



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

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Editorial: Navigating activism and academia

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Amanda Thomas

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN academics and activists has often been uneasy. Academics occupy a privileged position, historically characterised by secure tenure and healthy salaries. Anecdotes abound of academics spending the first two hours of their 9-to-5 with their feet on the desk, reading the newspaper. This image conjures up the out of touch lefty academic whose research on activist communities leads to little else but inaccessible publications and personal promotions. And as Noam Chomsky argues, this figure is also surprisingly submissive to the waves of neoliberal reform that reshape the university and how people access education.¹ In Aotearoa New Zealand this

1 Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of the Intellectual," *The New York Review of Books*, accessed August 16, 2017, <https://chomsky.info/19670223/>

submissiveness is not uncommon, particularly when it comes to the metrics academics are measured through. Academics have internalised the need for ‘quality assured’ outputs, and fret over student evaluations of their teaching. Compounded with the disciplining effects of student debt—as students seek to get their money’s worth, and enter paid work to cover unreasonable rents in crumbling flats—the politicised university campus seems quite mythical. It is little wonder that activists are often cynical of the motivations and roles of academics.

And yet, there are people who navigate the messy spaces where academia and activism come together; there is no simple separation of the two.

At the opening of the Social Movements, Resistance, and Social Change Conference in 2016, Teanau Tuiono was due to give the opening address but came down sick. With about 24 hours notice, the most incredible panel was assembled in his place: Tere Harrison, Leonie Pihama, and Moana Jackson, each of whom trouble any academic activist binary. This was no accident—the conference theme was the ‘academic and activist interface’. Pihama challenged the ongoing colonialism of universities in her address, and in particular a deal Victoria University had cut with the government to buy the Karori campus for \$10. This is not the kind of deal routinely offered to iwi and whānau trying to get back stolen land. As Pihama was speaking, a group got up from the audience, walked to the front, sat down, and wrapped themselves in blankets.

One of these people was Teresia Teaiwa. Teaiwa’s contributions to the world were vast. An i-Kiribati and African American woman, born in Hawai’i, Teaiwa was a poet, a teacher in the world’s first undergraduate major in Pacific Studies, and a campaigner for a free West Papua who constantly pushed and pulled an often stale institution to do better. She rejected the colonial frameworks and ideologies reproduced in university

and transformed people's worlds in the process, demonstrating a tenacity that has been ground out of others. She was strongly committed to her students, known to ring them if they didn't turn up to lectures. Teresia passed away five months later. Her work across activism and academia will be recounted in 'epic proportions'.² As Leonie Pihama concluded her talk, Teaiwa and the others presented the conference organisers (Amanda Thomas, Dylan Taylor, Murdoch Stevens, Leon Salter, Deborah Jones, and Jonathan Oosterman) with the blankets, a \$10 note, and a challenge to transform and decolonise our universities.

* * *

Building good relationships is perhaps the key to dispelling frustrations between academic and activist communities. The conference provided a space for new relationships to form and existing ones to consolidate. Creating this space—the third conference of its kind—was a way to deploy the privilege of academia to good effect. Those of us on the organising committee with academic positions were able to organise the conference within the scope of our job descriptions. Resources from our institutions could be used to facilitate the face to face meeting of around 400 people. We know of a number of new collaborations that arose out of this.

Indeed the problems we encountered in organising the conference came about because our own relationships with people outside our institutions and disciplines might have been stronger; we were not embedded in some of the conversations going on within some activist and community groups. And so, we made

2 Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands . . . A Beginning," in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, eds. Epeli Hau'ofa, Vijay Naidu and Eric Waddell (Suva: University, 1993), 4–19 & 126–139.

two significant mistakes in organising the conference. The first was beginning from a platform that privileged all voices equally, a common left wing norm. However, in reflection, this was not an adequate position to take. Our colonial backdrop and the Treaty relationship that we were trying (and failing) to honour require better. We were pulled up on this by a respected Māori thinker and activist. This humbling interaction was transformative for the conference itself, and for our own thinking and action. As a result of this lesson, the programme was changed and space was created for what became, for many, the most important, radicalising moments of the conference—Pihama’s opening address, and Moana Jackson and Annette Sykes’ calls to action on the morning of the final day.

The second mistake was to not do sufficient homework about the small selection of invited panellists. The invitation to one panellist provoked some backlash. Again, this was a learning curve for us; again, we were humbled and grateful to those who took the time to teach us. This issue was shot through with the politics of women’s work, the place of sex workers, of ethnicity, and the racism of who is most often subjected to call-out-culture, and more generally how we disagree with each other but *stay together*. This experience, among others, was a lesson on the complexity of political organisation on the Left.

Despite such challenges, the experience of organising this conference was immensely rewarding. Through donations from salaried conference attendees and through grants from Victoria University (and other institutional donations) we could not only keep attendance free, but were able to offer transport assistance for unsalaried and student presenters who wanted to come to Wellington from elsewhere. The conference benefited from this influx of younger activists and students who would otherwise not have been able to attend. It also meant that on a few chilly nights in spring, Wellington’s inner city truly had the

feeling of being the epicentre of Aotearoa New Zealand’s activist and engaged academic communities.

This issue of *Counterfutures* aims to capture and continue the conversations had at the Social Movements 2016 conference. It is important—we think—because many of us continue to grapple with how to successfully navigate activism and academia.

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An interview with Moana Jackson opens this issue. Jackson describes some of the people that have shaped his thinking, and some of the connections made across Indigenous communities and the black power movement throughout his career. In his incredibly humble way, he also discusses his work with Matike Mai and his dream for post-2040 Aotearoa New Zealand. Jackson’s previous and current work presents a master class for those looking to navigate the academic activist interface.

Marcelle Dawson draws on the work of sociologist Boaventura De Sousa Santos to analyse the fallist movement in South Africa. Through descriptions of Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall, student-led struggles that have confronted the colonial and neoliberal nature of universities, she examines the transformative potential of this kind of university based activism and suggests resonances for Aotearoa New Zealand.

In drawing on Santo’s work Dawson underlines the importance of not considering knowledge as a singular body; instead, we should think of a plurality of ‘knowledges’. In a complimentary fashion, Shannon Walsh grounds his discussion of the academic and activist divide on the assertion that we all, irrespective of background or profession, share an equal capacity for thought. Walsh draws on the work of Jacques Rancière, an increasingly influential thinker on the Left. To think from the position of the Left involves asking how one can change the

world. Necessary, then, is a thinking of what the world (existence) is. Rancière's work provides one such ontological grounding. A brief digression outlining Rancière's ontology is offered here for readers not familiar with his thought.

A key premise of Rancière's thought is that being is multiplicity; there is no underlying unity or totality to society. When considering social relations, any experience of consistency (for instance, 'of being a New Zealander') is an outcome of power relations. Power relations are unable to effectively order, or 'count', all elements in existence. As such, each ordering of the social always produces an 'inexistent', those who are not counted as belonging. Workers in the 19th century provide an historical example of this: while their labour underpinned bourgeois society they were not counted as members of this society (economically and politically). The persistence of the inexistent provides the basis for a radical politics, as encapsulated long ago in the Internationale's call 'we are nothing, let us be all'.

A politics capable of disrupting the status quo comes from, or aligns itself with, the inexistent, and it recognises an equality of intelligences across all people. It is important, then, argues Walsh, to be done with the notion of an academic-activist divide. Academics and activists have, historically, developed institutions and engaged in action together—this, argues Walsh, is proof of their equality.

In their piece, 'Social-model mothers', Gretchen Good and her colleagues use auto-ethnography to describe the significant and varied labour that is required of mothers of disabled children. Their actions and thoughts provide a vibrant example that further disrupts the notion of a fixed activist academic divide—although, as they show, traversing these two spaces can be fraught. Through analysing a series of vignettes, they argue that disability literature has not adequately engaged with the way this group of mothers work as advocates and activists, and

the tricky positions they are sometimes forced into. What is particularly striking about this article is the generosity and honesty of the authors in giving us insight into their families' lives and the 'uncounted' labour they do.

The question of work is also taken up in Campbell Jones's piece. Historically, work has provided a focal point for left political struggle. But since the 1980s, the Left concept of work has ceded ground to that of the Right; the historical differences between Left and Right in what is valued in work and what counts as work have collapsed. With this collapse, Jones argues, the political potential of work has been hollowed out. Rejuvenating a Left politics of work requires a revaluation of what counts as work and what we value in work. Also drawing on Rancière, Jones highlights the political potential in recounting the labour that is uncounted and miscounted—that which is not, under the reigning common-sense, recognised as work, but that is vital to the reproduction of the capitalist system. By reasserting what is unique to the Left conception of work, a powerful politics of work can emerge. Aiming to move beyond critique, then, Jones offers five axioms for a contemporary politics of work from the Left.

This issue also includes two interventions. The first is by Gradon Diprose, Kelly Dombroski, Stephen Healy, and Joanne Waitoa, who build on their presentation from the Social Movements Conference. As well as providing a brief description of community economies scholarship, and the challenges J-K Gibson-Graham made to how we think about the economy, the authors reflect on questions raised by conference participants, particularly those that asked about the relevance of community economies to this (post)colonial place.

Our second intervention, authored by Murdoch Stephens, offers the phenomenon of the 'punisher'—someone who monopolises a conversational setting to such an extent that others feel 'punished' by them—as an analogy for colonialism. Like the

punisher, an omnipresent Pākehā culture works to marginalise Māori culture and worth, dominating the national conversation.

A sensitivity to the voices of others, of drawing them into conversation rather than talking over them, is present in the four artworks by Siân Torrington reproduced in this issue. These images are from a project called ‘We Don’t Have to Be the Building’ that focussed on lesbian, queer, trans*, takataapui, and female identified activists. In producing them, Siân adopted inclusive, participatory practices that challenged artist/model, researcher/researched power relations and worked with people to tell their stories.

Three book reviews bring this special edition of *Counterfutures* to a close. Leon Salter conducts the first of these reviews in the form of an interview with Deidre Kent about her recent book *The Big Shift*. Kent argues for a radical reconceptualization of the economy—one that involves simultaneously rethinking our government. David Parker reviews another recent publication that also offers a vision for the rethinking of this country’s political system, Max Harris’ *New Zealand Project*. The strongest feature of this work, Parker argues, is its emphasis on the importance of decolonisation. As would be clear to readers of the third issue of *Counterfutures*, decolonisation entails a profound challenge to the criminal (in)justice system. Denise Blake’s review of Elizabeth Stanley’s *The Road to Hell* further underscores this point. Stanley’s work examines another form of incarceration in New Zealand: the institutional abuse of children in state care from the 1950s through to the 1980s, of whom a disproportionate number were Māori.

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Across these pieces points of productive tension and disagreement present themselves, as do complementary moments. Per-

haps the most productive tension is the notion of the academic activist divide itself. In bringing together the work of activists and academics in these pages, the voices found within the conference and, by extension, Aotearoa New Zealand's Left are represented.

On the following four pages are a selection of the tweets posted on Twitter during the conference. We have included them here, with the permission of their authors, with the intent of capturing some of the real time feeling of the discussions that grew from the conference. These are just a small selection of the hundreds of tweets that were linked through the #counterfutures hashtag.



Kerry Tankard
@anarkaytie

Following

Te Atiawa will pay \$23mill to regain their lands, sold for 'blankets and beads'
#Counterfutures



Kerry Tankard
@anarkaytie

Following

Announcing the Abolitionist Demands
@memer4life @cannibility
@noprisonpride
#counterfutures





crime goblin,
@pastelprole

Following

One of my role models Mani Mitchell speaking about being #intersex at #counterfutures



RacialEquityAotearoa
@RacialEquityAo

Following

Asians Supporting Tino Rangatiranga
#Counterfutures

Translate from Indonesian





RacialEquityAotearoa
@RacialEquityAo

Following



"Treaties are not meant to be settled they are meant to be honoured" Moana Jackson
#Counterfutures #TinoRangatiratanga



Katie Bruce
@KatieRoseBruce

Following



Gov spends more on prisons each year than total spent on treaty settlements. Prison- the only housing the gov investing in
#counterfutures



takatāpui pal huri™
@maorimarxist

Following



When our existence as Māori people is seen as inherently violent, how are we meant to participate in nonviolence #counterfutures



Following

ESRA has launched! Thanks to the over 200 people who came along last night, stay tuned for video esra.nz/esra-has-launc...
#counterfutures



"The first real leftwing think tank in New Zealand" | Economic and Social Res...
On Friday 2 September ESRA launched to a crowd of over 200 people at the Social Movements, Resistance and Social Change conference in Wellington. more
esra.nz



Following

Kassie Hartendorp at ESRA's launch, on neoliberalism as a colonising project
[esra.nz/neoliberalism- ...](https://esra.nz/neoliberalism-...) #counterfutures



Neoliberalism as a Colonising Project | Economic and Social Research Aotear...
"If indigenous people were given a space to be able to think about what system would work for them, I don't think that would look like capitalism" – Kassie
esra.nz

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