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Grounded in Place: Dialogues between First Nations Artists from Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa

Abstract

This paper introduces “Grounded in Place: Dialogues between First Nations Artists from Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa,” a special issue of Pacific Arts. It provides background information about the October 2021 online symposium of the same name, which brought together nineteen First Nations artists, filmmakers, and curators, along with non-Indigenous scholars and museum professionals, from Australia, Taiwan, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Philippines. The symposium explored the relationships that First Nations creative practitioners in the Indo-Pacific region have to the land and sea. Each symposium speaker discussed their creative practice in relation to their panel’s theme: history and sovereignty, land and community, site and materials, or place and space.

The journal issue comprises written and visual essays, an interview, poetry, and reflective pieces from symposium participants. The contributions are based on the participants’ presentations and have been expanded. While acknowledging the different political, social, and environmental contexts of each contributor, as well as their highly distinctive perspectives and creative approaches, some common themes have emerged in this volume, which the guest editors outline in this introduction. These centre on First Nations Peoples’ complex relationships with land and water as sites of appropriation and struggles for sovereignty, as sources of learning and creative production, and as places of ancestral being and continuous belonging, community, and culture. The introduction provides a brief overview of each contributor’s essay, as well as background on the collaboration between the institutions that convened the symposium: Queensland University of Technology, Taiwan’s National Museum of Prehistory, and Aotearoa’s Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre. It also fleshes out some of the similarities between the countries’ histories, particularly the ongoing effects of colonisation upon their respective First Nations Peoples.

Keywords: *history and sovereignty, land and community, site and materials, place and space, First Nations artists*

In early October 2021, while many of us across the world were in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had the pleasure of delivering the symposium *Grounded in Place: Dialogues Between First Nations Artists from Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa*. Presented online and across three days, it brought together nineteen First Nations artists, filmmakers, and curators, along with non-Indigenous scholars and museum professionals, from Australia, Taiwan, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Philippines. Comprising artist talks, panel discussions, a keynote address, and screenings of award-winning documentary films, the symposium explored the relationships that First Nations creative practitioners in the Indo-Pacific region have to the land and sea. Each speaker was invited to discuss their creative practice as it related to the overall symposium theme “Grounded in Place” and to expand upon their individual panel’s theme: history and sovereignty, land and community, site and materials, or place and space.

Significantly, the symposium marked the first time that most participants had met face-to-face (albeit virtually) and engaged with each other in conversation. It was also the first collaboration between our respective institutions: Queensland University of Technology, Taiwan’s National Museum of Prehistory, and Aotearoa’s Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre. Originally, the symposium and publication were planned as part of a First Nations artistic exchange program between Australia and Taiwan. However, given the need to pivot to an online format, we extended the invitation to our neighbours in Aotearoa to join us in this symposium exploring different contexts and perspectives from the Indo-Pacific. Through this exchange, new connections were forged and insights and lines of inquiry emerged, all of which we seek to further explore in this special issue of *Pacific Arts* and in a forthcoming exhibition.

For this publication, each symposium participant was invited to critically reflect on and expand upon their presentation within the context of their respective panel theme, resulting in the following essays, interviews, reflective pieces, and visual essays. While acknowledging the different political, social, and environmental contexts of the contributors, as well as their highly distinctive perspectives and creative approaches, some common themes have emerged in this volume. These centre on our complex relationship with land and water as sites of appropriation and struggles for sovereignty, as sources of learning and creative production, and as places of ancestral being and continuous belonging, community, and culture.

As continents and islands located in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa share a certain interconnectedness that has been shaped

by geography, relationships between land and culture, First Nations Peoples' ties to the land and sea, and colonial and migrant histories. There is anthropological evidence to suggest that Taiwan and First Nations Pacific Peoples have been connected since prehistoric times through maritime migration routes of Austronesian-speaking peoples crossing the Indo-Pacific. The legacies of colonial-settler invasion and genocide, inter-generational trauma, and the ongoing struggles for reconciliation, self-determination, and sovereignty are also shared by First Nations Peoples in Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa.

The centrality of concerns—especially sovereignty—in the face of lasting effects of colonisation is a response to specific national conditions. Taiwan is unique in that it relates both to East Asia culturally and linguistically because of Chinese migration to the island, and to Island Southeast Asia and Oceania because of its Indigenous peoples' Austronesian language connection. Taiwanese Indigenous languages belong to the Austronesian group, which includes the majority of language groups in "Island Southeast Asia" and Oceania.¹ The recognition of ethnic as well as Austronesian identity is important to many Taiwanese Indigenous artists. The term "Taiwanese Indigenous people" generally refers to ethnic groups who have been living in Taiwan and on its outlying islands for as long as five thousand years, significantly longer than the Han Chinese settlers who arrived in the 1600s.² Centuries of colonisation caused Indigenous languages and traditions to be lost, and the Indigenous population was subjected to racially discriminatory practices. Since the 1980s, the relationship between Taiwanese Indigenous people and the government has been substantially transformed through Taiwan's Indigenous Movement, which has made issues of ethnic politics, naming, and rights regarding the usage and possession of land visible. This led to the establishment of the Presidential Office Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee in 2016, whose mandate is to address the government's violations of Indigenous people's human rights.³

Australia is home to the oldest continuing living culture in the world, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been custodians of these lands since they were created. Yet, when British colonisers invaded Australia in 1788, they declared it *terra nullius* ("land belonging to no one" in Latin). This term became the legal principle upon which land was claimed—without payment or treaty—by the British colonisers and European settlers. It was used by successive governments to explain and legitimise the dispossession, dispersal, and brutal treatment of First Nations peoples. The forced removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional homelands and the systematic separation of their families has had an enduring and devastating impact on Aboriginal communities across the country

and its effects are widely documented. For many contemporary Aboriginal artists, including those contributing to this volume, the desire to reconnect with traditional ancestral lands and to expose the effects of colonisation and ongoing discrimination towards Indigenous Australians is reflected in their work.

Similarly, the continuous impact of colonial history characterises the context for Māori artists in Aotearoa today. The arrival of British settlers in the late eighteenth century and desire of both sides to clarify rights to land led to The Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi—an agreement made between Māori and the British Crown in 1840 that imposed British citizenship—and created one nation through Eurocentric systems of governance and law.⁴ While the Treaty led to the concept of biculturalism, as well as to the acknowledgement that Māori are *tangata whenua* (the people of the land) and have a special relationship with the land, the uneven nature of the Treaty partnership for Māori led to less-than-equal rights, protection, and status. Since the 1970s, Māori have been engaged in legal battles over land ownership and settlements intended to compensate them for their historical dispossession. Despite this opportunity, there is a wide body of literature that suggests that the outcomes of these settlements instead perpetuate colonisation and uphold the political structures that allow for the ongoing dispossession of Māori.⁵

In Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa, First Nations artists' experiences and responses to the ongoing effects of colonialism, and the socio-political, economic, and cultural environments in which they live, vary greatly. While acknowledging these distinctions, questions of sovereignty—what it means and how one might achieve it—are key themes underpinning works by many First Nations artists. For Taiwan's First Nation artists Chang En-man (張恩滿), Akac Orat (陳豪毅), Yuma Taru (尤瑪·達陸), and Anchi Lin (Ciwas Tahos, 林安琪)—whose papers are included in this volume—the question of sovereignty has national, legal, cultural, and personal implications. In their essays, they evocatively describe their respective efforts to recover and reclaim their ancestral lands, cultures, traditions, and their Indigenous identities in a predominantly Han-Chinese society and de facto nation-state.

Australia has more than 500 different clan groups or “nations,” each with its own language, customs, and laws. Sovereignty is viewed by many Aboriginal Australian artists—including symposium panellists Judy Watson, Mandy Quadrio, and Leah King-Smith—in relation to their connection to land and to their ancestral Country (including their waters). For Vernon Ah Kee, who was born in 1967—just months before the referendum in which Aborigines were finally recognised as

Australian citizens—sovereignty is both political and personal. He says, “[for me] sovereignty is about being able to build my future and my family’s future . . . not just merely declaring it. Do we want to use sovereignty in place of human rights?”⁶

The self-determination and continued autonomy of Māori culture expressed by the artistic practices of Ngāhuia Harrison, Ron Bull and Simon Kaan as part of Kaihaukai Art Collective, and Areta Wilkinson (the latter working as part of the collective Paemanu) are actions of sovereignty. Their practices draw on Te Ao Māori (The Māori World), and are informed by the interconnecting histories of *iwi* (tribe) and *hapu* (sub-tribe) with current ways of being that indicate an enduring presence. The exhibitions and works they discuss are evidence of artists providing insight into Māori *mātauranga* (values, concepts, and ideas) and inserting them into institutional and other contexts where they have previously been absent.

In an essay based on his keynote speech in the “Grounded in Place” symposium, Philippine-based art historian and curator Patrick Flores explores notions of origins, place, and sovereignty in relation to representations of Indigenous art in global, contemporary exhibition contexts. Reflecting on his own curatorial experiences, he highlights the inherent politics underpinning the representation of contemporary Indigenous art and the systematic discrimination towards people of colour, women, and Indigenous and queer communities within the modernist canon. Drawing on Chadwick Allen’s concept of the “transIndigenous,” Flores proposes an “Indigenous future” in which Indigenous artists might join together in solidarity and reclaim a space that is transdisciplinary, multidimensional, and multidirectional, that rises above geopolitics, race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Through the symposium and this publication, contributors have come together and claimed a space to meet, share their work, and engage in conversation, while many have also explored opportunities for future collaboration and exchange. They have highlighted their respect for ancestry as authority, and the ways they are acting to create, share, and be good guardians of knowledge. In so doing, they contest and Indigenise contemporary neo-liberal society. Their contributions evoke concepts of being connected to place and the multilayered realities within artistic research and practice in ways that empower their communities. As Judy Watson stated in her symposium presentation, the “artist as a needle” can pull community behind it or be pulled by community.

This special issue of *Pacific Arts* contributes artists’ knowledge, histories, and reflections on their own ground while forging acts that demonstrate their existence and resistance in acts of self-determination. We hope this publication

will offer new insights and help to build on the growing body of literature in this field, serving as a useful resource for creative practitioners, researchers, museum professionals, students, and teachers alike.

Numerous people contributed to the symposium and to this publication, and we are very grateful to them. Firstly, we would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank all our participants: artists Vernon Ah Kee, Chang En-man, Ngāhuia Harrison, Sarah Hudson, Kaihaukai Art Collective (Ron Bull and Simon Kaan), Leah King-Smith, Anchi Lin (Ciwas Tahos), Akac Orat, Mandy Quadrio, Yuma Taru, Judy Watson, and Areta Wilkinson (on behalf of Paemanu, Ngāi Tahu artist collective). We look forward to future interactions with them. Many thanks also to our keynote presenter, Patrick Flores, and to Wesley Enoch AM for offering a warm Welcome to Country during the symposium. We are grateful to film directors Larissa Behrendt, Merata Mita, Leon Narby, Gerd Pohlman, and Pilin Yapu (比令 . 亞布), and film distributors ABC Commercial, Black Fella Films, and Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision for allowing us to screen their films during the symposium. We would like to acknowledge and express our deepest gratitude to our advisors, Leah King-Smith, Juliana McLaughlin (Queensland University of Technology), and Yuma Taru, along with Megan Tamati-Quennell (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa), who provided valuable advice and support during the development of the symposium. Special thanks to Evie Franzidis, who worked tirelessly editing contributors' drafts of papers for this publication, and to Sarah Barron who provided valuable administrative and logistical support to Sophie McIntyre when organising and delivering the symposium. Finally, we would like to thank the Ministry of Culture, Taiwan (Spotlight Taiwan) for generously sponsoring the symposium and publication, and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (Brisbane) for their support and cooperation.

*Dr Sophie McIntyre is a senior lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology, and a curator and writer specialising in art from Taiwan and the Asia-Pacific. She is the author of *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity* (Brill, 2018), and has published widely on visual art, museology, cultural diplomacy, and identity politics. McIntyre initiated the 2021 symposium "Grounded in Place: Dialogues Between First Nations Artists from Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa," which she co-organised with Dr Fang Chun-wei and Dr Zara Stanhope. She has worked in museums in Australia, Taiwan, and New Zealand, and her curated exhibitions include *Ink Remix: Contemporary Art from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong*; *Penumbra: New Media Art from Taiwan*;*

and Islanded: Contemporary Art from New Zealand, Singapore, and Taiwan (with Lee Weng Choy and Eugene Tan).

Dr Fang Chun-wei is an associate curatorial researcher and the head of Department of Exhibition and Education at the National Museum of Prehistory in Taiwan and an adjunct associate professor at National Taitung University. For two decades, he has conducted research on Austronesian communities in Taiwan, Indonesia, and Fiji. He has also been involved in Indigenous museum development and training projects in Taiwan since 2017. His work has focused on the cross-cultural and comparative studies of museological and cultural diversity. He has published on ritual, religious conversion, and emerging cultural revitalisation among Taiwan's Indigenous Bunun people, and has edited two books on Atayal weaving.

Dr Zara Stanhope is the director of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery / Len Lye Centre, New Plymouth, Aotearoa New Zealand, and an adjunct professor at AUT University, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. A curator and writer, she has published widely and actively seeks collaborations that foster connections and increase an understanding of who we are across the Global South. She is focused on the strategic direction of GBAG as an active Treaty partner with mana whenu and of deepening experiences of contemporary art from Aotearoa and Te Moana Nui-a-Kiwa. She was the lead curator for Aotearoa New Zealand at the 58th La Biennale di Venezia, 2019.

Notes

¹ Southeast Asia (SEA) is divided into “Mainland SEA” and “Island SEA” due to the distinct natural environments, histories, languages, and cultures. The people of Island SEA speak mainly Austronesian languages.

² Taiwanese Indigenous people have been subjected to the successive control of six foreign powers: the Dutch (1624–1662), the Spanish (1626–1642), Koxinga (1662–1683), the Qing Empire (1683–1895), the Japanese (1895–1945), and the Republic of China (1945–present).

³ Presidential Office, Indigenous Historical Justice and Transitional Justice Committee, <https://indigenous-justice.president.gov.tw/EN>.

⁴ Claudia Orange, *An Illustrated History of the Treaty of Waitangi* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2004).

⁵ Scott Summerfield, “Towards a Positive Treaty Partnership in the Post-Settlement Era: Treaty of Waitangi Settlements and Decolonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand” (master’s thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2015); Margaret Mutu, “The Treaty Claims Settlement Process in New Zealand and its Impact on Māori,” *Land* 8, no. 10 (2019): 152; and John Reid, Matthew Rout, Te Maire Tau,

and Cheryl Smith, *The Colonising Environment: An Aetiology of the Trauma of Settler Colonisation and Land Alienation of Ngāi Tahu Whānau* (University of Canterbury Ngāi Tahu Research Centre, Christchurch, 2017).

⁶ Vernon Ah Kee and Sophie McIntyre, “‘nothing important happened today’: An Interview with Vernon Ah Kee,” *Pacific Arts* 22, no. 2 (2022): 11–26.