



ECOOCENE

POLITICS

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# INTERMEZZO II

## Loss and Recomposition, Part II

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### Genealogies of Place

Sealed within narrow ways of thinking, we fail to grasp just how much richness still remains in worlds otherwise flattened by hegemonic development. In the most ordinary occurrences, there may be the glimmer of a different world; in the slightest gesture performed with natural conviction, there may be the shards of a radical vision. Ideas, conventionally described as being conceived by a mind, often conceive of us, find us and take us along to show worlds that without their own light, remained obscured by darkness. Ideas make us.

Seen this way, places that we encounter, whether familiar or strange, dimly understood or profoundly researched, are always pregnant with possibility. The gestation period is infinite, the time of delivery always unknown. As experiencing subjects, as always traversed by the multiplicity of being, we may catch a glimpse of what lays underneath the supposedly obvious. It suffices to pay attention, to ask, to listen, and to allow oneself to be taken in by a sympathetic imagination that is shared. The relationship between decomposition and recomposition is always there, always dynamic. It has never been any other way: the meaning of places constantly shifts, their partial decomposition providing the ideatic and practical compost for something new, yet related, to emerge.

Before modern development achieved an unprecedented flattening of worlds, the change of meaning from generation to generation, the transformation of places according to the whims of natural rhythms, was a matter of fact. The illusion of control over the world that modernity has so ably promoted veils this fact and makes it hard to recuperate the

central insight of loss and rebuilding: what is always recuperated is the relation itself, not some romantic past that does nothing to challenge—and to decompose—modern ways of composing. An ethic of nativist bliss is anathema to the relational modes that one always discovers when digging through the concrete.

Places, all places really, are a living archive. As such, places hold powers that dictate, to a large extent, how they are to be approached and treated. The more we learn about the archival material of which places are built, the more we can read the landscape and find ourselves transformed, as we do in reading good literature. Being in a place that reveals its archive is very much akin to reading a novel: one is able to inhabit possible worlds, see their light and smell their scents, and one is able to feel the sadness of loss and the gratitude of endurance. Just like with literature, one can infinitely re-read, and each time it is different, the archive inexhaustible.

Returning to Auckland from having visited Waitangi, the place where the Treaty of Waitangi, the foundational document of New Zealand, was debated and signed in 1840, I stopped to visit Tāne Mahuta, a *kauri* tree in Waipoua forest that is believed to be the largest tree in the country. A representative of Te Roroa, the local *iwi*, stood nearby and chatted with curious travelers. He always spoke of the tree using either the personal pronoun, or one of his twelve names, given to Tāne Mahuta for good deeds he had done for local people throughout his life. It is estimated that he is around 2000 years old, which means that he was already very old when the first Polynesian navigators arrived in Aotearoa.

Back then, when Tāne was only 1000 years old, there was no Waipoua Forest, but a vast subtropical *kauri* forest that the newcomers slowly learned to live with and within. Today, he stands as testimony to what has disappeared, felled by the saws of settlers in pursuit of timber and pastures. Those past relationships that made Tāne can only be intuited; the relationships that made Tāne before Māori became Māori were surely a subject of local intuition before white settlers arrived. The representative of Te Roroa, contemplating the *kauri* that his ancestors named twelve different times, is testimony to the enduring significance of these beings, the uncanny survival of an embodied demigod that had, for a very brief period in history, become just timber.

For Māori each place has a force of its own, and human conduct has to take this into account. Geoff Park (1995, 164) explains it thus:

Before contact with the missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Māori believed their physical health and wellbeing were achieved in two principal ways. One was by maintaining the *mauri* of their places—the life force by which their natural elements cohere. The other was by lifelong observance of the laws of *tapu* [sacredness, forbidden, taboo]. Rites and rituals broke down the barriers between people and other species, allowed people to flow spiritually into nature and for nature's rhythms to permeate their own being. A host of daily tasks depended on conscious connection, both to benefit nature and limit human excesses.

Ritualized interaction with the environment allowed for the change inherent in natural processes to be incorporated as health, as the kind of vulnerability that makes one and that sustains sensitivity towards the *mauri* of places.

This way of being in the world meant that one observed the specific sacredness of particular places, like ones where giant trees grew (*kauri* is but one of many different giants in New Zealand). Rituals ensured that everyone respected the specificity of places. In order to suppress Māori and their philosophical ways it was therefore necessary to interrupt—to decompose speedily—their profound readings of places. Like elsewhere, white settlers had the correct intuition that you cannot control a people without changing their land. The beginnings of modernity themselves harbor the interrelation of people and places, albeit it negatively; this is a molecular residue of modernity within modernity itself, something that may as well become an auto-immune disorder, a kind of self-sabotage in order to return to this founding intuition as a positive project.

The early missionaries, in acquiring land and converting Māori to Christianity, had to physically destroy the *tapu*, the sacredness, of a place. They could not transform the ritualized interaction with the environment by wishing it away, or by converting people to abstract ideas. They had to intervene materially, because that is the level of interaction that sustains a certain way of life. Park recounts how, in the Mōkau Region, missionaries would perform their own rituals around sacred trees in order to drive their spirit out. The rituals were concluded by setting the tree ablaze, in what must have been a spectacular show of force on the side of the Christian God.

This spectacular force of destruction that makes the impossible real is a recurrent theme within modernity; it repeats itself wherever development takes over, going as it must through the process of

driving out the special significance of places and things. In Puglia, olive trees—the giants of that territory—were mostly imagined as immortal and therefore acquired extraordinary significance. Olive time was first shaken by the project of development that increasingly transformed them into cogs in a productive machine, multiplying their numbers to the point of near insignificance. Only the ‘monumental’ trees are seen as special within a sea of monocultural monotony.

The appearance of *Xylella*, the bacterium that has killed millions of olive trees in just a matter of years, has accomplished the radical desacralization that development has always sought. Pathogens may seem to come from nowhere, as if they are mere bad luck. In some sense they are just a matter of luck because they are part of the chance and change that defines the natural world. But in another sense, their actions can only be as good as the conditions that sustain them; monocultures of purely economic significance are an ideal habitat for a creature that simply pursues its own way of life. Inscribed within the story of that place, *Xylella* concludes its history of decomposition by doing the unthinkable: *killing* the eternal olive tree. In the beginning of the outbreak, most people did not follow the official advice of uprooting sick trees because they could not *believe* that they could die. Nothing in their experience attested to that possibility. Now, a landscape of scorched trees makes the impossible real. As Janos Chialá has documented in painfully evocative fashion, dried trees are burning every summer, driving their *mauri* into extinction, the *tapu* of the land finally exorcised.

We tend to forget just how much *work* goes into desacralizing the world. We pass through strip malls and highways littered with industrial debris—the sacrificial zones of global capital—without realizing the effort that went into the sacrifice, and the repeated nature of the assault, from priests burning trees to loggers felling the remainder to ranchers grazing pasture to developers and bulldozers and cement. The placeless world that global consumer societies create and promote, the uniformity of shops, production, storage, transportation, requires an enormous amount of work against the special significance of so many places. Each iteration drives out the spirit that people recognize in a place, with the Christian priest driving out *tapu* as much as the developer drives out the significance of the pastoral landscape, the monoculture unraveling the story of generational inheritance.

The flat world created over the past several hundred years is rooted in the specific agenda of neutralizing the inherent importance that people discover in natural environments. In so doing, it also neutralizes the people that are part of a place's archive, the people that cannot conceive of themselves outside of an intimate relationship to a place. In this sense, the world of global capital is inimical to the possibility of humans living in a rich and significant natural environment. Under the conditions of global capital, we can only hope for classic nature conservation, predicated on the artificial exclusion of people from a world otherwise teeming with networks of significance.

The ways in which people have inhabited places, all over the world, is infinitely varied yet retains a commonality with the deep relationship between human groups and natural environments. Park describes the Mōkau River in 1852, on the cusp of its most momentous transformation, as

an ecological mosaic. Supporting cultivations and community forests, both rich in useful species, it contrasted dramatically with the European idea of conservation which was to set aside large wilderness free of human interference, or keep remnant patches in a monocultural expanse of crops and plantations. Little of the Mōkau was left unexploited. Its people didn't act with any particular ecological nobility: they did whatever they had to do to feed themselves and their families. [...] And as the river landscape filled with history, it filled with emotion.

The emotion that past habitation has left behind is still legible in the landscape, inasmuch as the markers of legibility are left standing; some of those markers are people themselves, some the paper archives that document a passing. What remains true is that you cannot have healthy people is a sick land.<sup>1</sup>

Tāne Mahuta has witnessed, and recorded within his fibrous flesh, the events of natural history that make up a landscape. Today, he and his peers are fighting *kauri* dieback disease, a deadly pathogen spread through soil and spread by the hiking boots of well-meaning travelers. To protect him and the forest from the disease, wooden trails have been built that literally separate human feet from the forest floor. Once again, social distancing *avant la lettre*. The planks used in their construction

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1 This idea was developed by Janos Chialá during a lecture series on *Xylella* at the University of California, Berkeley, in October 2021.

likely come from some logging plantation that long ago replaced rich forest. One can no longer touch the *kauri* or walk up to them. The landscape is adding another layer to its archive, one telling the story of a globalized species carrying around disease, as it has done for thousands of years, and continuing to separate itself from the landscape, as it has done for hundreds of years. Reading the landscape, in Tāne's shadow, filled me with sadness at the tremendous loss of history, and gratitude for the resilience of life. A young representative of Te Roroa is learning, from his elders and in their language, Tāne Mahuta's twelve names. Generations from now, he might have received a thirteenth name, or he might have been lost forever, as the majority of his peers before him.

Similarly, *Xylella* did not only arrive, but it has also been created before it even arrived, its arrival meticulously prepared. The social distancing for trees that is still the official response in order to save what is left similarly interrupts relationships older than memory; one can no longer touch an uprooted, burned tree. And yet, in pockets that are easy to miss, people are fighting to keep their heritage alive, by lovingly tending to sick trees that may yet endure the bacterial assault. In the face of tragedy—the likely repeated dying of a tree that is being repeatedly kept alive—some people persist. The possibility of tragedy does not condemn them to apathy, it condemns them to perpetual action. It denies rest. But the stubbornness to go on in the face of almost inevitable loss itself puts in motion new communities of practice that can rise up from the destruction of the old. Once the carefully tended olive tree dies, that loving knowledge of the surrounding environment can migrate to other creatures, other relationships, other means of recomposition.

The movements of history take as much as they give, and in this fragile hour we must do more than possible to give back a portion of the enormous amount we have already taken. One place to start is in learning to read landscapes, re-sacralizing and insisting on adding to their archive, leaving the signs of legibility for the readers of tomorrow to be transformed, humbled, re-situated, by the story of this place. The genealogical links that always tie people to places are hurting, and this pain is now felt through the forces that tear these links apart. But the brute fact of human life is made by its genealogical imbrication with the environing world, the fact that humans themselves are places, and can never be extinguished. It is there that the commitment to restoration will always reside.