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Work in progress

Hinemoana Baker

Panel: Works in Progress

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In the first instance, I greet the traditional owners of this land. In the second, I greet the dead, I farewell them, then I turn and greet us, the living. Tēnā tātou – this we are.

Excerpt from 'Gondwanavista: An Outback Soundwalk'
(Arts Queensland/Queensland Writers Centre, 2009)
Listen here: http://www.hinemoana.co.nz/audiovideo.html

That clip from is from a recording called 'Gondwanavista: An Outback Soundwalk', begun during a residency I held in Australia in 2009.

My name is Hinemoana Baker, I'm from Aotearoa New Zealand – which I've seen described in a headline as 'The Land That Vowels Forgot' – so I'll speak slowly. My tribes are Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Te Āti Awa, Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Ingarangi – English – and Ngāti Tiamani – Bavarian. The way this played out in my childhood was as a sometimes bewildering mix of rugby, yodelling and trips to the marae, the traditional communal Māori living and meeting space. And a seemingly endless supply of cousins.

The way that it has manifested in my work in the past is as content, as subject, as infuriation, as navel-gazement, as propulsion and passion and politics. The way it manifests in my work currently is through the creation of a character called 'Nothing Nothing', who featured in the clip I just played you, and about whom I'll speak more in a moment.

For me, the phrase 'Work in Progress' is basically a polite way of saying that considering this work fills me with even more agonising self-doubt than would be the case with the stuff I've actually published or released. 'Work in Progress' pretty much describes everything I've made, as far as I'm concerned, even the stuff that might read or sound like a bought one. 'Work in Progress' makes me want to apologise for everything that's about to come. It's my ego – this is my first presentation as part of the International Writing Programme, so I would rather be rolling out My Hit Singles than my Hits and Misses. Nevertheless.

I am a writer, and a musician – and recently my musical bent has led me towards a wider appreciation of sound in general, of sonic art, of so-called 'noise', and some explorations of how to include text with
that. I have no formal training in these areas. As a musician I have produced several albums myself, and I have experience working as a radio features producer. I remember being maybe seven years old, listening to my father's cassettes of Louis Armstrong, and being absolutely enchanted by how Louis' voice, his trumpet, his very storytelling, changed for me so palpably when I cranked up the bass knob or the treble or – magic beyond all previous magics – both at once.

The real story began, though, when my partner commenced her postgraduate study in Sonic Arts at Victoria University in Wellington, and I vicariously met folks like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. I was especially taken with the work of Hildegard Westerkamp and her 'Soundwalks'. Westerkamp speaks about soundwalks as 'any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are.'\(^1\) Westerkamp reinforced what had already become, through my radio work, an abiding love of field recordings.

So for a while now I have been experimenting with different ways of combining text with itself, with voice, with field recordings and other more self-consciously arranged sounds like music.

This next track is from a CD called 'I Can See Fiji'. The text was written and is read by another poet, Teresia Teaiwa and then conflated, cut up, collaged and otherwise mutilated (with her full permission and encouragement, bless her) by me.

Ohiro Road from 'I Can See Fiji' (Fiery Canoe Productions, Wellington, 2008)
Listen here: http://tinyurl.com/3adsbog

'I Can See Fiji' was produced in 2008. This year and last year I find myself, as a woman of mixed Māori and non-Māori heritage, for whom issues of sovereignty and indigeneity are paramount personally, spiritually and politically, living for some months during writing residencies in countries where those stories are actively silenced, historically and today, arguably, far more than they are in New Zealand. The sense, both here and in Australia, of histories and atrocities denied, untold or at best poorly told has been at times physically choking for me. It seemed impossible to respond to what I was experiencing and seeing – and not experiencing and not seeing – in Australia with the poetic voice I had created up to that point. A new one was necessary. The character 'Nothing Nothing' – Kore Rawa as she is called in Māori – came along when I was asking for how to express these feelings and journeys in a way which was not rhetorical or didactic, while somehow allowing for the play of imagination and

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\(^1\) Sound Heritage, Volume III Number 4 ,Victoria B.C., 1974, revised 2001
the sound of language. I have found she helps me say what I feel needs to be said.

I am writing some Kore Rawa poetry here in Iowa, but in the spirit of experimentation I thought I'd play you some more sound sketches that I've been working on since I arrived. I'm very interested in the way we may or may not privilege meaning over sound when we read and write, and in the tension between those things. We want words to *mean* things – poetry that plays with language is sometimes seen as obscure or pretentious (at least in New Zealand). Since I got here, instead of recording myself reading my poems, I've started using recordings of found text, and selecting and arranging them as music, where the sound is as important as the meaning, if not more so. So, in this first sketch, for example, I'm still trying to use some of the principles of composition – there's a slow build-up of instruments, there's tune, there's tension and release, there's even a solo in there – but all of this is done with found voice audio. I've called this sketch 'Destination'.

Sketch: 'Destination' – 1:30
Listen here: www.hinemoana.co.nz/news.html

This next sketch is from a Skype conversation I had with my partner in New Zealand – and again, here I'm interested in how privileging sound can play with our need for meaning in language.

Play 'Skype Mix' 1:09
Listen here: www.hinemoana.co.nz/news.html

And finally, this sketch, which I've just called 'Carry On'.

'Carry On' 1:15
Listen here: www.hinemoana.co.nz/news.html

Kia ora koutou katoa.