

BOTANICAL PRECESSION

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In an attempt to escape the effects of blooming Chinese *Ligustrum lucidum*, I'm soon to depart from my home in New Lynn, 36.9090° S / 174.6775° E. We will head north toward Opuā, 35.3166° S / 174.1170° E, with the intention to immediately turn around, and via coastal waters make our way back to our place of departure. Propelled by wind and ocean currents on the sailing vessel formerly named 'Migration', we can only hope for rangi takō (clear sky). Heading south, we pass the potentially hazardous islands, headlands, and the rocky outcrops of Motukokako, Taranga, Marotiri, Te Hauturu-o-Toi, Kawau. If, as night falls, a thick impenetrable fog were to roll in and visibility were lost, when could we expect reassurance from the light of a rotating beacon or the sound of a foghorn, exclaiming the presence of potential danger, aiding our safe return?

In 1851, with the objective to demonstrate and prove the rotation of the earth, Jean-Bernard-Leon Foucault set his pendulum in motion by suspending a 67 metre, 28 kilogram bob from the dome of the

Pantheon in Paris. The plane of the pendulum's motion, with respect to the earth, rotated slowly clockwise, recording a precession period of approximately thirty-two hours. An illusion occurs for an earth-bound spectator: the pendulum's bob seems to be rotating, but it is in fact the earth.¹ Belbo, in Umberto Eco's novel, 'Foucault's Pendulum', reflects:

... I sat at the desk across from his sorting through old engravings of the World Fair.... "I wonder where all this is heading," he remarked one day. "Do you mean the twilight of Western civilisation?"

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The intent of navigation is to traverse space in time. The result is a safe arrival or return, whether it takes twenty-three hours, fifty-six minutes, four seconds, or a year of three hundred and sixty-five days, six hours, nine minutes, and ten seconds. This said, navigation can be part of a larger plan: a plan to define and control the very mechanisms of the world, to transcend our biological, psychological, terrestrial, and galactic limitations.

In a thick fog a horn evokes a warning, a relic of militaristic provenance. It is always difficult to orient oneself while visibility is

naught. Our other senses stand to attention. How deep do we go to listen for the sounds of warnings? To clear our minds of illusion? Reaching for a grip as I step across the shifting planks that form the deck, a contrived structure, floating, I seek the familiar sound of rustling leaves draped over a solid earth, the shelter of a canopy. Instead, I'm left with an indescribable sea sickness, only a few hours offshore. To gain clarity I find a line of sight and sound by using the rotating lens of the Cape Brett lighthouse³, then further south, Tiritiri Matangi's diaphone foghorn.⁴

A clearing in the sky.

At sunset we enter Kawau's northern channel. Making good time on our way to the Bon Accord Inlet, the rip of the evening's outgoing tide takes two knots off our headway. Looking forward, as we pass Vivian Bay, an emblem of domination appears. Is it the vessel or Mansion House, 36.4305° S / 174.8187° E, surrounded by plants from the world over, that is teetering, bobbing back and forth on the turbulence of this southern ocean?⁵ Much of the surrounding garden was planted by Sir George Grey with the help of a global network of transoceanic plant hunters and

wardian cases.⁶ He described this network in a letter to Sir Joseph Hooker, Director of Kew Gardens, in 1881:

*"You have only to touch a spring here, and a vast machine will go into action to effect your wishes."*⁷

My intentions are realised, via manipulation of and engagement with the vitality of sails and a hull's mechanisms. I arrive safely into the Waitemata Harbour. I'm spun around and out of the cycle of tides and of weather, back to a solid world that is anything but. As I write these words in the first days of 2024, I bear witness to similar colonial ignorance as 1881 at the press of a button. At present, the effects of machines continue to be felt. It is here that I stand, still sick to my stomach.

Overlooking Myers Park from above, I walk along the embankment of meticulously placed volcanic stone, another remnant of Grey's presence in this city, drawn toward The Audio Foundation, 36.8567° S / 174.7597° E.⁸ With the sway of the sea still in my body, tidal vortices propel my movement down the stairs of 4 Poynton Terrace, Tāmaki Makaurau, and into the performance and exhibition spaces to witness an attempt to map

place, botanic histories, and their respective ecologies.

It is here in proximity to the safety of a distant lighthouse that Miranda Bellamy and Amanda Fauteux's exhibition, *Signal, Echo*, embarks. The collaborative duo present a structure for seeing a future by looking back. Unravelling histories at a rhythmic pace, hand picked and selected fragmented plant material are unpacked. Corresponding multi-channel video and speculative soundscapes articulate latitudes and longitudes.

I find a bench to sit, listen, and look. Disappointment sets in, not for what was first perceived as a cushion clad bench made from reclaimed kauri and rimu, instead the realisation that there is no reprieve from experiencing the touch of a human hand. Bellamy and Fauteux's manipulation of material makes evident what used to be, what grew, and what could have grown in this place where I'm now sitting, moaning there is no escape from facing the consequences of past actions.

In the dark, I'm left to float, like the ocean currents. Within Bellamy and Fauteux's exhibition making, presentation of a fallen

canopy provides a glimpse into past desires, desires that sought to gain control of a world that is indomitable. Exotic places are imagined through notation of a plant's presence. Seed pods are placed as evidence against black backgrounds. How far do we distance ourselves? There is a desire to pull the canopy over my head, as the swell and waves roll by.

There are glimpses of futures as we exist in the darkness obscured by a fog. Acoustics resonate, their spatial phenomena are not exceptional but universal. We listen, surrounded by the hum of a distant call, a Peruvian *Nicandra physalodes* or *Furcraea foetida* from the Caribbean / Northern South America, broken, shattered and scattered across the globe, branches and seed pods left to chance. We are not simply an unmoving central point but are intertwined in a fluctuating web where repercussions refract, reflect, and are absorbed. What intentions are behind my own desire to touch a spring? I listen for a signal, then enter the echo.

¹ This movement is known as the Earth's precession, made visible beneath the pendulum and its fixed geometric point. If the experiment were to be placed on a southern latitude, the pendulum would rotate anticlockwise. At a point along the equator the bob would not rotate at all, and at either pole the bob would rotate as we would expect, proving the rotation of the earth over a course of 23.93 hours, described as a sidereal day. The equation to determine the precession period for a latitudinal point by an ideal pendulum and support system is 23.93 hours divided by the sine of the latitude. For example: Opua has a precession period of approximately 41 hours, while Tāmaki Makaurau is approximately 40, meaning it will take that amount of time for a latitudinal point to face the same galactic direction.

Joe Wolfe, "Foucault Pendulum," accessed January 5, 2024, https://www.animations.physics.unsw.edu.au/jw/foucault_pendulum.html.

² Umberto Eco and William Weaver, *Foucault's Pendulum*, 1. trade ed (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

³ Cape Brett Lighthouse (35.1753° S / 174.3326° E) was erected in 1909, and first lit on 21st February 1910. In October 1978 the lighthouse was deactivated and keepers were withdrawn, replaced by an automated beacon on the same site.

Christen McAlpine, "Cape Brett Lighthouse – Hut Book," n.d., accessed January 5, 2024.

⁴ Tiritiri Matangi Lighthouse (36.6055° S / 174.8974° E) was erected in 1864, and first officially lit on 1 January 1865. A slaughters gun cotton foghorn and store was introduced in 1898, replaced by a diesel powered diaphone foghorn in 1935.

Andy Dodd, "Tiritiri Matangi Archaeological and Historic Landscape: Heritage Assessment," n.d., accessed January 5, 2024.

⁵ Mansion House (36.4305° S / 174.8187° E) was built in 1845 for the manager of a short-lived copper mine. Sir George Grey bought Kawau Island in 1962 and owned the land until 1888. In 1967 the Mansion House and surrounding property was bought by the New Zealand Government. In 1977 the property was opened to the public. In 1983 the house was registered as a historic place and is now part of the Kawau Island Historic Reserve.

Robert Brassey, *Mansion House Gardens, Kawau Island: A Conservation Plan and Resource Document*, 2nd ed. (Auckland [N.Z.]: Dept. of Conservation, Auckland Conservancy, 1999).

⁶ A type of early terrarium invented by Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward.

"How a Glass Terrarium Changed the World - The Atlantic," accessed January 14, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/11/how-a-glass-terrarium-changed-the-world/545621/>.

⁷ "Papers Past | Parliamentary Papers | Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives | 1881 Session | | COLONIAL INDUSTRIES AND TARIFF COMMITTEE (FINAL...," accessed January 14, 2024, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/parliamentary/AJHR1881-I.2.2.5.20>.

⁸ Sir George Grey had lived in and used the historic St Keven's House, now demolished, as Government House for a short time in the late 1840s. "When [the house] was demolished in the 1920s a low wall was created along the new Poynton Terrace with squared off basalt stones - this was very probably the remains of the 1845 house."

"A Centennial History of Myers Park by K Road Business Association - Issuu," accessed January 14, 2024, https://issuu.com/kroadnz/docs/myers_park_book.