

Becky Nunes. Screenworks submission September 2023

How can environmental and indigenous alliance be enacted through an experimental lens-based practice?

This question is explored through the making of *An Age of Iron* HD 8' 2020

### Research Questions:

My research territory has for many years been engaged with imaging the effects of colonising and extractive forces on the land, and in making this short experimental film I hoped to identify my own standpoint more clearly, as a tau-iwi or non-Māori womxn deeply committed to issues circulating around land rights and use, and as a lens-based artist struggling with the ethical implications of photo-filmic representation. In particular I wanted to address questions of authorship and ownership of the narratives that were emerging in my practice, and to develop new strategies for imaging the other-than-human that remained sensitive to those questions.

The earlier still and moving image work I had been making explored degrees to which autoethnographic and documentary impulses could cohabit in photo-filmic work. Specifically, I was attempting to weave together references to intensely personal spiritual experiences with elements of less abstract visual storytelling using established conventions of landscape and still-life photography. Initially when working in the tribal lands of Ngāti Rangī I continued working in this way, and produced a series of still images and several short moving image works. *In single file* (Fig 1, Fig 2) was an early attempt to combine these aspects of my practice, and to provide a richer and more layered context for the themes in the work through the devices of dissolved transitions, the inclusion of sound and text overlays. This approach aligns with the history of the personal essay film in alternative cinema, and resonates with works by Chris Marker, Patrick Keiller and Gavin Hipkins. (Leonard, R. 2017)



Fig. 1 Still from *we walked in single file HD 2'47"* 2013



Fig. 2 Still from *we walked in single file HD 2'47"* 2013

However, the communication of a personal narrative via text felt on reflection like an uncomfortable appropriation of the landscape; through this process a visual hierarchy was set up, in that meaning was conferred to the land in the space of the frame only through the overlay of written English language. It is important to note that my lived experience is not only not that of someone indigenous to Aotearoa, I

also do not have any direct familial connections to the settler history of that country; arriving myself in the late 1980s from the heart of Empire, and as such always occupying the farthest reaches of the “hyphen between colonizer-indigene” (Denzin, Lincoln and Smith, 2008) Thus the intentions of the film to “place” a series of events into the body of a landscape risk inflicting further violence through a decentring of the trauma of colonisation. My approach to representation of the landscape, through static picturesque camera viewpoints that accidentally repeated the colonising gaze, inscribed into tropes of Western landscape painting and photography a “flexible mode of representation that served a range of strategic purposes including naturalizing the position of the colonial settler” (Mitchell, 1994) Despite the stitching together of word and image through transitions and overlays in the piece, the gaps between buried layers of meaning personal to myself and any real form of understanding on the part of the viewer remained unbridged.

### **Context and Methods.**

In response to what I perceived as the unintended perpetuation of colonising impulses and stereotypes in my previous work I trialled new strategies for production. My goals were to de-centre any autoethnographic impulses in the work, while continuing to acknowledge the situated and lived experience that informs my own cultural context. I also aimed to develop new approaches to experimental film-making that would not be paralysed by what Erica Balsom has referred to as the “pedagogy of suspicion” (Balsom, 2017) that has accompanied much of the dialogue around documentary representation in the context of postmodern photographic practice, but would instead respond by attempting to “revive key elements of the observational mode while challenging the epistemological claims that historically accompanied it through strategies of partiality, blockage, and opacity”.(Balsom, 2017) The specific context for beginning this development in my work was the long-term appropriation of Ngāti Rangi tribal lands for use by the Crown; specifically for energy generation through a hydro-electric scheme and for Ministry of Defence training purposes. I made repeated visits to the community, working alongside them to create a collaborative educational partnership with the institution in which I worked. In responding to these experiences through the act of making lens-based work, I separated out for development several distinct strands of practice, and tested them in my next body of work, *Tongariro Power*.

The first strand involved the overt appropriation of found archival material, re-working the triumphal and pioneering visual language of documentaries from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in order to make explicit the embedded settler, colonising and gendered narratives through surrealist and satirical tropes of montage and decontextualised re-presentation of the material. Campbell and Durden write that “Photography’s esthetic captures very well the reflective sheen of the surfaces of capital’s culture; indeed it helps to create it.” (Campbell and Durden,2019) In appropriating imagery from propagandist government-sponsored film-making my aim was to “intervene at the surface of this allure”, through the various uses of large-scale projections of fragments of footage, the abstraction of sound and film speed and the recontextualization of single frames into new narrative structures within accompanying zine-format artist books.

(Fig 3, Fig 4, Fig. 5)



Fig. 3. Film still from *Mama don't let your sons grow up to be cowboys 3'* HD Video 2015



Fig. 4 Single frame extracted into sequence in *Tongariro Power* artist book. 2015



Fig. 5 Single frame extracted into sequence in *Tongariro Power* artist book. 2015

The second methodology was developed as a process by which I as a filmmaker could “understand the landscape as a somatic place” (Pearson, 2010) After initial research was undertaken into the specific site and its context, I adapted an aspect of Situationist practice through undertaking the *dérive* as method to travel through the environment. My adaptation of this method includes the explicit understanding that I operate from the coloniser-indigene hyphen, and in working in this way I invoke the Kaupapa Māori approaches delineated by Dr. Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, sourced from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonising Methodologies* text. (Smith, 2021)

These can be stated as:

**Aroha ki te tangata**/Love for the people

**Kanohi kitea**/The seen face, or present yourself face to face

**Titiro, whakarongo**..korero/Look, listen....speak

**Manaaki ki te tangata**/Share and be a host, be generous

**Kia tupato**/Be cautious

**Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata**/Do not trample over the mana of the people

**Kia mahaki**/Don’t flaunt your knowledge

When in the environment I am watchful for Jungian synchronicities or meaningful coincidences, and through observing these events I am also acknowledging the practices of Mātauranga Māori, careful observations of signs and symbols of the natural world that feed into rich and complex web of indigenous intergenerational knowledge. Jung’s rewording of synchronicity as a “rupture of time” (McGuire & Hull 1978: 230) also aligns with Māori understanding of time as non-linear:

**Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua**: ‘I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past’  
(Māori *whakatauki* or proverb)

Respectfully, on foot with camera and audio recorder, I am open to what is offered up by the place. This includes photo-filmic responses to the landscape, aural responses to sound and also sometimes the collection of an artifact for further photographic and sculptural enquiry in the studio space. This fieldwork aligns with the embodied camera, with its limitations and possibilities described by Bridget Crone as she discusses the work of Charlotte Prodger. (Crone, 2020) Camera movements are the products of necessity; as a lone camera operator with limited equipment the camera takes up the “view from a body” (Haraway, 1998), which works in contrast to the Cartesian authoritative God-eye view from above.

## **Outcomes**

*An Age of Iron* represents my first attempt to synthesise these methodological strands of practice into a single experimental film. The work asks the audience to

consider land rights, resource extraction, ownership, and our relationships with more-than-human materials and place. Tahāroa is a tiny settlement to the South-West of the Kawhia harbor, in the North Island of Aotearoa. Some *iwi* (tribes) and *hapu* (sub-tribes) are looking at arrangements with corporations as sources of revenue as well as opportunities to retain aspects of their *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship) of *whenua* (land) and cultural protocols. N.Z Steel first brokered an agreement with local tribe Ngāti Mahuta ki te Hauāuru in the 70's to extract the titanomagnetite from the sands and ship it offshore for use in the construction of steel. Tucked out of sight, over the headland, the dredging operation of this iron-ore extraction from the volcanic black sands of the foreshore has been continuing unabated for over 50 years. In making the film I undertook to offer voice to that sand, to that foreshore, to those waves. This film asks what prolonged mineral extraction and the re-introduction of that material into the global manufacturing chain might mean for the *mauri* (or spirit) of the land, and for our planetary relationships.

The construction and structural elements of the film attempts to “revive key elements of the observational mode while challenging the epistemological claims that historically accompanied it through strategies of partiality, blockage, and opacity”. (Balsom, 2017). Creating space for the viewer to navigate these partial revelations, I removed any intertitles. I appropriated and created digital fragments from various archives, taking on the role of what artist Fiona Jack has referred to as “guerilla historian”. (Jack, 2013) Ship tracker data shows the slow progress of the *Taharoa Destiny* and other barges as they traverse the Moana Pacific (Pacific Ocean) with their ore cargo to their destinations on the Chinese mainland. Much of this ore is smelted into aluminium to feed the ongoing construction boom there and beyond. I have interrupted the more cinematic views of the landscape with screen grabs gathered from a citizen website broadcast from Beijing charting worker accidents and deaths on construction sites across the Chinese provinces. Through these interventions I am attempting to allude to othered and other-than-human narrative voices; those of the local mine workers, the Chinese labourers on construction sites, the iron-sands and the ocean that connects them. (Fig 6, 7) The insertion of animated symbols (miners' housing, abandoned tyres) wheel down and across the observational footage in another act of disruptive opacity. Two further animated elements refer to non-Western cosmologies, to time and space travel in relation to Polynesian mythologies and to the elemental/asteroidal nature of the ore itself. (Fig. 8) In this work I have departed from observational sound, commissioning a more cinematic score that emphasises the dystopian elements of this profoundly traumatised Anthropenic landscape.





Fig 6. Still from *Age of Iron* HD Video 8' 2020



Fig 7. Still from *Age of Iron* HD Video 8' 2020

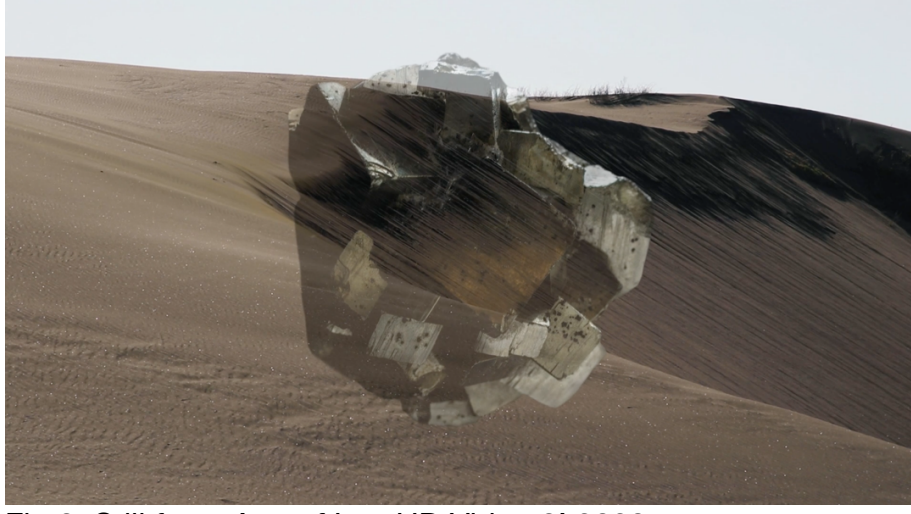


Fig 8. Still from *Age of Iron* HD Video 8' 2020

**Outcomes:**

Through the making of *Age of Iron* I have attempted to open up a space for myself to observe, consider and convey my responses to the profound and ongoing trauma inflicted on the land by capitalist, extractive and colonising practices. I have also attempted to develop methods that operate in alliance with indigenous ways of being and knowing, without making claims on or appropriating that knowledge or those stories. I have identified that interventions into the observational frame through the layering and animating of symbolic visual elements can offer some of the protective partiality and blockage Balsom has called for. The removal of guiding text or voiceover de-prioritises written/English language and asks the viewer to engage in somatic and intuitive ways with the voice of the land as mediated through the film. I have identified some methodological strategies to move beyond a paralysing critique of authorship in the process of making the work. As the viewer navigates the layered planes of imagery on the screen there is a “push and pull” of focus between observational and embodied states that points towards future directions for filmmaking that can more fully enter into the porous and liminal spaces between our human lived experiences and those other-than-human kin with which we share our planet.

**Impact:**

This film has screened (on the eve of lockdown) in a gallery context in Tamaki Makaurau, Auckland, Aotearoa (New Zealand). The installation of the film was augmented by the inclusion of an archival documentary from TVNZ from the 1960s that documented the impact then of the mine on the inhabitants of Tāhaora. This played using headphones simultaneously on an analogue TV in the gallery space, and provided further context for the more abstract moving image work, and would be my preference for viewing this work in the future.



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