audience activity captured directly within the space of exhibition simultaneously disrupts the 'Beuysian' function of tangible, material objects as well as the immediate presence of the (artist's) body.²² Within both these works, Barney disrupts a logical temporal continuum for the viewer by presenting sculptural objects simultaneously within the site of exhibition and within a parallel filmic space. Beuys' commissures—objects, materials, and the actions from which they resulted—posed reflective 'enhancements, enacting his utopian ideals.'²³ In a contrasting manner, in Barney's early works and later more elaborately cinematic pieces, the disruptive spatial and temporal implication is proposed primarily through film.

Somewhat estranged from the Beuysian commissural mode, whereby tension created through a sculptural and performative space provides a framework for discursive connectivity; Barney's later works rely on the representational realm found within cinematic language to promote another subjective tension. Beuys' 'countertime' and 'counterspace' evoked through a collective tension (or balance) becomes Barney's 'headspace' in which, within his cinematic language - bodies, object, and architecture created the artist's 'sculptural zones.' Barney's virtual 'social' mode is most accessible in aspects of the *Cremaster* cycle where, in refusing to psychologise his films via characters' points-of-view, a three-dimensional space of action becomes an imagined, yet functional social entity of its own—a malleable, yet holistic investigation of cinematic space.²⁴



Still from:
A torch and a light (cover), 2015
Single channel video, colour and sound
7min 33sec
Cinematography Iain Frengley

Within *a torch and light (cover)* (2015), the three main components of the work attempt to reflect aspects of a malleable social proposition, through a model that draws upon by Beuys' material, and Barney's filmic, performative commissural modes. The work embodies tension through the oblique juxtaposition of a love song (by an unidentified author, *He waiata te aroha*), a brief architectural scene shot within a former abattoir, and the documented material manipulation of a mass of wet towels. Singularly, each component of the work presents a 'break' of some kind. The aftermath of a relationship demised, the site of a former meat processing plant—a location that embodies the duality of mortality—and an ill-fated act of animation.

A torch and light (cover) aims to present a temporal and spatial proposition that—like Beuys' enacted ritualised tension is—centred on an empathetic ambition—mobilised (partially) by the viewer's understanding of materials. This provocation is described through the documentation of performative gesture (the recited text, the manipulation of towels) and also its fragmentation through the use of filmic space. Presented as three counterparts, the assemblage aims to provoke a questioning of the relationships drawn while presenting imagery where the relationship is also broken. These tasks however, can never be fully satisfied; this 'map' is fundamentally irreconcilable.

7. (*Interstellar*)

In a pivotal scene during Christopher Nolan's 2014 science fiction film *Interstellar* Murph, appears in a recorded video message to her father Cooper. Cooper eventually receives this message, along with a string of additional video messages, after a dramatic sequence of failures have delayed his mission scouting distant planets. Due to the effects of relativity, the hours Cooper has spent on a distant planet have equated to over twenty years on Earth. As he watches the stream of messages he witnesses both his children age with each following clip and is ultimately asked to reconcile a trajectory of time, spanning more than two decades, compressed into a sequence lasting only minutes. This moment in the film entails a montage of sorts that exposes Cooper to a consumption of experience and subsequent mortality that is both extraordinary and intensely distressing.

During her final address, Murph discloses two significant events to her father. The first is that, at the time of recording it is her birthday and secondly that with this birthday she will have reached the same age as her father at the time of their parting. This revelation prompts a cathartic release for both daughter and father. Murph is forced to re-evaluate a longstanding, imagined image of her father that is permanently disrupted by her own sense of adulthood, matured understanding of the events and the corresponding emotional and familial context. Cooper, on recognition of his daughter's admission, engages with a perception of temporality that seems to completely challenge his own lucidity. The proposition that when he next sees his daughter, she will be older than him prompts a disarming sense of transience for Cooper. The reciprocal sense of exchange is ultimately imagined for each. Nevertheless, the realisation for both instils a highly arresting, internalised embodiment of the entropic. This becomes accentuated given the exponentially vast notions of space and distance that have been present throughout the course of the film. Paradoxically however, given the embodied assumption of response from father and daughter, both characters are in fact portrayed and perhaps even received as *connected* within this expansive interplanetary network.²⁵



Still from:
two shoots that stretch far out, 2013-14
Single channel video, colour and sound
13:22min
Cinematography Iain Frengley

8. *Whakapapa*.

In the title of a recent essay discussing aspects of *kōwhaiwhai* within the work of Ngataiharuru Taepa, Nigel Borrell references the *whakataukī* *He kāwei hue, he kāwei tangata, descendants are like the runners of the gourd plant*. Identifying the potential of *whakapapa* as expansive connector; the ‘rapid growth’, the tendrils (*kāwei*) of the gourd (hue) stretch, linking people across *whānau*, *hapu* and *iwi*. Through its relation to the gourd Borrell evokes an understanding of *whakapapa* that vitalises the histories that are drawn through such a system. Borrell describes a social construct, an actively expansive genealogical consciousness. A system that *is* active, rather than activated.²⁶

Huhana Smith describes the expression of *whakapapa* as occurring within an exponentially expansive system, engaging all manner of existence—living and non-living entities, people, plants, animals and property; an ecological system ultimately responsible to an understanding of the Māori cosmology.²⁷ This is much more than ancestral genealogy alone but also a framework within which to locate a position within the multifarious trajectories that begin to map one’s life.

The articulation of such a framework can prompt a range of paradoxical implications. Simply considering one’s relation to their own *whānau* can challenge easily carried interpretations where past or previous generational lines are perceived as static or dormant. The customary visual representation of one’s ancestry for example, traces backward from a single generation, simultaneously spreading laterally, and eventually bridging accumulated networks of lineage. Within a somewhat schematic and relatively concise sequential system we are presented with a timespan that exceeds the commonly accepted or enacted mode of temporal consciousness. As one is related to a vast pool of ancestral predecessors, the lines of connection extend far beyond the scope of our own life’s experience. The relationship one may hold to preceding generations remains largely imagined—or even learned and then imagined. Added to this, the attributes of one’s lived experience—the embodiment of a life span—when comprehended within the expanse of *whakapapa* to encompass, landmark, pre-history and even cosmology requires an engagement with spatial and temporal frameworks that transcend many limited notions found within a normative, Westernised knowledge system.

Within a diversity of cultural paradigms, a common system for reconciling the correlation between an embodied ‘lived’ position and a socio-cultural framework with

the initial task of describing one's own 'lineage'. Within tikanga Māori, the *practice* of whakapapa remains fundamental. Understanding 'where' someone is from is accepted as customary social pattern. The genealogical structure from which one is born is perceived as a foundational locus for kōrero and broader social interaction. When engaged in acts of social introduction and self-affirmation, this process and the knowledge that it transposes forms a basis from which to consider one's social and cultural position.

Much more than a 'simply' descriptive process, the articulation and thinking *through* your whakapapa may in fact reflect a person's relationship *to* their whakapapa. In another sense, the subjective articulation of one's position should also resonate with a subjective worldview. The narrative around my specific genealogy is a personal history that I do not explicitly engage with when discussing my work within the public sphere. I am mindful of the risk of overstating a directly autobiographical intention, and become cautious of using any language that might foreclose more open-ended readings of my practice. Alternatively one could consider my own background as a type of filter by which to introduce aspects of my practice, rather than simply a direct reflection of it.

A number of my recent moving image-based installations such as *Follow the party of the whale* (2013), *two shoots that stretch far out* (2013-14) and *A torch and a light (cover)* (2015) feature 'me' as the central performer. Along with live performances *I stretch everything in the end* (2013) and *Towards doing more* (2014) I am positioned as the protagonist within a range contexts. These include documented site-specific performances, gallery and 'off-site' performances. Although, the specific decisions that inform the development of each work respond to various historical, or site-specific materials. Paradoxically within these works, the viewer is consistently presented with a construct (either documented and represented within moving image or, performed live) that carries a suggested subjectivity.

My identifiable, representational presence within a body of recent moving image and performance-based works has, in conjunction with the range of specific content explored, imbued within these works, certain autobiographical implications. These have in the past influenced how certain works might be read.²⁸ Understanding 'where' someone is from (again) is partial to understanding their embodied position.

To state that my father's death has influenced my artistic practice is paradoxical. I can acknowledge his death as fundamental in shaping my social or cultural outlook but it is not *really* what my 'work' is about. There *are* however, certain aspects that align this moment in my life with obtaining a clearer understanding of a number of threads within my practice. As a seven year old, being confronted with such a decisive moment understandably affects one's long-term view on issues of tragedy and trauma, especially as they might relate specifically to the 'family unit' or domestic setting. This history, or its reflection could be retrievable via certain recurring motifs discernible across a number of works. The often-melancholic tonal inflection evidenced within the portrayed imagery. Also through the sense of displacement suggested in a range of material that often explores, mines, and interweaves moments referencing a rather troubled domesticity or a tenuous 'pedestrian' setting.

The rift prompted by my father's passing assisted in entrenching a number of idiosyncratic trajectories within my early childhood. Firstly, that I would experience an upbringing with my mother and sister as the central figures within my own social understanding; and secondly, because my mother is Australian that these years of my life would develop outside a Māori worldview. This is not to say that both of these narratives are consistently retrievable within my recent work as an artist but, that the conception of a composite (as opposed to split) socio-cultural experience provides an organisational device that *is* actively engaged with in my most recent practice.



two shoots that stretch far out, 2013-14.
Installation view
Art Gallery of New South Wales, March 2014.

9. 'E kimi ana i ngā kāwai i toro ki tawhiti'

Translated into English this whakataukī exploits the characteristics of laterally extending gourd tendrils as its conceptual parallel. *Seeking the shoots that stretch far out* might describe the embodiment of the outwardly expansive 'tendrils', which enact an ambition for connection and growth. Historically, the proverb was attributed in relation to someone attempting to connect 'laterally' with their own whakapapa or perhaps a person whom might be seeking to maintain a 'long distance' relationship.²⁹ These understandings, read specifically in relation to Huhana Smith's conceptually expansive whakapapa, encompassing much more than ancestry alone, also broadens the social ambition described within this whakataukī. When viewed as a living system—a breathing social entity, someone seeking to connect to 'the gourd', seeking to connect to whakapapa becomes entangled within a pan-historical, inter-textual social and cultural setting. Not just a specific, subjective history but a multifarious framework and social entity, simultaneously implicating the universal and the particular.

Sharing a lament with a blind wallaby, an account of a wife as she reflects on the tension arising from the actions of her polygamous husband. I am ambling with a frail, housebound marsupial. I recite thoughts of loss and despair and through my voice; she listens to the muffled score of her estranged spouse and his new lover. 'Waloo' is ushered around the small space of the training barn as he brushes the inside of my legs and feet. I anticipate and simultaneously shadow his movements while he uses my presence to plot his own bearings. Meanwhile, the voice of Matahira observes through the wall, the heavy breathing from the next room.

Within the work *two shoots that stretch far out* (2013-14), the viewer is presented with a series of five video sequences between four-five minutes in duration. The series is looped extending the duration (13:22min). Within each clip I am portrayed reading various versions of a single text to group of rabbits, a swan, a donkey, ducks and chickens, and then wallaby. Initiated by a somewhat misshapen notion of discursive inclusivity. The central theme within the work hinges on a communicative gesture (a recital of a song) that explores an empathetic connection—a personal relationship—a marriage.

The recurring recital within 'two shoots...' draws heavily from an English translation of a pre-colonial waiata *He waiata mō to moe punarua* or *A song about two wives*. The

original waiata is attributed to Matahira of Ngāti Porou. The senior wife of Te Kotiri, Matahira authored the waiata after Te Kotiri took on his second wife Whioroa.³⁰ Given the imagery within ‘two shoots...’—the various inferential plays bought on by the ‘mismatching’ of partner, species, and language—the socio-cultural dualities explored within the original waiata prompt overlapping registers of ambiguity for the viewer. Aligning the uncertain narrative through the recital, alongside the ‘illogical’ and flawed discourse between (human) artist and animal presents manifold experiences via a relatively ‘simple’ and direct action.

Central to my motivation in the development of *two shoots that stretch far out* lay a much richer understanding of the *affective* potential between language and physicality. Italian theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s writing on *sensibility* has acted as the impetus for much of my thinking within this proposed field. For Berardi, *sensibility* as part of the human condition proposes ‘the ability to understand what cannot be expressed in forms that have a finite syntax.’ Ambiguity, nuance, and dialectical models work against the kinds of language interfaces prevalent today that ‘turn meaning into information.’³¹ For Berardi, the re-calibration of our empathetic agency will play a key role toward new mobilisations of the social imagination and the emergence of new social forms. I am not interested in love songs *per se* but see them as representative of a social or emotional borderland—moments where our personal attitudes toward one and other are brought into question. Structural and linguistic conventions found within waiata and whakatauki stem from a rich oral tradition that historically has drawn heavily upon language and content that compels one’s empathetic charge. A lament for a lost child, the eulogy of a prominent tribal figure or political commentary of the day embodies poignant ‘real world’ examples of the use-value of our collective ‘sensible’ potential.

This suggests potential in the promotion of more tolerant, equitable and perhaps more sustainable social structure, which Berardi suggests are implausible or simply inconceivable within the current social schema, which he unapologetically defines as ‘The Economic Dictatorship.’ Poetry and *poetic forms* propose imagery, discursive and relational models that can re-invigorate the now alienated relationship we currently maintain between language, our body, time and space.

Notes:

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2. *Ibid.*
3. See also [Ed. Barton, C., Conland, N. and Curnow, W.] Reading Room issue 6: Elective Proximities. E H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland 2013.
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5. Gibson. p13
6. Hau'ofa, E. 'The Ocean in Us' The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 10, Number 2, Fall 1998, 391–410 University of Hawai'i Press. p400 (retrieved from http://press.anu.edu.au/culture_sustainable/ch02.pdf 10/09/15)
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10. Mead, S. "*Nga pepeha a nga tipuna*" Victoria University Press, 2001 p
11. Sontag, S. *Regarding the pain of others*. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.p102
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13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. Coates, T. *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2015. p51
16. *Ibid.*
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19. *Ibid.*
20. Trotman p142
21. Trotman p145
22. Trotman p150
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Nolan, C., et al. (2015). *Interstellar*.
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