



This text is an edited transcript of a conversation held at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in Pakuranga, Auckland on the 16th of January 2012. Participants Alan La Roche, Nova Paul, Luke Willis Thompson and Pita Turei were invited by Fiona Jack to discuss three photos of Pakuranga from the Auckland Libraries collection.

Fiona Jack: So, the dates of the photographs are circa 1910, and the photographer is unknown. At first I thought that these would be James D Richardson photographs because he has taken so many of Auckland around this time, but perhaps not.

Alan La Roche: The first telephone into Howick went in in 1909, and you've got a telephone pole there in that middle photo – not a power pole – but a telephone.

Fiona: Ah, well there we go, so we know it's after 1909 at least. So in terms of the locations of these photos we know that the centre photo is at the intersection of William Roberts Road and Pakuranga Road, and the other two are less specific in their catalogue information, but after going and looking at the site it seems fairly obvious that the photographer turned the camera to the right, and to the left of that intersection. With those big tripods that they needed to hold up big glass plate cameras they probably wouldn't have wanted to move it unless they had to. If you're wondering why I chose these images it's mostly to do with the fact that they were taken so close to where the billboards will go, and just because I think they're really interesting photos. I like the details, the activity.

Alan: The man on his bicycle is hanging onto the back of the cart (laughs). When I first saw this picture I thought no, this can't be Pakuranga Road, for a number of reasons. One is the way the flats go on the right – the river isn't very far away today. I had also wondered whether it was Reeves Road; for a period that was the main road because where Pakuranga Road is today was too swampy.

Fiona: So maybe these are the correct captions then, because as we know archives and catalogue entries can have their mistakes. Who knows at what point the information gets assigned to photos, and how.

Alan: The first thing you see is that except for the cabbage trees there are no native trees. Over here you've got hawthorne hedge (points to photo one), you've got gorse hedges down on the other two which they called firs at that time. You can see a lot of pine trees. You've got the cabbage tree swamp which covers the whole of the Pakuranga flats here, which is interesting because most of the land from St Kentigerns right down to the Tamaki river was owned by Hemi Pepene who was an adopted son of Fairburn the missionary. He farmed that area and did very well with all his farming of wheat and oats. How do you grow wheat with so many cabbage trees? You've gotta get rid of the cabbage trees, and you've got to drain it.

Fiona: Was this ever native forest?

Alan: No, not in European times.

Fiona: Do any of your stories talk of forests here Pita?

Pita: Gardens.

Alan: As well as that you just go a mile down the river here and you've got two-metres-plus kauri logs in the mud flats, all facing the same direction.





Fiona: What does that mean?

Pita: It means a very long time ago, before a significant eruption, there was a forest. Under the lava flows of Mt Eden there was a forest too – 28,000 years old. Not sure if we have an eruption time for Ohuiarangi? Maybe 3,000 years old?

Alan: You've got 3 metres or more of peat below us here, which is old forest.

Fiona: Hence it was fertile for the gardens.

Alan: Well yes, but it created problems for this five story block over here (laughter) – they had to go down a long way with big piles because it was soft underneath.

Fiona: So... we're here now in this urban/suburban environment looking at these photos. How do we see these photos now? I don't live in Pakuranga, but I have to that say one of my first responses is a bit of grief for the loss of wide open spaces – wherever they are – even though I know I am part of the reason why they don't exist anymore.

Luke Thompson: One of my interests looking at these images is knowing that there's this significant amount of change that happened prior to even these photographs, and then I guess part of the next challenge is to reconcile that with what we're standing in upon.

Fiona: Hmm, yeah. Even though it's wide open space were seeing in the photos it does look so colonial somehow – land that is being moved in upon.

Pita: I see a real emptiness in them. And that's partly because today it's... pretty full. (laughter) But also the narratives associated with this land speak of a lot of people, and quite clearly they've all gone, and they've been absent for a little while in these photos. So it kind of speaks of an emptiness between a time when we were all moved off for one reason or another, to when it became the suburbs and the urban environment it is today. It's a transitional emptiness that's in there, but it still speaks quite clearly with those finely defined horizons. They're familiar. I'm searching for evidence or clues as to what the view of this landscape might have been just in the episode before this one – going back maybe 150 years before this to pre Te Morenga's visit when it was really populated, when the gardens provided the food, when the harvest was hauled up to Ohuiarangi, when the kaimoana was across the river, when the swamp provided the eel relish to go with all of those root crops that were harvested. You know there were a lot of people here then. When Nga Puhi had 300 muskets and they were thinking *where shall we go first, lets take the mightiest we can* – they came here. That's what this place was. It was desirable.

Fiona: And contested.

Pita: Those glimmers of the water there, that's state highway one for a thousand years, all the waka going north, south, east, west went past here you know. This was Camelot, and in this shot it's barren, it's empty, it's cleared.

Luke: It's interesting to have the perspective switched from the road to the river as the transit route, as the primary vantage to watch the landscape from. It kind of reverses the instruction of how to look at this photograph.

Pita: Yeah, cause in a way I look at that road and it reminds me of Genghis Khan or Julius





Caesar. (laughter) As a statement of conquest create your own line of communication – and especially as it's at a tangent to the established transport route, it's quite symbolic in that sense.

Nova Paul: You don't think of boy racers? (laughter)

Pita: Not yet (laughs). But that guy on the bicycle is saving up for a Mazda. (laughter)

Fiona: Yeah the phone lines are going that same way too of course aren't they.

Pita: That's right, the forerunner of broadband right there.

Fiona: It reminds me of those amazing aerial photos where a piece of land is being carved up to have houses built on it, these strangely sculptural landscapes with the infrastructure in place, but no houses... yet.

Alan: In 1904 there was a bus going up this road, and it only lasted for one year because it got stuck in the mud. (laughter)

Fiona: Alan, knowing so much about this area and living in it... is the history always there when you go to the supermarket? You know you just whip down the road to get some butter – are you deeply conscious of histories just in those simple daily acts?

Alan: Oh, I don't know. See, when I grew up in Howick we had a house cow, and we sold Cleopatra when I went to university in Otago... (laughter) which was very sad, and we made our own butter...

Nova: ...there's the butter tangent. (laughter)

Alan: I don't know, but I am sad when I see the constant subdivisions. Where I live in Cockle Bay I look out over all the green hills of Whitford and in writing my latest book I interviewed a lot of the farmers out there and they all say that it is uneconomic to farm it because the rates are so high and they're just waiting to subdivide, and I think that's very sad.

Luke: Talking about this sadness that's been present in the conversation, I think Fiona you brought up the word grief around this image, and I guess I wanted to ask what these photos may do in the process of mourning – do they address some of that grief around landscape? What role does the photograph play in addressing some of that loss even to get to this point, and then from this photograph until now? I'm partially just wondering if these kinds of photographs always remind us of a place where a lot of loss comes from, or can they help recover something; aid in recovering from that in some small way. It's a huge task, but I'm wondering if this act of looking can address some of that.

Fiona: Mmm, nice question. I guess I've always felt a sense of responsibility to try and know some of the past in order to be able to stand on the land, wherever I am, and photographs help with that learning. As I grew up I became suspicious of one singular voice telling me what things were all about. That's why I like this process of many of us here spending a lot of time looking and talking. It helps me see more in the photos, in the environment.

Nova: I guess loss and mourning is nostalgia for a thing that has passed, something that isn't going to return. It's clearly such a transitional moment here in these photos. I think firstly I have an overwhelming and constant amazement at the way that these moments have never really





fully responded to the land, they've always been driven by an agenda or an aspiration that is incongruent to what is going on with the land. You know... *we'll put a highway here, and here's a swamp – ah a perfect place for development.* So I think firstly in these photographs is a point of disregard, for me, for what is actually there instead of actually honouring the landscape... well you know the whole country's got that going on. Ngawha springs – a beautiful place with healing waters – *hey, lets put a prison there...* you know... there's this constant disregard.

Fiona: Coming here tonight I picked up Pita from his place in Grey Lynn. All the grass verges along the street are all neatly mown and out the front of Pita's house is this really overgrown patch with a little handwritten sign that says *"Dear lawn mower, please don't mow this verge, I like the flowers – Trish"*. It's such a nice little moment of letting the land be, in the middle of Grey Lynn.

Nova: I've been meaning to pull over and read that sign. (laughter)

Alan: Most of Europe has lovely little villages that are compact and here in New Zealand there's the greed of early settlers – and it continues today – to just buy as much land as they can and get the maximum price for it. The idea of using it appropriately just doesn't come into that equation, unfortunately.

Pita: Just coming back to your question Luke, when a family loses a member, and especially if that's through murder, or a loss at sea, or kidnapping and there's no body people find it hard to grieve. So there's a quest to get whatever remains there are returned, whatever condition they're in – it helps people release the process of grief and move on, and so in that sense I look at these photos in the same way. It's like bringing back the pictures of the charred remains after the torture, and you can go *"fuck"*, and you can look at it, and you can let that go, and you can move on, eh. It gives you an anchor in time; this is what it looked like – and you can start re-weaving the fabric backwards or forwards. In that there's a process beyond grief, and that is a process of reclaiming what has been destroyed. These things become our drivers, our engagement as members of Iwi with development, with the council, with the notion of consultation, the exercise of the resource management act. So, you know, we've probably got a couple of wetlands back, but we're still at less than 1% of what we originally had... so there's room for improvement. (laughter) So I see these photos in that context; their value is huge, but they're only one bit. They're the best trigger I've seen in terms of showing what happened. How did it end up? It ended up bankrupt, bereft, devoid, cleared, cleansed, of us.

Fiona: It's strange timing that the colonisation of New Zealand was happening at the same time as the development of photography because it means that we have so many of these, and so few of anything before.

Nova: I keep coming back to this figure of the person, the ground, and the grass. Who is this person? He's isolated – this idea of isolation is, for me, such a modern concern – the individual that sits alone in the landscape not connected to people, communities, just there, by themselves. I think this reminds me of the isolation that comes when people start dividing the land into quarter acre blocks; everybody starts to lose contact with the fabric of their neighbourhood and each other, and they become much more insular. The opposite of isolation for me is connecting with a group, and to that end I'd say that Mana Motuhake is about connections with each other,





not the singularity and individuality portrayed in this image – man alone in the landscape, disconnected from communities and almost levitating above the whenua. I guess I'm thinking of the photographer too when looking at an image like this; how are they situated in relation to the frame and landscape. How do other people respond to the details in the photo?

Fiona: I can see some intimacy in it. He seems relaxed. I wondered whether he had come with the photographer, maybe they were friends, and he just ended up in the shot – why else would he be there? But I know what you mean about the 'dividing up' though. The type of architecture that was dominant when this was turned into housing is boxy, contained architecture. They're not grounded, open houses.

Alan: You mean today? Today it's filled with little boxes.

Fiona: Today, 1950s...

Nova: ...isolated, there's no porous community. Well there is around places like this (Te Tuhi), and people can make thriving communities anywhere...

Pita: ...porous community – that's a really interesting term.

Nova: It's not a term, I just said it.

Pita: Yeah but it's really good though.

Fiona: Sort of leaking.

Pita: It's a really good way of describing it though – there's no way of connecting between one eggshell and the other.

Fiona: Yeah, and if we look at this photo on the right the dominant feature in the foreground of this photo is the fence, and fences are such a feature in rural and urban New Zealand. They make sure things stay quite separate.

Alan: These fences aren't just fences – they're ditch and bank. Because timber was scarce around Howick and Pakuranga they'd dig a ditch that was over a metre deep and they'd dig it as sods and place them next-door – so you'd get a ditch, and then a bank that is over a metre tall, and on the top of that you'd plant your gorse or your hawthorne.

Nova: That's a blockade.

Pita: That'd work. (laughter)

Alan: I was also going to say that at this period the grasses are native grasses – mainly *Microlaena stipoides*. We still have small clumps of it at the top of Ohuiarangi, or Pigeon Mountain, and some on Maungarei, some on Hawthorne Dene farm on Botany Road which I used to help look after because it's never been plowed. That's one of the few areas that hasn't been bulldozed or ploughed. *Microlaena* doesn't stand heaving cutting; it dies if it's mown really close.

Fiona: So it wasn't eradicated, it just didn't survive.

Alan: No it didn't survive the heavy grazing and mowing, etcetera.





Fiona: I'm interested in the fences – the blockades.

Alan: Pakuranga was covered with them. As soon as you got over the Tamaki river they were stone fences because you were into a volcanic area, and in Remuera you got railed fences because they were generally the more well to do farmers who could afford to buy timber that was brought in from the Waitakere ranges or the islands in the gulf, but out here they were all ditch and bank and they've almost all been eliminated. I've tried very hard to get one or two preserved on some of our council reserves, but they will keep bulldozing them!

Pita: Have you managed to be successful with any?

Alan: There's some at 180 Botany Road, Hawthorne Dene, because that's a historic reserve. We've managed to preserve some of them there. I understand how Maori must feel when they look at their former lands and how they've been destroyed and just covered with little boxes. I heard James Belich on the radio yesterday talking about history and his definition of history was to question; to question the past, the narrative of the past. Questioning is an interesting concept of history because every generation looks at history a little differently.

Nova: How do you think of history?

Alan: I'm saddened about the destruction.

Nova: You spend so much time writing these beautiful books – is it a quest in curbing the tide of sadness?

Alan: Well you're recording something that has disappeared. But, we have to acknowledge that the world is growing, the population is growing, our government insists that we bring in more people from other countries to share our land and I just accept that that's the way it is. But I can imagine when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed how people felt then. I sympathise with those who question.

Pita: Well I'm with Belich – history is a question, and that is how we have to approach it. The key to that question is how we dismantle whatever is put in front of us, ask the questions, then bury the questions deep within the evidence we have before us, and then re-construct it so it makes sense.

Alan: It's very subjective; we all have a very different viewpoint of the past.

Fiona: I just think it takes time, and that's what it seems to me we don't allow for. All of the questions and understandings take time to emerge and to surface. At art school we sit, as a group, with an artwork for a great deal of time unfolding what we see, and what we think it means. The tiniest and most insignificant detail can unfold into a room-sized balloon of questions. All objects, landscapes, people, stories... everything... can be so beautifully complex if you take the time.

Luke: I guess tonight learning a little bit more about the river from Pita, and then Alan's description of the native grass here has done that for me – started to shift my perspective. My interest in history lies in its ability to re-prioritise these other more permanent things in me, to get out of that default selfish setting that it is quite easy to have, and to move to something quite a bit wider. What's so interesting about looking at history is that it provides some sort of





constellation or orientation for the future, right? Also I should say I think I disagree with Belich's definition. I think the act of questioning is inherent to the practice of history, but I think it's dangerous to define it purely as such. At some point history is also about making a decision – to acknowledge, or to believe in, or to nominate one variant of a story. This is an uncomfortable position to take – so often historians have got it gravely wrong and I don't want to defend them for that – but if we say history is pure questioning then 1) we hide the judgments that we make less consciously, and 2) we may not know where or when to stop questioning and start re-addressing – when to say *sorry, this was wrong, we need to begin making amends for this*.

Fiona: Yes, I agree. Questions are essential, but there's little accountability in the endlessly provisional.

Luke: I also want to pause and go back to the moment where it was mentioned about more people coming into Aotearoa. I'm very aware that the population make up of the area is increasingly Asian and East Asian, and one of the remarkable things about Te Tuhi that I really love is the Saturday night markets that happen in The Warehouse basement carpark that speak a little bit to that current diversity of the area. I wanted to know what some of your perspectives were around this, and how the new visitors to this area – the manuhiri – negotiate this past. Isn't that a big question?

Pita: I don't think it's that big. If I lived in Camelot my kids would know about Lancelot (laughter), and that would enrich everyones lives because we'd be around the places where these things happened, and they would contextualize it. This land has a host of narratives to fuel that interest. You don't have to be able to say *well I'm a direct descendant of 19 generations from the...*, you don't have to say that to be able to appreciate it, or for that to be of value in your life. I don't think so anyway. I mean, I'm just imagining here, I don't know if it's actually true, but by and large I think it's the duty of those who take up the role of historian to deliver history in a way that does enrich the lives of the people of now and the future. Whatever fragments we can find we have to compose in a way that is palatable, inspiring, and enriching of peoples association with the land that is their home.

Alan: You were taking tours of Ohuiarangi and we tried to get an information sign but the council said they didn't have the money.

Nova: You'll have to keep giving the tours then. (laughter)

Fiona: What do you think this photographer was trying to do on this day? Do you think this was a photo for historical record?

Alan: It's a great pity we don't know who it was.

Fiona: Yes, that would help. But I also like that it's anonymous, a bit more license to invent maybe.

Pita: It's obvious – he's an Aucklander who came over here to take the photos.

Fiona: A tourist?

Pita: Or a real estate agent.





Fiona: Ha, yeah that's what I wondered too.

Pita: The road is the feature...

Nova: ...and this figure in this photograph, this aspirational gaze – it *is* real estate. *Place yourself here, and look out at this vista...*

Pita: ...and have a dream. The other thing is that the proximity of the road could indicate how the person got there, and the reason they took the photo there was so they didn't have to carry the heavy glass plate camera too far from the carriage it was on.

Alan: He couldn't carry it himself – he'd need a horse and cart.

Nova: That's the horse and cart, and that's that guy.

Fiona: All a set-up you reckon?

Alan: Howick at this time was a tourist attraction.

Nova: Why? (laughter)

Alan: In 1910 you've got a big two-storied marine hotel in Howick but they'd come by ferry, not many people would come by road because at that time you had to cross a steel bridge. It had a 40ft span that would be pulled aside to let scours and other boats go up the Tamaki River. You see if there was a boat going up the Tamaki river it sometimes took an hour to crank the span back into position because it was hand operated, and they just had to wait. So most people were coming by the ferry that went to the Howick wharf.

Luke: Maybe we've moved on slightly too fast in the process of deciding what these works were in terms of their purpose at the time as surveying or documenting real estate potential, or something like that. That might have been what they were then, but what are they now? Maybe that's more up for grabs, but I wonder if there are more clues within the photographs as to how to look at these. I'm still feeling slightly lost in the act of looking. Where are we with what is present, with what is here?

Pita: To me he's not from here, he's from somewhere else. I'd say he's a speculator – philosophically or emotionally. I mean this is just my reading. I'd say he's looking at the land and seeing the potential for exploitation. Now I'm not one to stereotype people or anything like that...

Alan: ...Pakuranga's full of them. (laughter) But it's the greed. That's the part of it...

Nova: ...yeah that's it...

Alan: ...we have four hundred land agents in Picton Street Howick (much laughter), and they're all making a living, and that's scary.

Pita: Yeah that's scary eh, cause they're not making anything.

Alan: They're not creating a thing.

Nova: Just turnover...

Alan: ...and the bank account is all that matters.







Pita: Well there's another way of looking at it: we've just got off this ship, we've got the last remnants of our inheritance, we've seen this photo – *a pound an acre!* Is that how much it would have been then?

Alan: A pound an acre for the early settlers, that's right.

Pita: I mean what a great joy this would have been to the eyes!

Alan: They were given a free passage from Great Britain with their family, if they bought land here.

Pita: That too.

Luke: If the greed is inherent in the lens, then are these photos now anti-greed?

Pita: I'm a bit worried about the use of the word greed, because I think that can distract us, cause today we don't call it greed – we call it GDP, or positive growth, or something else. So if you're asking if this looks like greed now, well in today's eyes it's not called greed anymore. And I don't even know if in their time it was greed, it was hope. If you were from anywhere in England this was hope – hope that you could be a land owner, that you could control your destiny, that maybe one day you'd even make a fortune. I don't think that we can simply put all that in a box called greed. I think that that is simply dehumanizing some of our characters in the narrative. (noises of agreement)

Luke: So what else can these photos be for us?

Fiona: In a straightforward sense they allow us to see the lay of the land, the contours, in a way that we can't now.

Nova: When you know a piece of land really well, somewhere you've walked alot, you know the gradient and the terrain very well. You would never get a sense of the terrain of this land now.

Fiona: When I first saw these photos I thought there was no way I would be able to recognize these places because they're sort of non-descript in their contours, and it's all so built up now, but when I went to this intersection I immediately said *yup, that's it*. That slight tilt in that road, at that angle, those horiozons... it was absolutely it. Even the St Kentigerns lawn in this right hand photo is still at that angle. It's subtle, but it's clear.

Luke: Fiona, something that intrigues me that has been consistent in your work, I don't know if that's something that's useful to talk about now, but the experience of passing your work Kohimaramara so many times to get to the beach, or whatever, and starting to take on that photo on the billboard with the peninsular and the way it was... you know I do think that these kinds of photographs offer us some kind of new way to orient ourselves in that new place.

Fiona: I think images like this are powerful in their ambiguity, their displacement. Ngarimu and I went through quite a process in making that billboard. We made a photograph that was a hybrid of the landscape as it is now and the 'missing' land from a historic photo. In the beginning Ngarimu was keen on having text on the billboard but we couldn't figure out the words - we changed them many times. Eventually all the text just dropped away because as we let the image just sit there we realized that the image didn't need anything. If that image was just going





to sit there on a billboard it would gather its own weight as time passed, as thousands of cars drove by it. We didn't want to close that down to a singular reading by putting words on top of it. So yeah, for sure I think that these kinds of images can help us to orient ourselves, to place ourselves in the narrative maybe.

Pita: There's another layer that resonates – ancestral history. This one (points to photo three) Nga Tuaitara a Taikehu – the dorsal fins of Taikehu – and Taikehu is our ancestor. He was a tohunga on the Tainui Waka, and they talk about the piece of Rangitoto being the dorsal fins which means they're protruding above. But the thing about the realm of Taikehu is that these peaks are protruding above the horizon and that horizon is usually other landscapes, so this is a classic example of that expression Nga Tuaitara a Taikehu. This is the realm of Taikehu, and Taikehu was an ancestor of Ngai Tai, so that speaks immediately to that. This one here (points to photo two) (singing) *E pā tō hau he wini raro – What's this wind blowing softly against my cheek turning these fresh tears to chills as I look across this land, I don't think these eyes will ever see again.* You know, it reminds me of that, with that distant peak. And here (pointing to photo one) there was Ma te tuhi rapa a Manawatere a ka kitea – he was someone who came here without a waka. He didn't need one, he was a navigator, he was a master. He founded a university Te Peehi o Manawatere and he re-translated the science of the navigator which was the observation of celestial movement, the basis of our numeracy, the cycles of not only season and time but also the cycles of the moon, and planets – the collective memory of the navigators that was brought here and then re-contextualised to the species, to the place, to the latitude. So there has to be a patience with it, and there's a patience with this guy sitting there isn't there, he doesn't look like he's in too much of a hurry. So...you know, the photos resonate other things too, certainly the land still speaks in them.

Alan: Coming down here this evening in my car down the highway there were probably fifty, maybe a hundred, godwits weaving their way through the sky going from the beaches and heading for the Manukau harbor, and then they go back again at the turn of the tide. But the way they're flying – you know they fly in their V shape constantly changing position – it's ... wonderful! And they do this for the next few months and then they're off to Siberia. They're only 50 feet or something above the land, just above the trees.

Pita: Then they're off to Siberia.

Alan: And they don't stop for the whole way.

Nova: We've got to get our act together don't we? We're so lazy. (laughter)

Pita: New Zealanders do love to travel. (laughter)

Fiona: That's a nice way to think about the land, with birds tracing the contours. Also to hear you just sing and talk to the landscape and these photos in a different way Pita. It is a privilege I think to hear land talked about like that. As much as history can teach us certain things about a place, there's nothing like the passing of stories. Maybe that open architecture, the whareniui and so on – as opposed to the boxes we were talking about before – is where story telling is just part of being in those spaces, doing the dishes.

Pita: I don't know, I think we can romanticize too much about these things, and I say that





because I've never experienced that. I've never known it, I don't know if it is true; I've heard about it, but I've never experienced it.

Fiona: The story telling?

Pita: In the meeting house and all that.

Nova: I remember squabbling over mattresses.

Pita: Yeah, you know all of those things. I never heard the story telling in the meeting house, I think it's a fantasy. Especially being in Tamaki – the only story telling we have is around the fire, nowhere near a marae. Well, not any of the existing ones anyway.

Fiona: So where do the stories get passed on then?

Pita: Land Court records, libraries.

Fiona: So you haven't inherited these stories orally?

Pita: I haven't inherited anything orally. I've researched them, I've dismantled them, I've studied who these people were who wrote them, and then used my perception of them to dismantle the way they wrote about me.

Fiona: So our privilege of hearing you tell these stories is hard-won.

Pita: I'm still experiencing – learning the information, going back to the land with the grandmothers and the grandchildren, articulating it and getting it out... and then it comes alive.

Nova: Whereas mine has been just the opposite, I've had somebody who has taken me into the landscape and told me stories about the landscape, my whenua. Definitely not on the marae, and definitely in a really specific way.

Fiona: Huh, that's interesting – as a visitor to many marae over the years story telling has been a central part of every experience for me.

Alan: The teller of the stories must be willing to share. I spent a lot of time with Mrs Zister, – generally to help her with her dentures to be honest (laughs) – but we'd spend hours discussing...

Nova: ...with her what sorry?

Alan: Her dentures. I used to be a dentist...

Fiona: ...and with whom?

Alan: Mrs Zister.

Pita: Ngeungeu Zister who was our matriarch. She died a few years ago. Went to school with Te Puea.

Alan: Yes, so she took me under her wing and told me lots of stories. I learned a lot.

Fiona: The idea of romanticising the story telling experience, I want to think about that a bit more. Maybe I'm thinking about something smaller? Like what about the protocol of standing





before you speak and saying who you are, where you're from, your river, your mountain...even that is a story. There's an allowance of time to speak that's different to what I grew up with.

Pita: That's quite a new construct though.

Fiona: Oh is it?

Pita: I don't know, I could be completely wrong, but I can never bring myself to say any of those things we're supposed to say. To me it's totally irrelevant and unimportant and no one came here to know where my river is. I think what's important is the subject. I look at our speakers of old like Rua Cooper – you would never hear him say where he's from. If we didn't know, we shouldn't be there. He would cut to the chase and if anybody wanted to know who they were they could talk to the neighbour. What was important was the kaupapa – we're there to keep that kaupapa moving and if there's not any discussion on it then sit down. No-one's got time to listen to who you are or where you're from – although there's usually a way of slipping in an anecdote, a musical reference, or some other reference that gives the clue as to where the person's from. And then other speakers will flick out some little reference to let everyone know that they know, and that means they're aunty so and so's nephew. (laughter) You know...it's more played out like that. I think it's really important that we abandon any hold on anything that looks like a set of rules about how we're supposed to behave because I think they're all constraints that don't help us. I think all of us, especially in our colonised situation, need to be free to express ourselves. If we can't express ourselves until we know how to say this or that... it becomes another layer of constraint rather than freeing us to speak our hearts and minds.

Luke: I can really respond to this idea that it's not...well... I quite liked the bluntness that came out when you said that what you've learnt is from records. Sometimes we have to work really hard to find out some of that knowledge. I can respond to that but I do also think that you can't only say that without referring to the next bit, which is that you have to find a way to place that knowledge and transmit it on.

Pita: Absolutely. That's why WC Fields is so important to me. He said never let the truth get in the way of a good story, and I think that's a very important point for anyone practicing being a historian – amateur, professional or otherwise – because if it's not a good story we won't remember it, we won't even bother finishing the book. We have to find the compelling narrative in there, we have to find those characters and we have to bring them so much to life that we can identify them with ourselves or the neighbor we hate, and then they're important to us, and then we remember them... and then the history lives.

Alan: When I do interviews with people I generally don't use a tape recorder I just scribble flat out and they're willing to loosen up and share their heritage, share their family histories and their thoughts about where we've been, and where we're going. I see that as an important role of a historian. I'm only an amateur historian, I'm not professional at all, even though I seem to spend my life doing it.

Nova: So you went to art school, and then you became a dentist, but really you're a historian. (laughter) So, you're collecting all these stories...do they all end up in the books? What are you housing inside here that's not...





Alan: ...my house? Records have taken over. (laughter) You know, the other thing that saddens me is the fact that around the homesteads almost no one planted native trees. They were using gum trees, pine tree and fruit trees of course, but there was virtually no use of native trees. They saw them as being unattractive, and if you look at some of the artists; when they had to draw native trees they drew them to look like an oak tree. (laughter, sighs)

Fiona: Geoff Park talks about that quite a lot doesn't he – this idea of bringing a particular way of seeing to New Zealand. He writes about how we brought not only plants, but we brought also a way of looking at landscape, so we changed the landscape of Aotearoa to be able to look at it in a particular way.

Alan: Albyn Martin did a lot of paintings in this area and they were straight out of Britain. He was a great artist, Royal academy and all that, but the light that he was using was not the sort of light we get here in Auckland – more like Britain.

Fiona: What about this road, do we know the age of this road? I love the idea that roads, pathways, can be very old. I know you've pointed out that the river was the main road, but Maori would have had to cross the whenua too...maybe along this route?

Alan: David Simmons has a theory that many of our main roads in Auckland were formed before the Maori arrived by moa going from one feeding area to another. Obviously when there was already a route through Maori would use it, and when the early settlers arrived there was already a route from one valley to another, so they used it too.

Fiona: That's a pretty cool theory.

Alan: There aren't any cattle or sheep in the photos.

Fiona: Yeah I was just thinking that too – not quite the typical New Zealand pastoral scene. Quite empty really.

Alan: You see they didn't have fertilizer so if you had a half a dozen cows on a hundred acres that was all you'd need because you had to hand milk them.

Nova: This detail's amazing Alan!

Fiona: Yeah, isn't it. So this is likely a slowly grazed paddock, but the few cows are out of view.

Alan: Yes, they didn't have big herds like we have today.

Pita: We hadn't started raiding Nauru in those days had we.

Alan: No.

Nova: What's that?

Pita: Nauru was an island of phosphate. Australia and New Zealand plundered it and we covered the entire landscape with phosphate from Nauru.

Alan: It was German territory, and after WW1 Australia and New Zealand took it as spoils of war. So suddenly we had a source of phosphate, and we needed tonnes of it! Hence all the fertiliser factories.





Luke: Nick Mangan did that work last year about the history of Nauru. Strange history – for a while they had Lamborghinis driving on the island's single road.

Pita: Once the litigation and compensation thing matured they became the richest pacific islanders on the planet. At the South Pacific arts festival the Nauruan's couldn't get up and dance they had just become so obese with the wealth.

Luke: All these remarkable things started to happen on the island where the mafia set up a fake passport business through the island and laundered lots of money...

Pita: ...all for our green fields.



1 Description: Looking south across the Tamaki River towards Otahuhu from Pakuranga. Record ID: 653-9928. Photographer: Unknown. Date: 1910. Original Format: Glass plate negative  
Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 653-9928





2 Description: Looking north along Pakuranga Road from the corner of William Roberts Road towards Panmure, showing Cabbage Tree Flats. Record ID: 653-9921. Photographer: Unknown. Date: c1905. Original Format: Glass plate negative  
Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 653-9921





3 Description: Looking north across the Tamaki River towards Rangitoto from the vicinity of St Kentigern's College, Pakuranga. Record ID: 653-9929. Photographer: Unknown. Date: 1910. Original Format: Glass plate negative  
Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 653-9929









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Pita Turei (Ngai Tai): Writer, film maker, sculptor.

Luke Willis Thompson: Practising artist and writer.

Fiona Jack: Artist and Senior Lecturer at the Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland.

Fiona Jack, *Pakuranga*, billboard vinyl and booklet stack, 2012

Images courtesy of Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries: 653-9921, 653-9928, 653-9929.

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