

NATALIE ROBERTSON

NATALIE ROBERTSON

Seismic Stories

Transcript of paper presented at First Person: International Digital Storytelling Conference, ACMI

Plenary session: First Person, 4 February 2006

Natalie Robertson's photomedia art practice honours Maui, ancestor and discoverer of Te Ika a Maui, the North Island of Aotearoa (New Zealand), and proposes a playground for trickster discourse, consciousness and narrative. Over the past decade Natalie has been making photographic and moving image works that contest colonial survey mapping practices. Recently she has been creating moving image works that explore oral storytelling through moteatea (traditional chant), waiata (song) and korero (talk). Of Ngati Porou descent, Natalie is a trustee and acts as a kaitiaki (guardian) of Maori land blocks on the East Coast of New Zealand.

Transcript

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional owners of this land, and wish to especially acknowledge Aunty Joy Murphy for her welcome to her country that I was privileged to receive last year. I hope it still stands.

Kia ora koutou nga rangatira ma, nga kui ma, nga koro ma, nga rangatahi ma o te tangata
whenua o tenei rohe.

Ko Hikurangi toku maunga,
ko Waiapu toku awa,
ko Ngati Porou toku iwi,
Ko Pokai Pohatu toku marae
I tupu ake, e au, ki Kawerau

Ko Putauaki te maunga
Ko Tarawera te awa

NATALIE ROBERTSON

Ko Ngati Awa, me Tuwharetoa nga iwi.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Today, I will speak of the dead and so I acknowledge nga mate, those who have gone before. This is dedicated to my schoolmates and the other Kawerau kids mentioned today who have passed away.

Uncle Tasman - The Trembling Current that Scars is a contemporary moving image art project in progress from Aotearoa/New Zealand that interweaves a visual narrative of volcanic and geothermal activity with Maori cosmology and the environmental impacts of local pulp and paper industry. As the project takes shape, I anticipate that the soundtrack will draw out narratives from local Maori, mill workers, townspeople, activists and environmentalists who can tell of the destruction of the eco-system and the desecration of sites of significance.

The story I present is one-sided and is based on my first-hand experience of growing up in Kawerau, a “mushroom” town, established in the 1950s as home to the Tasman Pulp and Paper Mill. Kawerau is in the Eastern Bay of Plenty in the North Island of New Zealand, or to describe it from a Maori perspective, is in Ngati Awa territory in the shadow of the sacred ancestral mountain, Putauaki, on Te Ika a Maui - the island known as Maui’s fish. Maui is known widely across the Pacific as a discoverer of lands, as well as a trickster demi-god.

Uncle Tasman - The Trembling Current that Scars the Earth

ACT 1: This not a love story

Once upon a time, long, long ago, a tall and handsome volcanic mountain, Putauaki, lived with his wife Tarawera, a mountain upstream. Out at sea, Whakaari, an enchanting and flirtatious young volcano, sent puffs of white smoke high into the sky above the azure sea she was surrounded by. Driven crazy with love for her, Putauaki deserted his wife and went in pursuit of Whakaari. Cautiously he tiptoed away, but his movement created a great trembling in the ground and his footsteps carved into the earth behind him. His daughter awoke upon hearing him and followed him. She asked where he was going, but feeling ashamed of his plans he did not answer her. All night, the child tugged at him.

This made traveling painfully slow – so slow, that the sun caught him where he now stands. In the full light of day he could not go on and advertise his intentions to the world. He looked back and saw his wife weeping for him. This made him more ashamed. He could not go forward and he could not go back; so he stayed where he still is, at Kawerau, with his child. Tarawera still weeps for him, and her tears filled his footsteps and formed the Tarawera River. The child is the foothill to Putauaki.

NATALIE ROBERTSON

Much later, in the 16th century, the famed Maori chief Tuwharetoa, a descendant of the chief of the Arawa canoe, and his people lived in the area. Tuwharetoa's mother was of Te Tini o Kawerau, the earlier inhabitants and Ngati Awa lines. Tuwharetoa died and was buried there not far from the present day township, and his bones were later placed in an ancient burial cave.

In ancient times, the area was densely populated with people attracted by the geothermal activity that provided constant warm water for bathing and hot steam for cooking. Much later again, newcomers from over the seas, also attracted by the geothermal steam, established a new puffing trembling giant that would scar the land in new ways.

Born in Kawerau at the foot of the mountain Putauaki, I grew up with the smell of sulphur in my nostrils, and I played in the steaming mud and sulphur pits on my way home from school. The fragile crust of the earth could burst open at any time, sending forth vents of steam and revealing the boiling world below. Now, the smell of sulphur triggers a pang of homesickness. The stories of my childhood were populated with the gods and goddesses of Maori cosmology and with the knowledge that volcanic mountains were prone to running off in pursuit of distant lovers. We were told of caves once inhabited by historic ancestors and of the mountain caves that held the bones of their past occupants. As a child, my bedroom window looked directly at the mountain, and I would often stare out wishing to see the caves, and wanting, but not wanting, to see the bones. At times the towering mountain was ablaze as a forest fire ripped across its hide. I remember cowering with my equally young neighbours, Lynette and Sandra, in their garage, certain that the fire would tear down from the mountain and consume us.

As teenagers, we swam at night in enigmatic warm steaming streams in the nearby bush belonging to local Maori families. Frequently Ruaumoko, the God of earthquakes and all geothermal activity, would start kicking in the womb of Papatuanuku the Earth Mother and we would dive under our desks and tables as we'd been taught. The name literally means the 'Trembling Current that Scars the Earth'. Rū is an earthquake, while Moko is the art of tattoo. Our Maori cosmology recognises -through the stories of mountains that move -the scientific understanding of seismic activity and the relationship of all things above and beneath the earth.

The romance of my birthplace was overshadowed by the monstrous Tasman Pulp and Paper mill. The site for the mill was selected in 1952 for its geothermal reservoir of steam and the Tarawera river water supply. The mill provided employment – and, ironically, poisoned the Tarawera River with dioxins and organochlorines.

In 1962, Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, and she stated that:

"For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death."

NATALIE ROBERTSON

In 1954, less than a decade earlier, the New Zealand Government passed the *Tasman Pulp and Paper Enabling Act* specifically requiring that all effluent from the new Kawerau paper mill would be discharged into the Tarawera river. The Parliamentary records (Hansard), shows there was debate about the effects on farmers downstream using the river for stock watering, but the discharges were described as “so slight as to be almost unnoticeable”. The exemption of the company from prosecution or individual action for damages was regarded as necessary in case “some crank gets a bee in his bonnet” and brings an action for pollution. (Jeanette Fitzsimons MP, Green Party Co-Leader, in a Special Debate on 150th Anniversary of Parliament, 24th May 2004, described this use of waterways as “sewers for industry”)

Not surprisingly, the debate didn't mention the effects of the discharges on the Maori community, Onepu, downstream and downwind from the mill. Nearby, the hot pools that once were a local bathing place of the chief Tuwharetoa's people are now polluted with waste. Downstream from the mill, the Tarawera River is referred to by locals as the Black Drain. The tears of Tarawera flow to the sea daily, filled with tones of effluent, in the most serious dioxin contamination of any body of water in New Zealand.

The seismic activity below the earth was matched by the labour and employment volatility above ground, with union strikes stretching out from days into weeks and months, at times threatening an end to the small town of 8000 where I lived. However, the mill - with its billowing chimneys spewing out stinky toxic emissions - was also the Great Provider, not only of jobs but also of clothing and many other perks. And so the benevolent title of Uncle Tasman was bestowed.

ACT 2. Death is a distant rumour to the young

The first person that I remember dying of cancer was Paula Hansen (08.07.71). She was 16 years old and I didn't really know her because I was about 9, even though her family lived only a few doors down our street. When I walked past their house on my way to school, I felt like I should tiptoe, so as not to disturb her. After she died, everything seemed so quiet in the street. It was whispered that the family kept her room exactly as it was. After her death, her parents, who owned the local book and toyshop, looked like ghosts to me.

My memory of Averialle Whalley is less clear, as I was younger then. I remember hearing at primary school that she was sick and wouldn't be coming back. Her brother Michael was in my class. Then one day, a hearse (the first I remember seeing), stopped outside our primary school, very close to the Whalley's house, to take Averialle away.

Then Noel Hawgood went (11.06.77). His family lived in the street around the corner too, but he was 21 and had really lived, or so I thought. I was about 14 at the time. Cancer again.

NATALIE ROBERTSON

The next year, Monique Leenan died. She was so tiny and shrivelled that I walked past her in the hospice, thinking her to be an old lady. I had to ask the nurse where she was. Monique had lived just around the corner. She was 14 when she died, and by this time I was 15, going on 16. Monique had looked after my horse while I studied for exams at school, but her mum said she was losing too much weight. Turned out it was leukaemia, just like Paula.

I left Kawerau the day I finished high school. My neighbour Sandra and I walked home from school for the very last time contemplating our futures.

For the next few years, motorbike and car fatalities were more frequent than the cancers. But during that time Peter Moon went, as did Lindsay Haywood, the surfer with the coolest purple panel van.

At first it seemed that Sandra's ovarian tumour was containable and no one wanted to talk about it too much. As my next-door neighbour, I'd known Sandra her whole life. A year or so younger than me, we became better friends after her older sister Lynette (who I hung out with all the time) left home. Less than a year after the c-word was first spoken, Sandra died on January 1st, 1990.

It wasn't one of those, "well, you know, at least they're prepared for it", kind of deaths. It was messy, painful and terribly lonely. Sandra had pretty much stopped speaking to anyone a few months earlier, and my last conversation with her was only a few days before she went, as I headed off on my birthday for New Year's festivities. I felt selfish and mean and disconnected to this shell of a woman lying in the bed she'd slept in as a child. In the small airless darkened room, the too-large floral dress she'd been given for Christmas hung pathetically limp from a coat hanger on the door.

Around this time, I heard that my childhood friend from primary school, Meredith Olsen, daughter of the mill manager, died of cancer too, though she had left Kawerau when she was about 9. I heard about Cherie Barkla too, who had lived down the street in the end house when we were kids - she was the same age as Sandra. Cancer. And Tiffany Waghorn, younger still.

My dear friend Chris told me that Easter, almost 10 years ago, that he had melanoma and it was in his lymphs. He died just 9 weeks later, all skin and bone. He'd been working at the Whakatane sawmill for a few months when the tumours were found. I always thought he'd be killed in a motorbike accident, as his brother had been. A ghost on the highway, I'll love you forever.

A bit over five years ago, a couple of days after returning from an overseas trip, Chris's good friend Grant called me to tell me that Daine Hartley, my first ever Form 2 'boyfriend' had been diagnosed three weeks earlier and had died very quickly - within 2 weeks. Stomach cancer. And that Chris Delaney, Daine's childhood friend, and another classmate of mine, was terminally ill too, that Robert Gleed, from over the back fence,

NATALIE ROBERTSON

also the same age, he'd got it too, and that Raymond Turnbull, a year older, was on the list. I go overseas for 3 weeks and when I get back 2 are dead and 2 are on the shortlist. To date, 4 out of 13 Kawerau kids that had made it to my combined 6th and 7th form class, had died of cancer. More are dead for other reasons. Kia ora Selwyn. My boyfriend from when I was 14, David O'Brien got it too, but he's survived.

So, with all these boyfriends and schoolmates dying, I kinda figured it's me, or something in the air.

SOME FACTS:

Tasman Pulp and Paper mill at Kawerau in the Bay of Plenty produces 1 per cent of the world's paper, 2 per cent of New Zealand's export earnings, and 3 per cent of our discharges of the 'greenhouse gas', carbon dioxide. Its smokestacks currently emit 450 tonnes of particulate matter per year using state of the art control technology, and approximately 1,000 tonnes of reduced sulphur compounds per year, including the 'rotten egg' gas, hydrogen sulphide, which creates a local odour nuisance. This is a work environment where the 'acid rain' fallout on site meant that all cars had to go through a car wash daily, before leaving.

<http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/ser/ser1997/html/chapter6.7.html>

Kawerau has the highest age-standardised cancer registration rate of all the health Territorial Authorities within New Zealand. <http://www.bopdhb.govt.nz/>

A Socio-economic Profile of the People of the Bay of Plenty Region – Census 2001

Cancer: Bay of Plenty male and female age-specific rates for cancer are higher than New Zealand for all age groups except 65 years and over. Maori rates are higher across all age groups except for females in the 0-14 years age group.

In 1988, national breast milk studies revealed that levels of cancer-causing agents being found in the breast milk of New Zealand women was second only to women in Vietnam's Ho Chi Min City. Since WW2, widespread use of chemical fertilisers such as 2,4,5-T, 2,4-D and PCPs (Pentachlorophenol) have contributed to alarming rates of dioxins in blood serums.

On Ministry for the Environment dioxin inventory, Tasman and the Kawerau district are also identified on the Greenpeace toxics-map as a dioxin polluted site, with both historic dioxin pollution and ongoing dioxin emissions. Dioxins are some of the most dangerous chemicals known – they can cause cancer, birth defects such as hydrocephaly, chronic health problems and infertility.

NATALIE ROBERTSON

ACT 3. The Paradox

The mise en scène is compelling: a site of great beauty, and masses of international tourists coming to the geothermal areas of New Zealand to look at bubbling mud and to see the local Maori people utilize the environment in their daily lives.

Some of the local Maori of Kawerau, who once enjoyed the benefits of geothermal hot waters, receive their land back in 2013, once the industry lease expires. It includes a sacred lake where Tuwharetoa's mother is buried on an island that has been used as a toxic dump.

The cause of death of my friends, schoolmates, neighbours and acquaintances can be explained away. Is it coincidence? Is it other implicating factors? Or is it because it's a small enough place that we just know everyone? It's actually not that small - four primary schools, an intermediate and high school, where in fact, not everyone knows everyone. I've only mentioned the deaths I'm aware of. I've been away so long now, that there is much I haven't heard about and I have no direct connections to the Onepu Maori community downstream from the mill. So though I'm aware of their involvement in the Faces of Dioxin campaign that has highlighted the issue, I haven't spoken of the health impacts on their community.

Our skin cancer rates are also the highest in the country, but in grief we try to find meaning. I don't expect to find 'proof' as such. But as I talk with other people who left Kawerau, we all speculate. We laugh as we call it the Kawerau conversation. And we look at each other, thinking that we are the lucky ones. So far. And it conflicts with our view as New Zealanders who are very proud of their clean, green reputation.

The economy of the town is dominated by Uncle Tasman, and the mill is the only reason our parents moved there. As the KDC website states, 'Kawerau has the distinction of being one of the youngest towns in New Zealand. The mills, which process wood from the vast plantations of the nearby Kaingaroa forest, have always been, and will continue to be, the main focus of commercial activity in Kawerau.' It is a place of contradiction, the kind of place where they'd say "it's a great place to bring up children, it's got everything". The problem is, it's got more than they bargained for.

In October 2000, not long after Daine died, Greenpeace brought its Eliminate Dioxin Drive to Kawerau to highlight the extent of dangerous dioxin pollution around New Zealand, and called on the New Zealand government to agree to eliminate dioxins at an international toxics treaty.

According to Greenpeace Toxics Campaigner, Sue Connor, 'the greatest obstacle to protecting New Zealanders, the environment and future generations from deadly dioxins is the New Zealand government. Only a handful of nations involved in developing an international toxics treaty have so far refused to aim to eliminate dioxins. New Zealand is one of those.'

NATALIE ROBERTSON

In April, they're closing the No#1 Bleach Plant, the plant where my brother works, which is the oldest part of the mill operation. It has been replaced by a chlorine dioxide plant. Uncle Tasman's well over 50 now, and he has monthly health checks and environment tests on the discharges into waterways and atmosphere. Apparently he's cleaned up his act a lot since the early days, but Chlorine Dioxide still produces toxic effluent.

'The most advanced mills in the world use oxygen-based TCF bleaching because it does not produce any toxic organochlorine pollutants,' said Mr Szabo, who is also a member of the Ministry for the Environment's Hazardous Waste Advisory Group.

Conclusion

Let us return to Maui. Throughout Polynesia, Maui of a Thousand Tricks, Maui Tikitiki a Taranga, is known as the ancestor 'demi-god' of the Pacific. Maui is a shapeshifter and change agent who, through story, provides us with an example of the artist who challenges the norms of mainstream culture, demonstrating inquisitiveness, curiosity, enquiry, and through action, tests the boundaries of this world. These are all qualities associated with innovative creative practice. Maui also reminds us of our power to slip out from underneath domination and control, and to challenge hierarchy.

As artists, we can take a position and suggest an alternative viewpoint, and we can say, the Emperor has no clothes. In a place where the workers are dependant on the industry, it's still not too much to ask that the environment, for all living things, be respected and treated with thought for the future. Through this work-in-progress, *Uncle Tasman - the Trembling Current that Scars the Earth*, I hope to bear witness to the acts of environmental degradation and to add to the voice of those who challenge this industry to clean up its backyard.

In 1886, Tarawera mountain blew her top, erupting with such force that the world-famous Pink and White Terraces were destroyed and an entire village was buried. As the sun sinks slowly in the west, we are aware that though Putauaki stands dormant watching over his puffing, hissing competitor, he may decide to tiptoe away in the night in pursuit of his dream lover - the sexy and flirtatious marine volcano, Whakaari - leaving Uncle Tasman in his wake.

Our ways of telling story are embedded into chants that map and describe important places, reminding us of our connection to the land. They also remind us of the proverb that when the people die, the land remains. It is traditional in Maori to finish a speech with a waiata, a song or chant. So I conclude with Kimiora, a young cousin singing of the tribal lands of my people from the East Coast.