

Of People and Place: (Re-)Making Aotearoa

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In the fields of Indigenous critical theory and settler colonial studies, it has been argued that colonisation is a failed project, that the myriad attempts to eliminate Indigenous peoples, sever their connection to ancestral land and destroy their ways of knowing and being have not succeeded. That despite the hideous violence of colonisation, Indigenous peoples remain; their deep ontological and spiritual attachments to land have not been severed (see Brown, 2014; Moreton Robinson, 2003).

To speak of colonisation as a failed project is not to deny its impacts on Indigenous peoples. No indeed, the intergenerational trauma of colonisation can be counted in all manner of heartbreaking social statistics from incarceration rates, to poorer health and mental health outcomes, to the elevated incidence of learned behaviours such as domestic violence and substance abuse. Rather, to characterise colonisation as a failed project is to highlight the enduring connection of Indigenous people and place; to stress, in the context of Aotearoa, the 'inalienable' connection of Māori to the whenua (land).

Nowhere is this enduring connection more plainly visible than in the pages of *Kia Whakanuia Te Whenua: People, Place, Landscape*. The umbilical connection of Māori to whenua is the unifying thread that ties together the diverse chapters of this work. The volume is a snapshot of an Aotearoa, familiar to some but emerging for others, in which that connection between Māori and the whenua is acknowledged as at once central to the past and vital to the future. It is an understanding of this enduring and reciprocal connection to place that provides us with the knowledge we need to perform our role as kaitiaki (guardians) and steward the land for subsequent generations.

That this future is by no means guaranteed is elaborated in Kim Himoana Penetito's impassioned and elegant exploration of the intimate and symbiotic bonds between wāhine Māori (Māori women) and Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and the ways in which that relationship is crucial as a bulwark against the exploitation of nature. Alayna Renata similarly brings a wahine Māori perspective to the fore in her discussion of the wairua of the whenua – of the ways in which the land speaks to those of us who are prepared to listen. It is a stunning insight into the types of knowledge that will likely prove essential if we are to protect the whenua and the whakapapa (genealogy) it can sustain from our worst excesses.

BOOK REVIEW

If this is not the century of Indigenous knowledge, then it might well be the last century of humankind.

Rachel Shearer too explores the ways in which we might listen to the whenua, and in particular to the silences created through biodiversity loss. It is sobering to reflect on the nothingness left in our wake. Māori have likewise been silenced, te reo Māori (Māori language) beaten out of our tīpuna (ancestors), our ways of knowing archived by the forces of colonisation and assimilation. The assertive reclamation and reawakening evident in these pages do not and should not obscure the ongoing and pernicious impacts of colonisation, impacts explored in Wayne Knox's discussion of whenua and identity. Knox highlights the rupture between many Māori and their ancestral whenua, awa (river) and maunga (mountain). Yet Knox also hints at the possibility of reconnection, of opening ourselves up to the interconnectedness of our personal wellbeing and our natural environment.

Lena Henry's chapter on whenua Māori and the state provides a useful background on traditional Māori land tenure and the extensive battery of legislative weapons deployed against it by successive Pākehā (European) governments. That Māori retain just 4 to 6 per cent of their whenua even after the majority of historical Treaty of Waitangi claims have been settled is pause for thought indeed – the settlement process formally extinguishes the right of Māori to seek further redress from the Crown and indeed Māori landholdings have diminished since the settlement process began in the early 1990s (see Wynyard, 2019). The ongoing struggle of Māori to have their ancestral lands restored to them is also explored in Mere Whaanga's poignant and personal account of her as-yet unsuccessful struggle to have her ahikāroa rights to her whānau (extended family) land restored. Sadly, it is a tale of frustration depressingly familiar to Māori in many parts of Aotearoa.

William Hatton and Jacqueline Paul catalogue the efforts of Indigenous peoples to have their treasured 'cultural landscapes' protected or returned to them. Their chapter connects the struggle of Māori at Ihumātao with the struggles of Kanaka Maoli over Mauna Kea in Hawai'i and with those of the Hunkpapa Lakota, Sihasapa Lakota and Yanktonai Dakota tribes over the Standing Rock Reservation in the mainland of the United States of America. By making explicit the connections between these various contestations over culturally significant landscapes, the authors highlight the ongoing centrality of land to the colonial project and, crucially, to Indigenous resistance against it.

The legacies of colonisation also haunt Fleur Palmer's chapter. Palmer notes that colonisation is not an historical event; rather it is an ongoing structure that continues to prove toxic to indigeneity in myriad disparate ways. For Palmer, Indigenous knowledge is key to a more sustainable and non-exploitive future. Central here is the idea of connection: we are, Palmer notes, all part of, not separate from, the natural world. This connection is also crucial to the work of Sterling Ruwhiu and Hōhepa Waenga, educators at Auckland Zoo, whose work centres on connecting students to the living world around them. Together these chapters offer a vision of tūmanako, of hope. A hope for the future in which Indigenous knowledge nurtures a relationship between people and place that is not based on exploitation, degradation or the relentless pursuit of profit over all other concerns.

It is precisely that vision of hope that makes this volume such an enriching read. Here is a vision of an emerging Aotearoa where Māori ways of knowing, doing and being are no longer marginal but, rather, central to the ongoing wellbeing of all New Zealanders.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Wynyard has iwi affiliations to Ngāti Maniapoto and Ngāpuhi, as well as Pākehā ancestry.

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