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Infectious rhythms

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Infectious Rhythms

Nigel Clark
Faculty of Social Sciences: Geography
The Open University
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA,
n.h.clark@open.ac.uk

Now don't look horrified — if you had had a modern intellect, you would not have suffered half as much as you have about coming to these wilds, for you would have known that something surprising would turn up.

Jane Mander [The Story of a New Zealand River](#)

Sampling the islands of the South Pacific on Cook's first voyage, botanist Joseph Banks reputedly pressed his choicest specimens between the pages of Milton's [Paradise Lost](#). He would have had no shortage of strange and surprising biota. Islands are hotspots of biodiversity, rich in species found nowhere else, and here, in Aotearoa, Earth's largest remote oceanic island, odd lifeforms were especially prevalent. But, for all the excitement of discovery, Banks was a far from disinterested observer, even in his Endeavour days. He went on to play a vital role in establishing a global traffic in seeds and plants, sustained by British sea power and in the service of Empire. Just as the European voyages of the late 18th century opened new conversations between previously unacquainted cultures, so too did Banks and his colleagues weave the world's biological life into an unprecedented intimacy.

An early source of inputs to the global vegetal database, Aotearoa would later find itself on the receiving end. When it came to colonizing these islands, settlers sought to transplant "everything but the soil and the climate". New Zealand was a European concept rendered in living matter, an attempt at a biological and topographical makeover more akin to terraforming than "taming nature". The ongoing repercussions of this project are the subject of [Tutira](#) (1921), one of our own literary classics - a story less of paradise lost or regained than permanently postponed. Herbert Guthrie-Smith's account of the transformation of a single block of farmland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries documents subsiding hillsides, threatened native species, livestock turning feral, and, not least, the arrival of invasive weeds. After some hundred and fifty pages devoted to advancing "vegetative aliens", Guthrie-Smith concludes:

Had the vast change sketched in preceding chapters been fulfilled according to the inclination of man, only grasses and fodder-plants for his domesticated beasts, shrubs, flowers, fruit for his taste, and forest trees for the pride of his heart, would have been acclimatised — Tutira would have been as the Garden of Eden, nourishing nothing but what was good for food and pleasant to the eye. Such an ideal condition is impossible to maintain; the pioneers of every colony set in motion machinery beyond their ultimate control; no legislation can regulate the dissemination of seeds. As the sun

shines and the rain falls alike on the just and the unjust, so fleets, railroads, and highways convey seeds good and bad to a like common destination.

Guthrie-Smith's idiom may be Victorian, but a prescient 'antipodality' animates his observations. He is aware that Tutira is on the receiving end of processes set in motion years earlier and a hemisphere away, but he casts his own region as an epicentre in its own right. Through the transmutations of life and landform unfolding on single farm, we see the way projected dreams are distorted by local conditions; how the grand designs of the colonial enterprise are warped by the encounter with a novel ecosystem. But Guthrie-Smith's astute eye also detects small miracles amidst frequent catastrophe. If Tutira marks a crisis of faith in civilisation's assumed march from shadowy barbarism to bright, reconstituted paradise - it also intimates new and unforeseeable possibilities. And in doing so suggests that there is more to viewing a landscape than registering our own constructions.

These days we tend to shy away from attributing a 'grounding' to ways of life or modes of knowing. The emphasis is on the flows of culture or the circuits of information rather than on the terrain they pass over and weave their way through, as if today's journeys were entirely devoid of the substance or gravity of the maritime voyages of earlier centuries. But perhaps the enthusiasm with which some contemporary thinkers have unbound their notions of culture from the 'bedrock' of nature is discouraging us from giving the 'ground' the consideration it deserves. Those of us living on islands, especially, might do well to recall the grainy inconsistencies of the physical world, to wonder how its varying textures, its alternations of solid and fluid, still make a difference.

Do sea-encircled lands have their own dynamic? The successive shock waves of weedy invaders that washed over Tutira hint at what we might call a logic of islands. Islands pulse to periodic invasion, they reel to infectious rhythms. Whatever breaks their seclusion — plant, animal or human — tends not merely to arrive, but to irrupt. When a delicate equilibrium is disturbed, unruly proliferations prevail. Never simply annexed, nor relenting to step-by-step advance, islands require a passage, an approach, a breaching. The ocean is sometimes a barrier, sometimes a medium, but the shoreline always constitutes a change in pattern, a radical discontinuity underestimated by some new arrivals. Oceanic histories show that those who think they rule the waves frequently founder when they hit land, their linear calculus corrupted as it comes across the beach.

Historically, western visions of oceanic islands have been a paradoxical blend of the unmoored and the too-solidly grounded, of unbridled hallucination and staunch determinism. In times of transition and turmoil, when foundations felt shaky, European thinkers would conjure imaginary worlds where culture and nature bedded down in timeless harmony. As microcosmic mindscapes, gardens were good think with, but islands were better. As tranquil and luxuriant as gardened plots but more fully insulated, ocean-encircled islets suited reverie and mental circumnavigation: you could get your head around them. When successive bouts of maritime adventure turned up actual archipelagos, fantasy was fuelled, substance added to utopian scheming. From the "fortunate isles" of

the Atlantic, to the enchanted islands of the Pacific, reports of real paradise beckoned the opportunistic and enterprising.

But even sustained contact was slow to revise European preconceptions that islands slumbered in a primordial time-warp and that their people — variously indolent or barbaric — were essentially children of nature. Ironically, while European visitors cast islands as static and timeless, some islanders saw sailing ships as wooded islands on the move — an idea with more than merely poetic appeal. Ships were not simply slanted cross-sections of metropolitan society, not just imperial bachelor machines beating south. They were biogeographical offshoots of their lands of origin, fissured continental fragments loaded with lifeforms, licit and illicit. With livestock and seeds from home, plants and animals picked along the way, stowaway scavengers and a rich microbial complement, they formed an unsettled community: a volatile ecology looking for somewhere to erupt.

Though culturally and biologically unprepared for contact, islanders were hardly paragons of unworldliness or inertia. Many Pacific peoples held their earliest European visitors in high esteem - being appreciative of a good voyage because they were long-distance travellers themselves. By contrast the European navigators, inheriting a relatively recent seafaring tradition, were unaware they were entering the cultural space where ocean transit and navigation had been pioneered. Of course, island sanctity had been breached long before representatives of our species figured out ways to work with wind and current. The very antithesis of “purity”, most oceanic islands have been utterly reliant on intrusion to seed them with life: human and non-human arrivals alike adding the flesh and foliage to enliven otherwise arid outcrops. "Every living thing on an island has been a traveller", anthro-historian Greg Denning reminds us. "Every species of tree, plant and animal on an island has crossed the beach."

For larger island formations like Aotearoa New Zealand, some of whose biotic inhabitants have been rafting on continental shards for million of years, periodic invasion added a vital shaping force. The shared refrain is one of discontinuity: alternation between the finitude of land and the vastness of ocean, between contamination and closure, equilibrium and irruption. These wildly syncopated rhythms render life on islands far more precarious than on continents - where a greater landmass modulates the flow of arrivals and departures. When arrivals from neighbouring islands can upset a local ecology, the effects of an invasion that leaps tropics and meridians can be catastrophic. As environmental historians observe of the impact of European expansion: “Nothing akin to the shock wave that swept discovered islands occurred on the continents”. But what makes islands vulnerable also makes them generative. Though more easily convulsed, oceanic islands provide opportunities. Interlopers may escape competition, predation, the usual restraints; while a restricted territory also concentrates and exaggerates. “On islands each new intruder finds a freedom it never had in its old environment. On arrival it develops, fills unfilled niches, plays a thousand variations on the theme of its own form”. Or, perhaps, is played upon.

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Today we tend to think of encounters between the cultural traditions of islands and continents as mutual exchanges, interplays of accommodation and resistance. And our artists are quick to reflect on what it means for our artistic premises and practices to have trundled across the sand, taken root here and been transformed. John Lyall takes this a step further, probing the genuinely unprecedented events that arise out the entanglement of cultural and physical processes; realms usually considered discrete. For Lyall, the project of reconstructing this country by transposing elements forged in another hemisphere courted catastrophe and deviation from the outset. No "enlightened" calculus could predict the transformative effects of a novel terrain and a new ecology. Even the languages we bring to bear on our new environment — the imported cultural codes and techniques - were bound to run wild and readapt.

Lyall's museum photographs provide an allegory of this. In the civilising process, as it was intended to unfold, museums play a strategic role. By stockpiling the outmoded, they reveal the fatality intrinsic to progress. In laying out fragments of the past, they also underwrite the future, providing visible evidence that development has a direction. As Walter Buller reflected late in the 19th century: "everything relating to the early history of the land of our adoption should be carefully recorded and observed for the student of the future." In this way, the plan to totally transform these islands required their museumification: the arts of the conservator joining the tools of the developer. But as Lyall observes from a later vantage point, the transposed display conventions of the specimen, the vitrine and the diorama are themselves subject to obsolescence.

On location at the Auckland Museum during a recent round of refurbishment, Lyall catches the interplay of extinct or threatened local species with introduced modes of display at the moment of their own passage into extinction. A moa skeleton, wearing its label like a dog tag, is reflected repeatedly in the glass of a dismantled cabinet, as if its fate is to relive its own demise endlessly. There is a synergy of sadness here, a mirroring of condemned cultural and biotic forms. But from this melancholy terrain, Lyall salvages fleeting moments of vitality and enchantment. As the deconstructed containers of extinguished lifeforms randomly spill their contents, there is another chance for mingling and miscegenation, a window of opportunity for symbioses as yet unseen. For an instant the living, the dead, and the endangered dance across the same stage, presenting, perhaps, a more profound challenge to the conventions of linear narration than any recently-conjured hypertextual medium.

But the museum's narrative has been unravelling, Lyall suggests, even prior to this physical disassembly. Cataloguing and organising "everything", when it includes the elements being displaced as well as those on the ascendant turns out to be a self-defeating task. As Lyall sees it, the intended order of the classical museum convolutes into a maze of reflections and refractions: the local and the introduced, the natural and the artificial, the extinct and the extant bounce off each other in ways that curators and conservators could never anticipate. Unintentionally reproducing the uncertainties of an island ecology in turmoil, the museum is revealed to be a microcosm of the world beyond its walls, but it is a world characterised by generative chaos rather than orderly improvement.

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Mariele Nuedecker offers another way of generating new life from declining modes of display, through her recasting of great romantic paintings in the three dimensional format of the museum vitrine.

Adrift in a chemical mist that simulates the atmospheric effects of the painterly seascape, a fully rigged sailing ship ghosts its way to an unknown destination. Or perhaps it is bound for disaster, a journey cut short by the unforgiving crush of shifting pack ice. As these once moving and turgid scenes are replayed in a claustrophobic world under glass, we come face to face with the self-defeating nature of the impulse to grapple with sublimity - the folly of representing the unrepresentable. But at the same time, seeing the great moments of European culture so reduced, there is a disturbing intimation of what decontextualization, containment and obsessive recrafting might likewise be inflicting on the artifacts of other cultures.

But there is also a sense in which Nuedecker's rescaled and uncannily tangible reconstructions offer an opportunity to re-explore an otherwise timeworn genre from new angles and perspectives. For a southern island audience, the themes of shipwreck and disorientation at sea offer undeniably chilling reminders of the dangers our forebears endured to reach these lands. Only now, the ships that brought the pioneers, along with all their romantic yearnings and museumifying imperatives - are themselves reprocessed through the very conventions they once conveyed. Memories are the same time evoked - and restrained from being aggrandized to mythic proportions.

Scaled up rather than down, the romantic impulse in our colonial past has provided fertile grounds for cinematic representation. In Jane Campion's The Piano (1993) the eponymous instrument is the crux of a tension that seems to be left unresolved. Despite the fact that the piano stands for an unhealthy attachment to a world left behind, the film itself is reliant on nature imagery and a musical score that remain firmly within the European romantic tradition. There is a similar tension in the novel that partly inspired Campion's script, Jane Mander's The Story of a New Zealand River (1920), a romantic account of new world potentiality which opens with a piano being punted down a tidal creek. And again in the real life experience of Cantabrian pioneer author Samuel Butler, who - in spite of his abiding interest in the way ideas and organisms interchange with their surroundings - would not part with his own weighty cultural luggage. In the recollection of one of his fellow settlers, Butler 'took up a run at the back of beyond, carted a piano up there on a bullock dray, and passed his solitary evenings playing Bach's fugues'.¹

Following Campion's film, the scenically well-appointed piano has become a local icon. Planted on the sand, paddled through surf, hefted up bush trails, it underscores both the rugged beauty of the local landscape and the tenacity of the pioneer who insists on installing it here. But as Michael Parekowhai suggests, it is a strange and melancholic medium for conveying what is special about this country. Parekowhai's piano piece, titled, after Mander, The Story of a New Zealand River, conjures both the feeling of a magnificent performance just passed, and a more funereal event still in progress. Like the grand piano itself, the immaculately carved roses on its lid and around its feet are black, impervious and forbidding. They are not of this place, and yet share a sly

monochromatic link with other, more populist brandings of this country. The tension between imposition and adaptation heightens.

But in the final instance, with its monumental exterior and the rigid bar divisions within, this piano is an instrument of authority, not of improvisation. Incongruous in its new surroundings, the piano announces a divide between civilization and nature: a gulf between what arrives from abroad and what came before. Refusing to buy into the idea of the piano as a domesticated icon of romantic resistance, Parekowhai confronts us with an ensemble attuned to the logic of edifying this unruly backwater, one that is versed in haunting melodies to accompany savagery's eclipse by civilization.

But what is the fate of this alien monolith once it lands on these shores? Aside from falling a touch out of tune, does the piano retain its grandeur during its passage through a new environment? We know who usually got the job of lugging it around. Maori were expected to be at once the piano's porters and the tragic objects of its rhapsodies. But Parekowhai's people chose other options. Some would take to this music as it stood, divas who reached for the pure notes, and triumphantly made them their own. But others would forgo the gravity of the grand piano, for something lighter, more portable, less highly strung. The Story of a New Zealand River offers a new chapter in a musical history Parekowhai opened with his 1999 work Ten Guitars - which celebrated the instrument Maori fully appropriated, along with the Engelbert Humperdinck song they adopted as an anthem. This work evoked a roving band of players who carry their music across the country, performing a thousand variations on a standard: "And very soon you'll know just where you are". Where we are, Parekowhai's conversing pieces seem to say, is in a landscape of compromise and fleeting opportunity. Not some rarefied realm where a well-rehearsed high culture rhapsodizes unsullied nature or native, but a region of bumpy, irregular terrains, where unleashed refrains bend and shape to the lay of the land. A place where improvisation is the order of the day.

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But how far will these improvisations take us? How might the "giant ecological field experiment" that is Aotearoa New Zealand unfold? At its best, music, like birdsong or animal morphology, is a kind of open-ended search, the probing of a space of possible forms. No one can say in advance what patterns or structures will emerge from such explorations. You can glean this from Darwin, especially from his observations of island life. Or, like the early fatal impact theorists, you can take something quite different from his theorem: a faith in "superior forms" destined to win the struggle for existence wherever they come to roost.

In the eyes of nineteenth century ornithologist Walter Buller, most of New Zealand's native birds would "erelong...exist only in museums and collections", his own exorbitant stockpiling of specimens helping ensure his prophecy would be fulfilled. Rebounding from this scenario, Bill Hammond's bestiaries open up another space of evolutionary possibilities. Part bird, part human, the denizens of his alternative antipodes inhabit an uneasy interzone: sheltering on forest fringes or reclining on the uppermost branches they seem to be gathering themselves for some further adventure of form-building. Hammond's paintings explode Buller's imperially-adapted Darwinism by pushing it to its extreme. If

New Zealand avifauna had radiated out to fill many of the niches normally taken by terrestrial species, then the displacement of bird-life by an influx of aggressive bipedal colonists implies that it is our fate also to spread outwards into these vacated posts. "Hammond's bird-people' it has been suggested, 'are people on their way to becoming birds, not vice versa."

Appearing mournful of the diversity decimated in the drive to remake this land, Hammond's chimeras point to co-evolutionary potentials that might still be redeemed: to morphogeneses that could occur if the remnants of local life were released from their museumification. In place of Buller's "fascination at the ancient life of a primeval paradise failing to adapt to the empire", there is the more intriguing prospect of ourselves at the frayed end of empire doing the adapting. The vision of a slender opportunity for open-ended excursions into fields of untested form and structure, a narrowing chance for choosing self-transformation over terraformation.

The thematic variations that might result would not only be biological — written in genes and tissues — but scripted in all the markings that compose our inhabitation — the scribblings of language, numerics, musical scores. Texts intended to distinguish ourselves from the landscape instead turning into textures that camouflage, patterns that merge with an irregular and variegated topography. Indications, perhaps, that the land has designs on us, as much as we on it.

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Viewed from northern metropolises, oceanic islands began as mirages of tranquillity and timelessness only to rematerialise as cauldrons of chaotic fecundity. But are we grasping the specificities of the insular and the antipodean just at the moment they cease to make any difference? Now, the planet seems to be stitching itself into a single landmass, a supercontinent strafed by jet streams and bathed in electronic communication. Even in the mid 19th century, however, Samuel Butler was amazed at the brevity of his journey from Britain to New Zealand. He was still more enthralled by the new telegraph from Lyttleton to Christchurch, which prompted his speculations on global interconnectivity, published in the Canterbury Press in 1863:

'We will say then that a considerable advance has been made in mechanical development, when all men, in all places, without any loss of time, are cognizant through their senses, of all that they desire to be cognizant of in all other places, at a low rate of charge, so that the back country squatter may hear his wool sold in London and deal with the buyer himself — may sit in his own chair in a back country hut and hear the performance of Israel in AEGYPT at Exeter Hall — may taste an ice on the Rakaia, which he is paying for and receiving in the Italian opera house Covent Garden...'²

But Butler's this hymn to 'the annihilation of time and place' seems to take its impetus from the lived experience of specific landscapes, its celebration of weightless instantaneity a counterpoint to the gravity of pianos and other baggage hauled up hills and across oceans. For this is the same high-country scholar who inspired the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze to write of the tensions between an abstract placelessness and the encounter with the

materiality of particular sites. 'Following Samuel Butler, we discover *Erewhon*, signifying at once the originary 'nowhere' and the displaced, disguised, modified and always re-created 'here-and-now'.³

It is not only on islands that the slickness of unencumbered mobility and the grainy particularities of place grate against each other. Across great landmasses the growing intensities of commerce that draw regions together also eat into ecological communities, eroding them into enclaves severed from their surrounds yet subject to sudden invasion from almost anywhere in the planet. Once buttressed from the sorrows of islands, continents now worry themselves over the perils of interconnectivity and runaway, self-perpetuating accidents. But here in oceanic testing grounds, amidst the fallout of failed terraformations and among the museum's ruins, we seem to have gained some familiarity with events that defy prediction or containment. Perhaps here too we are seeing intimations of arts and sciences that play on the same irruptive terrain, engagements that hew to shifting and discontinuous ground, responses that are sensitive to their own infectious rhythms.

¹ Mrs. Brayton to Alice Roland, from Jane Mander *The Story of a New Zealand River*, Vintage, Auckland, 1999 (1920). p37.

¹ Jonathan Lamb referring to Arthur Thomson, 'The Idea of Utopia in the European Settlement of New Zealand', in Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas and Hilary Ericksen (eds) *Quicksands: Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1999. p81.

¹ Herbert Guthrie-Smith, *Tutira: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station*, Godwit, Auckland, 1999 (1921). p294.

¹ Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourses on a Silent Land: Marquesas 1774-1880*. University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1980. p31.

¹ Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches*. p32.

¹ Cited in Geoff Park, *Nga Uruora, The Groves of Life: Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1995. p192.

¹ Sir Joshua Williams, cited in George Dyson, *Darwin Among the Machines*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1997: p17

¹ Allan Smith, 'Bill Hammond Paints New Zealand', *Art Asia Pacific* 23, 1999: p52.

¹ Samuel Butler, cited in George Dyson, *Darwin Among the Machines*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1997: p33.

¹ Samuel Butler, cited in George Dyson, *Darwin Among the Machines*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1997: p33.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans, Paul Patton, Athlone Press, London, 1994 (1968) p xxi.

¹ Sir Joshua Williams, cited in George Dyson, *Darwin Among the Machines*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1997: p17

² Samuel Butler, cited in George Dyson, *Darwin Among the Machines*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1997: p33.

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans, Paul Patton, Athlone Press, London, 1994 (1968) p xxi.