

*Manawa i te Kāniwha*

Tyson Campbell and Julia Lomas

Writing from the continent-island the British settlers called Australia, itself a place of red earth, I will begin here by considering the terms in which settler logic has sought to underwrite the concepts of spatiality in which we move, work, listen, write. My aim in doing so is to disturb the footings on which settler spatiality stands: that is, space as a territory to be claimed, a container to be filled, and a paddock to be fenced. *Manawa i te Kāniwha* instigates such a challenge; the melding of forms that are palpably familiar in both European and Māori aesthetic contexts lays bare the complexity of what it means to assert spatiality as a form through the demarcation of its bounds.

The most immediate feature of this work is its almost seamless amalgam of two jarringly distinct forms. The curvilinear patterning rendered in kokowai recalls kōwhaiwhai, which is traced and interlocked with bars and balustrades: the heavy decorative motifs of Victorian-era wrought iron gates. It is of course impossible to separate Victorian (as well as French and other western European empires) decorative tropes from the social and political grounds from which they sprang. Yet whilst these motifs establish and augment the ideologies of the empire, further consideration of decoration also holds the potential to undermine and complicate these narratives and ideologies: 'The coloniser-indigene hyphen always reaches back into a shared past. Each of our names – indigene and colonizer – discursively produces the other.'<sup>1</sup>

When the British crown declared the legal fiction of *terra nullius* (most infamously of Australia, but in specific instances, also of Aotearoa) the assertion rested on the notion that land could be found to be 'desart and uncultivated.'<sup>2</sup> There is no room here to address the manifold ways in which this claim was false and made in bad faith.<sup>3</sup> Instead we might take up the assumption that underpins the idea of *terra nullius* as a form of emptiness, as uncharted, unsettled or uncultivated space. This notion of emptiness can in fact be traced back to the

Greek philosopher Plato, who in c.357 BC provided an account of 'space-as such', that is, space as a pure concept. In the dialogue entitled *Timeaus*, Plato used the concept of *chôra/khōra* to describe the first theorisation of 'space in general', as opposed to space simply as a location.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Timeaus*, as Louise Burchill has shown, the *chôra* is not named as such until a set of figures including 'receptacle', 'nurse', 'mother', 'imprint-bearer' and 'amorphous medium' have first been advanced as characterisations.<sup>5</sup> Plato understood the *chôra* as a 'third kind of nature' between the copy and the ideal form. The Demiurge, who in Plato's dialogue is the divine artisan who constructed the cosmos, modelled the copies of the eternal forms, so as to build the cosmos 'in conformity with reason and accordingly, as beautiful and good as possible.'<sup>6</sup> Scholar Ann Bergren has identified that Plato's narrative follows the Classical convention of beginning *in media res*. Casting backwards, Plato explains that prior to the intervention of the Demiurge, the pre-cosmic – what Bergren calls the pre-architectural – *chôra* was 'liquefied and ignited [and] took on many motley guises. And since the forces with which she was filled were neither alike nor equipoised, there was no equipoise in any region of her.'<sup>7</sup>

This earlier *chôra* is then for Plato, the chaos before divine order. The *chôra* only becomes a support structure when Plato, through the demiurge, renders it as an amorphous entity to be shaped, thereby ordering the universe. The demiurge, or artisan, stabilises the *chôra* using mathematics and measurement and contrives to set order, unity and balance as regulating principle: 'So that the *kosmos* can be a true copy of its model, the *chôra* "place, space" in which it is built must be absolutely passive.'<sup>8</sup> But, as Bergren highlights, prior to the intervention of the demiurge, *chôra* is described as unstable, unregulated. Retrieving this

sense of movement, Bergren's 'pre-architectural' *chôra* is then animate and molten, not a passive receptacle.

We might then see two things – one is that in Plato's account, the divine architect has to first impose order so as to facilitate the *chôra* as imprint bearer. Prior to the intervention of the demiurge, the *chôra* is liquid, unstable: 'no equipoise within her'. The other, glaringly obvious, is the gendered and colonial characterisation of space that, once tamed, can then be conceptualised as first empty, and then as potential: space that can be filled, imprinted. This reading of *chôra* then allows us to see some of the predicates for space conceived as an inert, passive container, and thus as the pre-condition for *terra nullius*. But through the readings provided by Bergren and Burchill, we might also understand *chôra* as that which gives motion and movement to spatiality, as differentiated, in motion, as living currents of quickening action. Space and spatiality then might be considered as animate – as what Louise Burchill explicates as *spacing*, space as self-differencing motion.<sup>9</sup>

It is not that the Whenua of Aotearoa should be read as analogous to either conception of *chôra*, however. Following Édouard Glissant's articulation that, 'colonisation is not a place but a project,' I have hoped to show that the project of colonisation, its conception of *terra nullius*, is not just fiction in British common law, as has been elsewhere proven.<sup>10</sup> It is rather my aim to unsettle the grounds on which *terra nullius* might still lurk as a latent idea underlying some present-day concepts of spatiality. In Aotearoa, the Whenua has not ever been a place awaiting an imprint, nor was it passive nor empty, it does not need interpolation for its agency and existence to be realised.

The confrontation that *manawa i te kāniwha* instigates is between the Victorian decorative motif Māori kōwhaiwhai. The painterly gestures in the mural are not themselves tied to traditional conceptions of kōwhaiwhai, that is, knowledge transference within a Māori genealogical framework. Instead, the work toys with tribal signifiers — complicating questions of place, indigenous and settler relations and the ‘innocence’ lurking within the decorative. Perhaps Watson and Jensen’s mural can be read through the parameters that Robert Janke has provided in his account of *kōwhaiwhai*, whilst also acknowledging that this particular work operates in a different social tension, outside of the Marae.

Robert Jahnke’s scholarship has also clarified important distinctions between Māori and European traditions. In his 2010 article, ‘*Ko Rūamoko e ngunguru nei: Reading between the lines*’, Jahnke traces interpretations of tā moko (tattoo) and hōpara makaurangi, a specific form of painting for whare and whareniui, or homes and carved meeting-houses.<sup>11</sup> Jahnke looks specifically at the narrative of Mataora, which recounts the process by which ta moko, kōwhaiwhai and hōpara makaurangi were passed into being.<sup>12</sup> Central to Jahnke’s text is a comparative textual analysis of two previous translations.<sup>13</sup> Jahnke re-reads the original Māori telling of the story and in-so-doing teases out crucial moments whereby the lines of kōwhaiwhai work as conduits between worlds. Jahnke is clear on the distinction from European traditions such as figurative painting and decoration and the inappropriateness of these terms when discussing hōpara makaurangi.<sup>14</sup>

Jahnke situates the traditions of these art forms which, contrary to European interpretations and mistranslations, ‘set up a series of interrelationships between two worlds, material and spiritual [...] between permanent and impermanent designs – that is designs from the spiritual world and those from the human world.’ Also explicit in Jahnke’s account is, ‘the sacred nature of knowledge of creativity, the knowledge that is not passively there to be

gathered but to be earned.<sup>15</sup> Janke directly references the matrix of relations that form Te Ao Māori, a world-view reinforced through doing, and kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face relations). As Jahnke demonstrates in his examination of previous translations of texts, to know something passively through reading is always at best a translation, with its slippages, partialities and silences. In Te Ao Maori these transmissions are lived, it is embodied.

From the position of this paper, Jensen and Watson's mural can be seen as non-customary practice, one that does *not* "maintain[s] or mimic[s] traditional visual referents."<sup>16</sup> The mural borrows the visual language of kōwhaiwhai within the Marae but is not tied to the traditions that Jahnke illuminates. Instead, the non-customary status of this work appropriates western symbology as a form of capture and shifts away from designations of Māori art that do not allow for material changes or the assimilation and/or appropriation of Western traditions. What the mural presents in fact, is not so much debasement of tribal traditions, but a site of the cultural collision as a natural consequence of transcultural interlocutions, ie., the very real implications and spatial imprints of Western disciplinary institutions such as the church, the villa, the military, and agricultural settings on unceded Indigenous territory. This is where decoration becomes a critical mode in itself – a way of both enacting and critiquing a Westernised view/lens and deepening our understanding of the enmeshed worlds of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies.

~ ~ ~ Julia Lomas and Tyson Campbell.

1 Jenkins, Kuni, and Jones, Alison. "Rethinking collaboration: working the Indigene-Colonizer Hyphen." Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008.

2 As John Tate has written, 'Blackstone's famous distinction in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765) between the discovery and settlement of 'desert and uncultivated' lands, and the colonisation of lands 'already cultivated', was central to the development of the doctrines of both native title and *terra nullius* in English common law.' Tate further connects the influence of Blackstone to the judgement applied by Prendergast CJ in *Wi Parata v Bishop of Wellington*, delivered in 1877. This latter example was to be of significance when in 2003, Elias CJ strongly criticised the *Wi Parata* judgement and overturned the High Court's ruling in the matter of *Attorney General v Ngati Apa*. See John Tate, "The three precedents of *Wi Parata*" *Canterbury Law Review* 11;10, (2004), 273. This matter became significant for the creation of the Foreshore and Seabed Act of 2003. See Jacinta Ruru, "A Politically Fuelled Tsunami: The Foreshore/Seabed Controversy in Aotearoa Me Te Wai Pounamu / New Zealand." *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 113, no. 1 (2004): 57-72. Accessed February 23, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20707199>.

3 Stuart Banner articulates why *terra nullius* was anomalous to British common law, see Stuart Banner, "Why Terra Nullius? Anthropology and Property Law in Early Australia." *Law and History Review* 23, no. 1 (2005): 95-131. Accessed February 23, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30042845>.

4 Louise Burchill, "Re-situating the Feminine in Contemporary French Philosophy", in Orr, D (ed), *Beliefs, Bodies and Being*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 88-89. Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. A.E Taylor, (Plato. London; New York: Routledge, 2013). ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=1092736>.

5 Burchill, "Resituating the Feminine", 88.

6 Ann Bergren, "Plato's *Timeaus* and the Aesthetics of Animate Form", in Barbara Sattler, Richard Mohr (eds), *One Book, The Whole Universe: Plato's Timeaus Today*, (2010), 343-372, 346.

7 Plato, *Timeaus and Critias*, (52, d-e), 51-3.

8 Bergren, "Plato's *Timeaus*", 347-348.

9 Burchill, updating Bergren's reading, sees in the pre-cosmic *chôra* Derrida's notion of *difference* in its infinitely repeatable divisibility. Louise Burchill, "Re-considering Chôra, Architecture and "Woman", *Field Journal* 7:1(November 2017), 191-204, <http://field-journal.org/fieldjournal/>

10 As Stuart Banner points out, in British legal statute this land was legally protected and enshrined as native title. The aforementioned example of the *Wi Parata* case shows how colonial interests obscured even the legal standing of British common law.

11 Robert Jahnke, “*Ko Rūamoko e ngunguru nei: reading between the lines*”, *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 119, no. 2 (2010): 111-30. Accessed September 8, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20790136>.

12 Jahnke uses the title ‘the Mataora narrative’, actively renaming the story from its translation by Smith who used the culturally inappropriate subheading, ‘Mataora’s Visit to Hades. The Origin of Tattooing.’ See Jahnke, *Ko Rūamoko*, 129, n1.

13 Jahnke writes, ‘At the heart of my *wero* (challenge) is the uncritical acceptance of early translations of a Māori text that led to a number of misinterpretations by Roger Neich.’ He then examines the translations by S. Percy Smith and Elsdon Best over 1915-1924. See Jahnke, 111 and 112.

14 See *ibid*, 111-113.

15 Jahnke, “*Ko Rūamoko e ngunguru nei*”, 125.

16 Robert Jahnke, ‘Is ethnic labelling of Māori art cultural apartheid?’ *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, vol. 5, no. 6, pp. 127–36, doi:10.18848/1833-1866/CGP/v05i06/35954