

A process of unlearning/unstitching

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Abstract

In Aotearoa, how do we position ourselves within an academy pervaded by Western philosophical thought? During the 1980's Post-structuralist theory was the main stay in my education as an architect. Although we live in a colonised country, local research oriented by post-structuralist thinking seemed to be unable to interrogate how our cities and rural areas are socially and ethnically segregated. Suspicious of collectives and racial or ethnic identity, Poststructuralism, has been strangely indifferent and disconnected to social, political or environmental concerns relating directly to indigenous peoples but in spite of this, Post Structuralist theory is seen as critical to supporting research within the academy.

My PhD research is involved with Māori communities in the Far North of Aotearoa, to which I am affiliated, but disillusioned by Western philosophical frameworks, I have found myself unlearning its principal doxa to reposition my research practice.

When I went to The Auckland University School of Architecture in the mid 1980's, the focus of my education was on the design of buildings or objects, – things that could be easily controlled such as aesthetics, or style, or form underpinned by a theoretical context, based on a Post Structuralist philosophical discourse which liberated design from the grand narratives and universal truths of modernism, which had been driven by socialist and utopian ideals. In a move towards greater complexity, writers such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown called for “elements which are hybrid rather than "pure", compromising rather than "clean", distorted rather than "straightforward", ambiguous rather than "articulated", ...and “messy vitality over obvious unity”. By the 1980's, Modernism had been widely discredited for its blandness, lack of freedom and disempowering nature. Evidence of its inherent failure was represented by cities such as Brasilia (built between 1956 – 1960) which was slammed by its critics for its failure to meet human needs (Robert Hughes – Shock of the New) Award winning buildings such as the Pruitt Igoe tower blocks (built in 1954) became notorious for its crime, poverty and racial segregation and ended up being demolished in the 1970's. While the cold war raged between the Soviet Union and the United States, New Zealand was taking a stance over its nuclear policies, and as students we were searching for alternative theoretical narratives that like punk rock were capable of unsettling the status quo. Avidly, we read Mark Wigley's PhD thesis (he had just graduated from the school), and his thesis would be later published as Derrida's Haunt. We also devoured Paul Walker's dissertation published the same year which alerted us to Michel Foucault. These two influential dissertations lead in turn to a collective love affair with the European Post Structuralist theorists. And as Wigley's and Walker's theoretical influence permeated through the school, the liberalism and theoretical engagement associated with French Philosophy and Post Structuralist discourse was realised through the proliferation of projects that playfully teased out the nuances of a critical reading of architecture through multiple texts that ended up being identified with Deconstruction. In his thesis Wigley wrote “Derrida's essays are everywhere concerned with the question of place” and “the enigmatic movements of displacement or dislocation”. Deconstruction seemed immanently cool, but like a flock of noisy parrots caught in a cacophony of noise, endless self-reflection, and appreciation, the barrage generated by Post Structuralist discourse strangely left no space for actual place within the New Zealand context, or for consideration of displacement, or for other voices that were more marginalised to be heard. Aotearoa is a

colonised country, but in the rarefied realm of Post Structuralist thinking there was no room for projects that interrogated how Māori occupied our cities, and no consideration of how our cities have been socially and ethnically segregated, or any scrutiny of how Māori occupied rural areas, or who gets the right in Aotearoa to access to housing, or who is excluded as part of this process. Post structural discourse was indifferent to these issues. Suspicious of collective entities and association with racial or ethnic identity, Post Structuralism was more interested in ideas associated with non-unified thinking, celebrating pluralism and the complex, playful and often arbitrary relationship between things or practice, and the form making that evolved from this philosophical engagement was disconnected to any commitment to interrogating social, political or environmental concerns that specifically related to indigenous peoples.

A decade earlier, issues to do with Māori land rights had been highlighted, when Dame Whina Cooper walked the length of the North Island in the Māori land march in 1975, but the political implications of this march in relation to concepts of Spatial Justice weren't on the agenda within the Architectural school. While Post Structuralism and feminism prevalent in the 1980's was interested in boundaries, and margins it was not able to politically connect with what had historically happened to Māori in Aotearoa, or even able to critically engage with the unevenness of our cultural landscape, (which in the New Zealand context was particularly relevant to Māori). The very discourse it aimed to engage with was emasculated. In considering the inability for Post Structuralist theory to engage with indigenous contexts Patton has observed that while "modern political theory , especially in its liberal and social democratic variants has emphasised universal rights, equality before the law and individual and collective freedom,.....it has also explicitly denied such entitlements to indigenous peoples." Tully put this more bluntly, stating that "Western Political theory fails to enter into a just dialogue with indigenous peoples."

At the time I found this problematic, as surely in terms of place based struggles, a lot of things were going on here, and this was a rich area for research. In simply ignoring the ongoing effect of Colonisation, was the academy inherently racist? Within this context, I felt I had something to contribute, but the problem was, I did not know how to express myself. I did not have the confidence to question the status quo, in terms of challenging the relevance of Post Structuralist theory to the realities that Māori communities faced. I was located within a privileged white male dominated architectural realm, and working in a profession that was primarily dedicated on creating unique houses to meet the aspirations of wealthy Pakeha clients, and my academic peers were all intoxicated by a bevy of hard hitting heavy weight Eurocentric Post Structuralist thinkers. Against this competition, I felt I couldn't even punch at bantam weight level. I had no intellectual arsenal to fight back with, and no specific alternatives to draw on from a local context that resonated with my own ideas about place, or displacement or any consideration of local ecologies or the effects of colonisation in relation to the Māori experience. I wondered whether I had missed something. Was I simply being naïve in thinking that the theoretical contexts in which we were being educated in should be more ethically engaged, and have more bite in terms of consideration of their consequence especially in relation to a wider impact?

20 years on, when I began reading Phd dissertations on Māori subject matter, and practice based architectural projects in preparation for my thesis, I noticed that the texts I read (particularly the ones that I found exemplary)

typically began with a preface that outlined the influence of Post Structuralist discourse, usually with a nod to Foucault in terms of a genealogical approach, that identified and critiqued the underlying intractable problems that have arisen from historical conditions that effect our present condition, without ever being able offer any solution to the problems that have arisen, or to a Derridian provocation that problematizes everything beyond what we ever think about, or a Deleuzian influence in relation to notions of deterritorialisation which bring forth “lines of flight” as a means of acting against dominant social conditions, or “becoming animal” (Latour) as a way of countering modernist or reductionist ideologies. How such diverse theoretical influences are actually played out in reality terms of developing a practice that has had a positive impact in terms of generating change against oppressive political systems seems to be an on-going problem for research that is reliant on these theoretical contexts, although the ontological turn that emerged with feminism and writers associated with New Materialism and Eco ontological discourses promises to change this. I will wait and see.

In the meantime Western Philosophical thought still heavily pervades the academy, its long fingers permeate and underpin all doctoral research, holding it in a tight grip, pivotal to critiquing and either radicalising or undermining logo-centric discourse, as a means of encouraging critical and creative thinking in a continued drive for novelty, inventive thinking and endless playful articulations. But in terms of a practice based research into Māori housing, I found the dependence on Western theorists as a lens for framing my own research troublesome. I was caught in the same uncomfortable dilemma that I found myself in 25 years earlier. Noting the apparent divide and crisis that emerged between Post Structuralist philosophical thought and its practice, specifically in relation to architectural practice, Philip Plowright has argued that another framework is required that can “judge the quality of a thought” based on the “relevance of its effect.” While Post Structuralist theory offers a critique of current situations, its lack of real engagement in terms of practice contributes “to the demolition of consistent expressions of selfhood and structures of common identification – including human rights –widely understood as necessary platforms for co-ordinating strategies of resistance.” (Patton, Bignall) With a yawning abyss apparent between theory and its application, another strategy was needed that was more able to grapple with the lived experience of the communities in which my research was based. But what was this other framework? Writers associated with New Materialism and the ecologically based thinking that has emerged in response to the global warming crisis, offer enticing snippets that promise a more ethical and politically engaged approach to how we might practice. But if I relied on these newer theoretical contexts to situate my research, how were they relevant to the Māori communities I was working with? And wouldn't I simply be defaulting yet again to the same old reliance on Western ontologies albeit a new and improved variety just to legitimise and my research within the academy at the expense of Māori perspectives? I realised that somehow I had to position myself in a way that was able to identify what is directly relevant to the Māori I knew, from the Far North who had no voice within the academic milieu. I wanted an approach that was more able to directly critique in a practical way the issues at stake in relation to how Māori live, or how they inhabit urban areas, or inhabit remote ancestral rural places, or how they have access to housing within contemporary contexts. I yearned to read research which talked about what it was like for Māori families living below the poverty line. How did they survive? What were their day to day living conditions like? I wanted to look at

research that investigated the provision of housing for families whose only experience of a house was living in a Skyline garage, or living in an uninsulated cowshed with a shared double bed for warmth in the winter, or a whare Nikau with dirt floors. I wanted to read about research that specifically dealt with issues relating to what it was like for Māori who had more than 4 children and lived on a benefit in an overcrowded house with not enough money for healthy food or decent clothes, where the kids all slept together at night top and tail in a double bed, or research that delved into the relationship between domestic violence, sexual violence, drug use and housing conditions, or the relationship between unemployment and housing in areas where Māori predominantly lived. But aside from government reports that were more interested in focusing on Māori deficit problems and a few chapters on Māori housing in a book on inequality edited by Max Rashbrooke there was not a lot of research that specifically dealt with these types of issues that were connected to the social effects of housing in Māori communities. Those who are most adversely affected by ongoing effects of colonisation, had no voice within the academy. And any research in this area predominantly come from outside or was framed in such a way as to assert an authority which kept the day to day realities that Māori face at a distance. I was also aware of the fact that while academics who research Māori earn doctorates, their research does not always lead to any direct benefit for those who have been researched, perpetuating an ongoing process of colonisation.

While the idea of Māori, or how they live seemed to be in conflict with Western philosophical traditions, I also felt that research recognised by the academy was overtly suspicious of an ethnically centred approach unless it was able to be clearly positioned within a Western Philosophical framework, which is why I think so many academics working with Māori subject matter tend to preface their work with references to Western philosophers. (This ensures it is recognised as legitimate). When I realised this, I began to stubbornly resist doing this, and consciously attempted not to overtly rely on, or privilege any European thinkers in any writing or presentations that I gave. But this abstinence also meant that without the support of heavyweight theorists that came from a Western background my approach seemed ungrounded. This was apparent whenever I presented my research to Pakeha colleagues. I could tell from their scepticism, and the fact that I wasn't overtly name dropping from the catalogue of Post structuralist thinkers that researchers normally rely on, that they were worried that by focusing specifically on Māori and the issues they faced, and not framing my research within a context that they recognised, that my research was theoretically weak, and that I was being racist and intentionally exclusive. Internally their response to my project was always, "What about Pakeha?" "Why Māori?" "Why are you being so exclusive?" "Had I looked at Deleuzes and his writing on?" When I presented the same material to Māori audiences, the response was very different.

To highlight the fact that my Pakeha peers felt my focus on Māori was inevitably self-limiting and not strictly relevant to the polymorphic theoretical discourses that they thought were critical to an engaged academic study that came from a privileged Western perspective they always asked me "What is your theoretical position?"

This question has always stumped me. I knew I needed to theoretically frame my research, but I did not know how to articulate my position without relying on theories grounded in a Western philosophical tradition. Of course the obvious approach to avoid criticism relating to this dilemma was to firmly position the research within

a Kaupapa Māori methodology. But although my practice was focused on mana motuhake, self-determination and empowering Maori communities. I was nervous about overtly naming it as Kaupapa Māori, as I did not have any confidence in using the terminology. I was filled with doubt. Although I identify with being Māori through my whakapapa, the thing is, what do I really know about Kaupapa Māori? How could I define it and explain it to other people in a meaningful way so that they could understand what I mean when I use this term? By locating my research within Kaupapa Māori, I felt unstable, a feeling exaggerated by the question of my identity and background. I come from both Pakeha *and* Māori ancestry. My research is specifically about Māori and access to housing, but I was concerned that within the Māori world I was not Māori or brown enough to legitimately carry out this research under this kaupapa, especially given the fact that my education had been primarily influenced by Western philosophical traditions: I had only lived in houses modelled on Pakeha values, I had only learnt Latin and French, at school not Te Reo, and all my undergraduate and post graduate studies were focused on Western modes of practice. Given this background, how would Māori judge me in terms of my ability to relate to Te Ao Māori (world views), or my sensitivity to Tikanga (protocol) and concepts relating to Kaupapa Māori? I was vulnerable, and worried that I would make gross assumptions because of this lack of knowledge, and to reinforce this, in Māori contexts, I am like a clumsy child, I tend to make a mess of things. My delinquent tongue betrays me by mangling my Te Reo, exposing my inadequacies, making me inherently flawed and unqualified as Māori. So if I wanted to rely on Kaupapa Māori as a theoretical context to position my research, I had to face up to the fact that I although I am Māori, I do not really know who or what I am. But Māori in itself is a colonising term, as being Māori is never a distinct position, but is inextricably tied to a history of colonisation.

This is something I struggle with.

Adding to this sense of insecurity and fraudulence, when I have talked about my research, peers have asked “How much Māori blood do you have?” I think that what they mean when they ask me this, is that they think the % of my Māori blood effects the legitimacy of my claim to be Māori or my right to engage in Kaupapa Māori. To them I am not brown enough to be a real Māori.

But Māori is my DNA. Māori is who I am, as much as I am Scottish or English or African.

These insecurities have made me initially reluctant to overtly locate my research within a Kaupapa Māori framework, but within the academy, I realised that Kaupapa Māori is essential to offering an anti-colonial alternative to Western theoretical traditions. And while I feel that the term is colonising and exclusive in the same way that western critical theory operates, as a way of legitimately asserting indigenous ontology and self-determination within Western institutions, Kaupapa Māori is strategically and politically important, not only as means of defining a framework in which Māori research practice can be situated in a way that is directly relevant to Māori communities, but also for engaging in a more politically active practice that supports a holistic way of thinking focused on Te Ao Māori (world views). Te Ao Māori is immersed within on an ancestral lineage that is associated in a shared belief in the interdependence and a connectivity to all things – both animate and inanimate. Te Ao Māori does not recognise a separation between ourselves and the natural world. Everything is “contingent and mediated”. Because everything is relational, Kaupapa Māori encourages an ethical mode of practice in relation to thinking about how humans and all other things from microorganisms to climatic elements are organised and are complicit in the act of making the world. This leads to a different way of thinking and

mode of practice in terms of how we build things, how we co-produce, how we theorise about and share our world with all other things, and raises ethical questions about how humans and all other things from microorganisms to climatic elements are organised and are complicit in the act of making the world. This deeply connected way that everything is entangled with everything else, means that nothing is inherently separate from anything else. As a framework for thinking about how we all can act in a more ethical and sustainable way, Kaupapa Māori considers the nature of our existence, and how our environment is produced, imagined, and controlled and identifies the effect of the on-going ramifications of colonisation, as a means of considering how different communities, with conflicting world views, can connect and equitably share scarce material resources in a more affirmative and sustainable way.