The Cadastral Map as Imperial Ruin: *All She Surveys*

Neil Lowe

Department of Industrial Design in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.

neil.lowe@me.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1476-5776)

ABSTRACT

While living and studying in New Zealand, I encountered a derelict Victorian fountain at Wairongoa Springs on the Taieri Plain near Dunedin. Initially struck by the romance of the scene, I soon found this colonial relic quite unsettling. I explored the intersecting object histories of this fountain through the metaphors of ruin, ruination and the gaze in a Master of Fine Arts degree obtained from the Dunedin School of Art (Otago Polytechnic) in 2023. Now, back in South Africa, I reflect on *All She Surveys*, an installation work from *Mother's Ruin*, the exhibition component of my MFA. I reflect on my own work and process and the similarities between South Africa and New Zealand using the cross-cutting themes of colonisation, expropriation and exploitation of natural resources through cadastral grids of property delineation. I invite readers to think alongside Ann Laura Stoler as she introduces the concept of enduring imperial debris and considers the notion of ruin, both as noun and verb, as a legacy of colonisation and empire. I interpret these legacies as imperial debris and explore their role within Slavoj Žižek's framework of objective violence. My work aims to offer a new, oblique vantage point on this matrix of violence – these ruins that continue to ruin us.

Keywords: Imperial debris, installation art, New Zealand, objective violence, postcolonial, ruins, South Africa.

Dates:
Received: 2024-10-10
Accepted: 2025-04-24
Published: 2025-06-23

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2025/n39a4

Introduction

In *Situated knowledges*, Donna Haraway (1988) contends that all knowledge is situated and must, therefore, be considered according to the point of view and point in time from which it was produced. She also argues that the 'only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular' (Haraway 1988:590). Indeed, the contested multicultural, (post) colonial[1] space and time we find ourselves living in is filled with dissonant voices and competing versions of history. Haraway's notion of situated knowledges is a way to make sense of these plural views without fracturing into total relativism.

As an artist and author, I, too, have a point of view, a perspective and a history that I carry. They inform my attitudes towards everything that I encounter, and through which I refract the world I encounter. I am a white, primarily cis, queer male born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and raised in apartheid South Africa, later moving to Aotearoa New Zealand and returning to Johannesburg. This migratory path informs my artistic exploration of postcolonial power dynamics.

In 2019, a sound work of mine – *Inaudible Ambiences: Suburban Johannesburg* – was included in *Audiosphere*, a large group show of sound art at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, Spain. In this work, in which I explored the *genius loci* of Johannesburg, I transformed the electromagnetic fields generated by security and surveillance equipment in a suburban home into audible signals and pulses, evocative of Johannesburg's pervasive undercurrent of violence.

In 2021, we moved to a house on the South Island of New Zealand on Wairongoa Road, North Taieri, just beyond Dunedin's suburban fringe. Having read about the Wairongoa Springs, I visited the site of the former water bottling plant, which is within walking distance of the house. There I discovered a derelict fountain, hidden away in dense, overgrown bush, lonely and almost forgotten. Something about the site, the ruins, the romanticism of the environment, and the failed visions of empire that it seemed to conjure, piqued my interest. The more I learned about the fountain and its history, the more I wanted to know. At last, I had found an object, with its layered history, on which to build new content and context. I had found the missing avatar for the *genius loci* of the place and the focus of my Master of Fine Arts project for which I had just enrolled.

The main outcomes of the MFA were a written component (thesis) and an exhibition, both titled *Mother's Ruin: Refracting the Imperial Gaze*.[2] The exhibition consisted of three installation works in conversation with each other in one space. In this text I discuss a particular exploration of the enduring effects of colonial legacies through the artwork *All She Surveys* – the work that was displayed in the centre of the room.[3]

An Encounter

Object histories are a way of unearthing situated stories through artefacts of material culture. However, what if we explore the many stories and histories that intersect when considering one colonial object like the fountain?

In *The lives of colonial objects*, edited by Annabel Cooper, Lachy Paterson and Angela Wanhalla (2015), the contributors discuss a range of objects, some at first glance quite pedestrian, to illustrate aspects of New Zealand's colonial past. The book highlights the fact that objects do not have to be in a museum to be able to tell their stories. As the editors note in their introduction: 'Object stories bring attention to underexamined social and cultural practices, as well as a focus on the less familiar elements of emotion, feeling and experience in otherwise well-traversed dimensions of our history' (Cooper *et al* 2015:19).

Gerry Altmann and Zachary Evkes (2019) propose a new way of understanding events and how we encode them in memory. They maintain 'that events are encoded as "ensembles of intersecting object histories" in which one or more objects change state' (Altmann & Evkes 2019:817). This view of events as ensembles of intersecting object histories enables me to investigate the various histories of one object and how events or processes, or even materials, link it to the histories of other objects.

Descending into an overgrown gully near our home, I encountered the unexpected: a Victorian fountain, silent and still amid the chaos. Its ornate, weathered form stood dark against the vibrant foliage, dappled in filtered light. Tiered basins bore intricate botanical motifs – metal leaves and ferns mirroring the living forest. The lowest basin cradled three swans, their necks arched over stagnant water littered with rotting leaves. Above them, heron sculptures flanked a central column adorned with floral designs, its spire straining toward the canopy. The air smelled of damp earth and decay, pierced by distant birdsong.

The more I thought about the fountain as a colonial relic and the history of the place, the more my nagging discomfort and questions about the perceived romanticism of the scene grew.

Wherein lies the charm of ruins? Why does the romanticism of colonialism and its relics persist? These questions made me wonder about the unseen forces at work supporting the clearly abhorrent notions of colonialism that continue to haunt us. What machine, engine, or relic – hidden in plain sight – is animating, zombie-like, what should be the forgotten remains of colonialism? How can my work unmask and undermine this zombie, the undead enduring impact of colonial structures, shedding light on these issues, challenging my perceptions and, perhaps, changing those of others?

FIGURE **Nº 1**

The fountain at Wairongoa Springs, 2021. North Taieri, New Zealand. Photograph by Neil Lowe. Courtesy of Neil Lowe.

Theoretical Framework

To examine the undead, enduring impact of colonial structures, I draw upon key theoretical frameworks by two authors: Slavoj Žižek's (2009) concept of objective violence taken from *Violence* and Ann Laura Stoler's (2016) notion of imperial debris from *Duress*. These perspectives offer crucial insights into the often invisible yet pervasive effects of historical power structures on contemporary society.

Žižek's (2009) framework distinguishes between subjective violence – visible acts performed by identifiable agents – and objective violence, which operates as an invisible, normalised

force. Objective violence comprises two interrelated components: symbolic violence, inherent in language and meaning-making; and systemic violence, embedded within political and economic structures (Žižek 2009).

Symbolic violence manifests in the very fabric of language. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's (1962) concept of 'essencing', Žižek (2009:67-8) argues that language actively shapes our understanding of reality. This process simplifies complex entities, dismantling their organic unity and imposing external meanings. For instance, when we label something as "gold", we forcefully extract it from its natural context, imbuing it with human desires and aspirations entirely unrelated to its inherent properties.

Systemic violence, on the other hand, refers to the less visible forms of coercion that uphold structures of domination and exploitation. Žižek (2009:179) posits that the entire history of humanity could be viewed as a 'growing normalisation of injustice', resulting in the 'nameless and faceless suffering of millions'. This form of violence is particularly insidious as it often goes unrecognised, serving as the backdrop against which more overt forms of violence are perceived.

Complementing Žižek's framework, Stoler's (2016) concept of enduring imperial debris provides a lens through which to examine the persistent effects of colonial histories. Stoler (2016:3) argues that many of the urgent issues of the day are rooted in colonial pasts, shaped by the 'distribution of demands, priorities, containments, and coercions of imperial formations'. She emphasises the active nature of these historical remnants, viewing 'ruin' not only as a noun, but also as a verb – an ongoing process of ruination (Stoler 2016).

Ruins, in this context, embody a paradoxical relationship with time and history. As Brian Dillon (2011:11) notes, they serve as both remnants of the past and gateways into it, while simultaneously projecting us into the future. Stoler (2016) extends this concept, arguing that imperial debris continues to shape contemporary realities, perpetuating forms of decay and societal deterioration.

The intersection of Žižek's objective violence and Stoler's imperial debris is particularly evident in phenomena such as institutionalised racism. This enduring remnant of colonial systems operates as a form of systemic violence, perpetuating inequalities and discriminatory practices within social, economic, legal, and political institutions. Simultaneously, it manifests as symbolic violence through the language and narratives that normalise these disparities.

By viewing imperial debris through the lens of objective violence, we are compelled to engage critically with aspects of the ideological and structural underpinnings of empire.

This framework allows us to recognise the matrix of violence that continues to shape our world, often in ways that elude direct observation. It challenges us to look beyond visible acts of subjective violence and confront the more subtle, pervasive forms of violence embedded in our linguistic, social, and institutional structures – the objective violence that continues to haunt us long after the formal end of colonial rule.

The Cadastral Grid as Imperial Debris

The cadastral grid, as a system of land measurement and division, stands as a potent symbol of colonial power and its lasting impact on landscapes and societies in all imperial and colonial-settler contexts. As Mick Strack (2011) elucidates in the case of New Zealand, as elsewhere, the implementation of cadastral frameworks left indelible marks on the country's landscapes, serving as a physical manifestation of the colonial agenda.

In the context of New Zealand's colonisation, as elsewhere, surveyors played a pivotal role that extended beyond mere land measurement. These individuals, acting as explorers, ventured into new territories, mapping routes and clearing land for their operations. However, their work often disregarded indigenous understandings and uses of the land. Instead, their primary aim was to establish property that could be owned, utilised, and invested in – a concept fundamentally at odds with Māori customary relationships to the land (Strack 2011:102). The Taieri[4] Plain, Strack (2011:105) explains, was considered to be a valuable, communal food-gathering resource by Māori, and contained carefully managed supplies of flax and other useful plants. The settlers, however, viewed the wetland as a swamp that needed to be drained, divided and sold as private property in order to become productive and useful (Strack 2011:104).

Also of note, according to Strack (2011), is that the role of colonial surveyors in New Zealand differed from that of their counterparts in Britain. Whereas in Britain, their main task was to document the existing, negotiated boundaries of ownership, in the colonies, surveyors created a cadastral framework to cater to the burgeoning population of land buyers, promoting land production and an active land market. Their descriptions of the landscape, Strack (2011) notes, often emphasised its picturesque qualities, excluding Māori from the European cultural aesthetic. Additionally, as Strack (2011) argues, surveyors portrayed the land as measurable, productive, and divisible into property, effectively creating a 'blank canvas' upon which Western perceptions of land patterns were imposed, irrespective of indigenous landforms, cover, or customary occupation.

The cadastral grid clearly played a crucial role in advancing the colonial agenda, providing comprehensive information that benefited some while proving detrimental to others.

Instructions to surveyors frequently prioritised creating boundaries and dimensions without consideration of indigenous land use or occupation. Consequently, the cadastral map effectively erased traditional connections to the land, consolidating colonial power and control.

The lower Taieri region, encompassing the Taieri Plain near Dunedin, where the fountain at the heart of my study is situated, serves as a stark example of this process. Strack (2011) contrasts two landscapes within this region that represent divergent values between Māori and Pākehā (European settlers).

Kāi Tahu[5] (also known as *Ngāi Tahu*) are a cultural grouping of the indigenous Māori of New Zealand from the South Island [*Te Waipounamu*]. The Māori assembly or council of the area around Dunedin – *Te Rūnanga o Ōtākou* – are *mana whenua* [those who have historic and territorial rights over the land] of the area in which the Taieri (or, more correctly, Taiari) river lies. The Taieri Plain, transformed by European settlers since the 1850s, now features straight roads, squared farm blocks, and orderly clusters of farm buildings – a direct reflection of the imposed cadastral boundaries. This ordered landscape served the colonial settler and capitalist production ethic, facilitating particular types of land utilisation and an active land market. In contrast, the division of the portion of land reserved for Māori as part of the sale agreement,[6] the Taieri Native Reserve farther downstream, stands in stark opposition to the orderly grid of the plain. Surveyors subdivided the reserve, presenting boundaries that suited only their needs and disregarding Māori patterns of occupation and customary rights. Consequently, the divided land offered no economic benefits or cultural significance for local *Kāi Tahu*.

The impact of the cadastral grid extended beyond mere land division. Strack (2011:114) argues that, 'The straight-line boundaries and the grid pattern of property created by the surveyor are both simple and convenient, but they are not innocent'. These boundaries resulted in the loss of indigenous knowledge, eroded cultural connections, and imposed colonial dominance over the land. The grid pattern prioritised ownership and productivity over traditional land use and cultural significance, effectively serving as a tool for the expropriation and exploitation of natural resources.

The cadastral framework as imperial debris is visible, I argue, not only in the linear hedgerows and fences visible on the Taieri Plain, but also as objective violence in the very structure of contemporary society, where its lasting effects are perhaps less neat and picturesque. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012:5) explain that in settler-colonialism, 'the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence'. Property rights systems, legal frameworks, and resource access mechanisms continue to privilege descendants of original colonial

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Map of the survey districts of Dunedin and East Taieri, East Taieri town, Upper Kaikorai, Lower Kaikorai, Wakari, Ocean Beach, Green Island West and Green Island Bush, 1939. Wellington [N.Z.]: N.Z. Lands and Survey. Source from LINZ. Crown copyright reserved.

landowners, creating and maintaining intergenerational wealth disparities (Tuck & Yang 2012; Veracini 2010). These systems, while appearing neutral, systematically favour those who are predominantly wealthy and white, perpetuating unequal distribution of land, resources, and political power (Harris 1993; Veracini 2010). Such embedded structural advantages operate subtly yet effectively in modern society, reinforcing socioeconomic stratifications that can be traced directly to historical land division practices and their associated legal protections (Tuck & Yang 2012).

In my work, the grid functions as a motif to evoke the cadastral grid and its sociopolitical effects. In *All She Surveys*, this is expressed as a grid of light projected from above, a metaphor I will elaborate on later. First, however, I turn to water – another key motif that embodies a complex interplay of cultural, political, and historical narratives.

Water

In *A vocabulary of water*, Tessa Fluence (2015) discusses the use of water in contemporary art as a subject and medium. Fluence (2015:12) further suggests that there exists 'a diverse and complex vocabulary of water that materialises the conditions of contemporaneity, offering an ontology of the present and a vocabulary for the now'.

Fluence (2015:15) explains that she views water in contemporary art as a material language that reflects and repeats the prevailing conditions of the present. Consequently, water functions as a subject, medium, and a vocabulary that relates to existence and reality. Fluence (2015:18) quotes philosopher Ivan Illich (1986:24), who observed that: 'Water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors … It is a threshold; a liminal space that confronts us with ourselves, raising fundamental questions about who we are'. In his book *Water and art*, David Clarke (2010 cited by Fluence 2015:26) argues that water possesses a duality in art, serving as both a literal subject matter depicted in artworks and a material or medium itself, as observed in watercolour paintings or its utilisation in sculpture and performance art.

In *Who owns the Wai*,[7] an opinion piece for Briefing Papers, Keri Mills (2013) examines water ownership in New Zealand across political perspectives. She notes that while the National Party claims that nobody owns water, Labour and New Zealand First argue for collective ownership, and the Māori, Green, and Opportunities parties emphasise unresolved Māori rights to freshwater resources. Although the political landscape has shifted somewhat in the decade since the piece was written, the basic arguments remain.[8]

Water's value in New Zealand is multidimensional – material, cultural, spiritual, and economic (Julian *et al* 2017; Mills 2013; Prickett & Joy 2024). Rivers, for example, are considered ancestors by Māori and are intricately connected to identity (Prickett & Joy 2024). New Zealand's water primarily comes from rainfall and snowmelt that feed rivers, lakes, and underground aquifers (Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ 2020). Despite its abundance, water quality is deteriorating (Julian *et al* 2017, Mills 2013). While domestic water use remains free, commercial and agricultural users also access water without charge (Mills 2013).

The water ownership issue intensifies as businesses profit from water through trading water consents and bottling for export (Mills 2013). All political parties acknowledge the reality of inadequate waterway protection, although approaches to solutions differ. Implementing charges for water use would challenge the traditional notion that running water cannot be owned.

The water ownership question intersects with indigenous rights through native title – a doctrine recognised in Australia, the United States, and Canada – where indigenous peoples retain certain proprietary rights to lands and resources unless lawfully revoked (Mills 2013). The Treaty of Waitangi[9] reinforces these rights for Māori, guaranteeing full rights to lands, forests, fisheries, and other properties.

While common law does not recognise the ownership of flowing water, Mills (2013) notes that the Waitangi Tribunal acknowledged Māori rights to freshwater resources, although the New Zealand Government has not recognised ownership claims. Importantly, Māori concerns primarily stem from environmental degradation affecting traditional food sources [*mahinga kai*] and cultural well-being rather than financial interests (Mills 2013; Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ 2020).

The Taieri Plain is an example of an ancestral food-gathering region that has been lost due to settler activity. *Te Rūnanga o Ōtākou*, *mana whenua* [the indigenous people – Māori – who have historic and territorial rights over the land] provided a statement of values for a report to Wenita Forest Products Ltd., titled the *Berwick Forest Archaeology and Heritage Management Plan* (Jennings, Sutton, Greig & Aukaha 2021:16-7). In this statement, they explain that the area displays strong evidence of ancestral occupation and traditional connections to the land, with seasonal movements for gathering food and resources. The landscape, including wetlands, forests, and seacoasts, was vital for sustenance and had great spiritual importance as the burial grounds of ancestors and deities. Additionally, the Ministry for the Environment and Stats NZ (2020:53) explains that altering natural water flows can diminish the environment's life force or vital essence [*mauri*]. This reduction in environmental health and spiritual integrity impairs the ability of the indigenous Māori people [*tangata whenua*, literally 'people of the land'] to fulfil their traditional role as environmental guardians and stewards [*kaitiakitanga*] of wetlands, rivers, and lakes.

Having briefly explored the legal and historical context of water in New Zealand, I now focus on Southern Africa, a region that presents strikingly similar challenges. Water has been a key instrument in delineating colonial boundaries worldwide, with Anjuli Webster (2024) emphasising its role in shaping colonial and postcolonial states in Southern Africa. Webster (2024) illustrates how rivers, hydrological surveys, and hydroelectric power were used to define borders and consolidate colonial control, while Anthony Kaziboni (2024) highlights how water governance practices in South Africa served as tools of power, disproportionately favouring European settlers and perpetuating racial inequalities. Webster (2024) contrasts this with pre-colonial isiNguni societies, which developed adaptive political structures suited to the region's climate, arguing that colonialism disrupted these indigenous practices by imposing rigid boundaries and centralised water control. These

colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary water politics and access in South Africa (Kaziboni 2024; Webster 2024). Kaziboni (2024) further reveals how invented water scarcity was imposed on black communities through discriminatory legislation and practices, entrenching systemic inequalities during the colonial and apartheid eras. Webster (2024) contends that understanding this history of water, power, and politics is essential for addressing current water management and equity challenges, particularly amid climate change and growing water scarcity in the region.

Inattention to (and the latent structure of) the legal and historical aspects pertaining to water, as discussed here, I argue, can be viewed as imperial debris that constitutes part of the matrix of the objective violence of colonialism. Working with water in artworks in Aotearoa New Zealand or South Africa inevitably raises the issues of water and land ownership and the viewer's role in the society in which these issues play out. Other artists have, as I have previously argued (Lowe 2023:68-74), used the imagery of water in various ways to highlight fluid relationships, refer to societal injustices past and present, implicate their viewers in the issues at hand, and create liquid environments for reflection and contemplation.

The *Mother's Rui*n project is based on the histories of a fountain at a place called Wairongoa, which is a literal (colonial) translation of medicine water into *te reo Māori* (Lowe 2023:41). This translation is, I suggest (Lowe 2023:41), a type of appropriation and a 'spurious claim on indigeneity and to authenticity'. The paradoxical notions of water as a tonic (medicine water) and tonic water as an enabler of colonisation (Lowe 2023:46-48) served as a potential difference, enabling the flow of ideas and inspiration, to use a mixed water and electricity metaphor, which is apparently quite dangerous.

Artistic Response: *All She Surveys*

All She Surveys serves as the introductory piece to the *Mother's Ruin* exhibition, immediately engaging visitors as they enter the darkened space. The installation is a multisensory experience, carefully orchestrated and conceptually layered in an attempt to evoke an array of emotions and thoughts in the viewer.

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors are enveloped by a gentle wave of birdsong, recorded at the site of the Wairongoa fountain. This natural, soothing sound creates an initial sense of tranquillity. However, as one progresses through the installation, a contrasting auditory element emerges: a low, rumbling sound that ebbs and flows ominously at the edge of perception. This deep, resonant tone emanates from a subwoofer hidden within the plinth, creating a subtle yet palpable sense of unease that counterpoints the peaceful birdsong.

FIGURE Nº 3

Neil Lowe, *Mother's Ruin* – exhibition layout si. Courtesy of Neil Lowe.

There are three cast gunmetal swans in the lower basin of the Wairongoa fountain. A wing from one of the swans had come loose and was lying beside in the pool of water and decomposing leaves. I found the image of a swan with a broken wing resonant and decided to use the wing in my work.

Once the viewer's eyes adjust to the dimly lit environment of *Mother's Ruin*, the central visual elements of the installation come into focus. Hovering above the installation is an ethereal white object – a 3D-printed replica of the swan's wing from the original fountain. The "broken" wing reinforces the idea of ruin, and illustrates a poignant beauty in vulnerability. The replica wing, crafted from plant-based plastic, has a pearlescent glow. Its deposition layers, artefacts of the digital scanning and production process, create a texture reminiscent of a contour map of an unknown landscape or territory. Beneath the wing, resting on a dark plinth, is a shallow black plastic basin. This basin is filled with spring water from Wairongoa (literally "medicine water"), dyed black with eco-friendly pond dye. The water's dark, reflective surface creates a stark contrast with the luminous wing above. White lines of light shine from above, imposing a grid pattern on the wing and the surrounding floor, but are barely visible on the black water's surface.

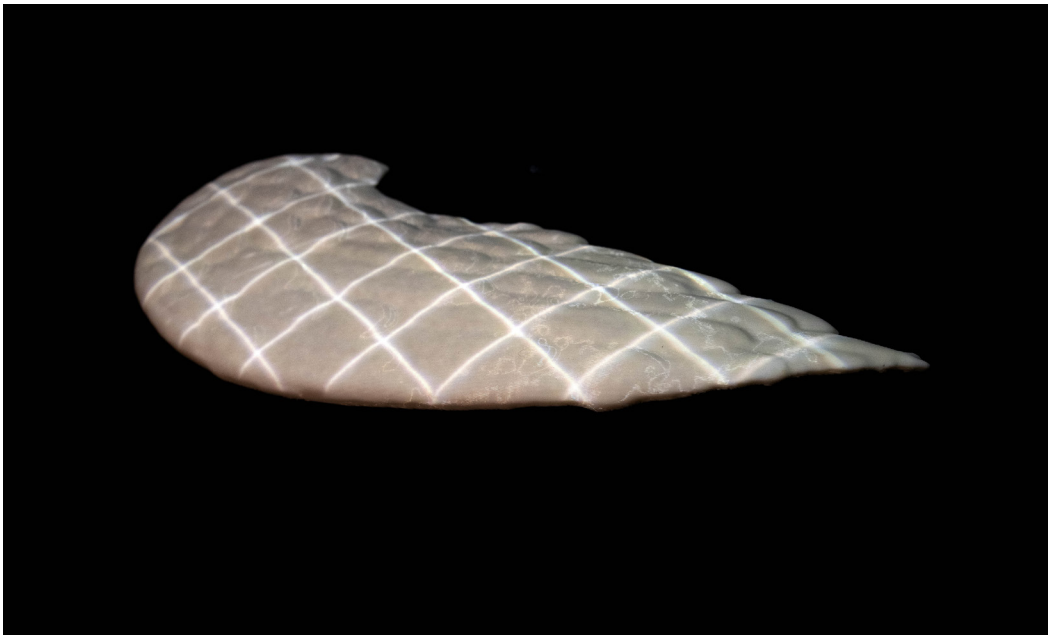

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Neil Lowe, *All She Surveys*, 2023. 3D printed copy of broken swan wing from the Wairongoa fountain, water from the Wairongoa Spring, light grid, audio track, dimensions variable. Detail view of installation, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, New Zealand. Photograph by Justin Spiers. Courtesy of Justin Spiers.

This grid serves as a visual metaphor for the cadastral mapping process, and a horizontal version of a screen. According to the vlogger (with a PhD, I hasten to add), Plastic Pills (2021:04:03), the screen is a useful analogy in the context of psychoanalysis, because it can act as a filter, a membrane, and I would add, as something that is projected onto. The screen, as a motif in my work, thus functions as a filter, shaping and mediating light and images in light that pass through and as a surface onto which I project images, just as a human subject projects their inner thoughts, desires, and conflicts onto others. The screen mediates light, mirroring the mechanisms the psyche employs to process or externalise unconscious material.

The cadastral grid of property delineation and the binary grid of digitisation are both important elements of this project. Roberto Simanowsky (2011:158) considers mapping art, his term for data-driven media art, an artform that celebrates the computer's inherent capabilities. This art emerges through the computer's ability to transform all phenomena into numerical code, thereby stripping them of their physical form. Once digitised and represented within the computer, these phenomena can be easily materialised in various forms. In this way, the computer can be compared to money, as both serve as machines for translating and exchanging different objects based on their abstract numerical value.

The crude blocks of the cadastral maps that have been overlayed onto the variable geography of the Taieri Plain can be viewed as a metaphor for the discrete, digital sampling of the analogue world, as illustrated by the digital sampling and recreation of the swan's wing. The steps of measurement are quantised into discrete units; a particle view of the landscape rather than a wave function.

According to Haraway (1988:595), boundaries are not fixed entities, but are instead constructed through mapping practices. Objects, she contends, do not inherently exist; instead, they are formed as boundary projects (Haraway 1988). Boundaries themselves, she continues, are not static; they are constantly in flux, they 'shift from within', and pose a challenge (Haraway 1988:595). What boundaries temporarily enclose has the potential to generate and produce new meanings and bodies. Haraway (1988:595) concludes that, 'siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice'.

The installation *All She Surveys* incorporates subtle movement that draws the viewer's attention. The low-frequency sound waves from the subwoofer create ripples on the surface of the black water. A spotlight trained on the wing reflects off the water's surface, casting a pool of light against the back wall. The slight movements of the water are amplified in this reflection, creating pronounced, rhythmic undulations of light. The reflected light on the wall shows the wing and its shadow as an inverted double image, reminiscent of embryonic shapes in a pool of vibrating amniotic fluid.

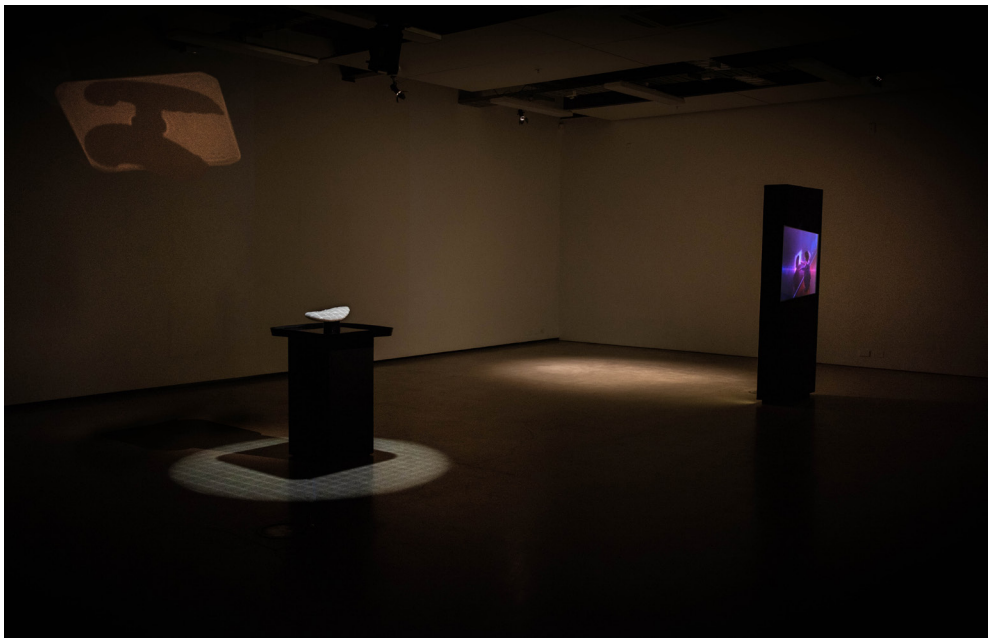

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Neil Lowe, *Mother's Ruin*, 2023. Installation view. Dunedin School of Art Gallery, New Zealand. Photograph by Justin Spiers. Courtesy of Justin Spiers.

Reflection, as a diversion of light and a mode of thought, is an important tool in my palette of artistic techniques. A significant aspect of the larger *Mother's Ruin* exhibition is the implication, often through reflection,[10] of the viewer situated within the matrix of objective violence.

Through its intricate arrangement of visual, auditory, and kinetic elements, *All She Surveys* creates an immersive environment that engages multiple senses. The installation invites viewers to contemplate the complex legacies of colonialism, the tension between natural landscapes and imposed order, and the ongoing reverberations of historical actions in our present day, frequently manifesting as an invisible, menacing violence.

Oftentimes, looking closely or directly at something is not the best strategy to determine exactly what one is looking at. Bill Brown (2001:6) reminds us that 'even objects squarely within the field of phenomenality are often less clear (that is, less opaque) the closer you look'. The subtitle of *Violence* by Žižek (2009) is *Six sideways reflections*. He argues that confronting violence directly lures us through its 'overpowering horror' and our empathy with its victims and blocks our ability to think (Žižek 2009:3-4). He advocates for these sideways glances at violence from a distance 'out of respect towards its victims' (Žižek 2009:4). *All She Surveys* illustrates the principle that sometimes it is best to look elsewhere if we want to see the effects of something. Sometimes a sideways glance can reveal aspects that are hidden in (or from) plain sight.[11]

The Imperial Gaze

The concept of the imperial gaze plays a salient role in understanding the lasting impact of colonial structures and their representation in *All She Surveys*. Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2023) reframing of the imperial gaze as the titular *White sight* provides a useful lens through which to examine this artwork. Mirzoeff (2023) describes this gaze as 'a downward gaze from a plinth, a view from above that surveys land and places all life under surveillance'. In *All She Surveys*, the plastic fountain with its toxic pool is situated on a plinth, with the source of the menacing, almost subsonic, rumbling hidden in it. The 'view from above that surveys' mentioned by (Mirzoeff 2023) is represented by the grid of light projected from above onto the physical components of the work.

Mirzoeff (2023) further argues that during the high imperial period, colonial practices such as mapping, surveying, and surveillance were augmented by what he terms 'the imperial screen'. Intentionally designed, this omnipresent, if physically invisible screen, served as an emotional and cultural barrier, creating an affective border that prevented the imperial viewer from empathising with the subjects being observed.

The screen, as viewing area, membrane, and receptor of projections, is an important motif running through my installation. The film screen is a vertical grid of woven fibres onto which an image is projected horizontally in light, but in this instance, I aimed the light vertically from above to form, in projection, an abstract, horizontal representation of the cadastral survey grid.

Light is an important motif in my work, a constantly returning *leitmotif*, if you will. I use light not only as a projection, but also in various forms as a medium. I employ spotlights to accentuate and create shadows (absence of light). Shadows, to me, represent the Jungian shadow and the unconscious, those parts of ourselves that we are reluctant to own up to or are unaware of. Carl Jung (1969:21) writes:

> The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is.

Stoler (2016) argues that contemplating the ruins of empire involves a deliberate rejection of a melancholic gaze. Instead, it requires situating the present within the broader frameworks of vulnerability, harm, and resistance that are sustained by imperial systems. This approach aligns with my intention to, through my work, offer a critical vantage point rather than indulge in imperial nostalgia.

As explained by Laurence Kritzman (1991), the concept of melancholia provides a metaphorical framework for understanding the postcolonial condition. The failure to separate from the 'Mother Country' or metropole can be seen as causing an elusive sense of loss and melancholia in the (post)colonial subject. This fractured or ruined sense of self is part of the complex I have termed *Mother's Ruin*.

The simple but beautiful image of the broken wing in *All She Surveys* is an elegy of sorts, meant to embody a sense of loss but failing to do so in its digitised, plastic form; the failure of embodiment perhaps emphasising the loss. The romance of the colonial, it suggests, is a lie. The benevolence of the Mother Country is a fiction, and the yearning for wholeness with the mother, which never was, is a fool's errand.[12]

By engaging with these concepts of the imperial gaze, melancholia, and ruins of empire, *All She Surveys* offers an exploration of the lasting impacts of colonial structures. It invites viewers to consider how these historical legacies continue to shape our present, challenging us to move beyond nostalgia or simple critique toward a more complex understanding of our postcolonial reality.

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Neil Lowe, *All She Surveys*, 2023. 3D printed copy of broken swan wing from the Wairongoa fountain, water from the Wairongoa Spring, light grid, audio track, dimensions variable. Installation view, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, New Zealand. Photograph by Justin Spiers. Courtesy of Justin Spiers.

Conclusion

The aim of the *Mother's Ruin* project and the work *All She Surveys* has been to identify some of the underlying mechanisms that support the perpetuation of the injustices of colonisation. This was done by considering, through thinking and making with other scholars and artists, the situated intertwined histories of a neglected Victorian fountain on the Taieri Plain.

I concur with Stoler (2016:350, 337) and accept her invitation to 'think with ruins of empire as ruination' when she notes that 'it is the occluded histories of "imperial debris" as active agents that command my ongoing attention precisely because these ubiquitous forms of cumulative damage are too easily transposed into processes that so readily get identified by other names'.

In my practice, I layer and juxtapose symbols and images in an oscillating process of accumulation and editing. I layer concepts and associations into, often ambiguous, assemblages. In All She Surveys, and by extension, Mother's Ruin, I encourage the viewer to look closely at the underlying structures of the quotidian, to look inside and reflect on how we might be complicit in and affected by the ruin and ruination of imperial legacies, but also to look elsewhere for its effects and glance sideways at what seems evident to perceive the violence lurking beneath.

Notes

1. Ann Stoler (2016:ix) explains that although she agrees that the 'post' in postcolonial refers to a critical stance rather than a temporality, she prefers '"(post)colonial" studies to emphasise a colonial "presence" in its tangible and intangible forms and to acknowledge that there are colonial "presents" – as those who work in Australia and the Americas would argue and those concerned with a Palestinian/Israeli context would contend'.
2. Photo documentation of the exhibition can be viewed at https://flic.kr/s/aHBqjAUByL
3. Video documentation of the work can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/1070355998
4. Taieri is an example of a transliteration error and should be written as Taiari (Te Runaka o Ōtākou [sa]); it is thought to have derived from the Māori word *taiari*, meaning "spring tide" (Dunedin Public Libraries [sa]).
5. When writing in English in New Zealand, *te reo Māori* words are not italicised, and only uncommon words are translated. The italics have been applied in this article to conform to the South African publishing standards.
6. More details about the sale agreement can be found here: https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/connect-2/connect/news-and-stories/the-otago-deed-1844/
7. *Wai* is the *te reo Māori* [Māori language] word for water.
8. The current (in 2024) centre-right National government, with its right-wing coalition partners, is reversing many of the gains made by Māori regarding language and co-governance.
9. The Treaty of Waitangi is a, somewhat controversial, agreement between the British government (the Crown) and various Māori *iwi* [cultural groupings], and is a foundational document of the modern New Zealand state. The controversy arises mostly between differing interpretations of the English and *te reo Māori* versions of the text, specifically the translations of a few very particular words (Archives New Zealand 2024). These admittedly hard to translate words are central to the notions of power-sharing and sovereignty, and are thus crucial to the implications of the treaty. The two sides, in effect then, signed two different agreements.
10. The ambiguity is intentional.
11. After attending a floor talk about the work, an exhibition viewer remarked that although she enjoyed the exhibition and the explanations, she now wishes that she could "unsee" some of the insights she had during the process.
12. This is a reference to Lacan's *objet petit a*. Tyson (2006:28-29) explains that for Lacan the *object petit a* represents the unattainable object of desire arising from the subject's entry into language. It emerges from the sense of lack experienced when transitioning from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order (from a world of images to the world of language). This concept is linked to the loss of unity with the mother figure and the formation of the unconscious, embodying an endless pursuit of an unreachable desire born from the fundamental experience of absence in linguistic subjectivity. It is important to note that this unity with the mother figure was an illusion to start, thus this lack is a yearning for something that never was, and never can be.

References

Altmann, G & Ekves, Z. 2019. Events as intersecting object histories: A new theory of event representation. *Psychol Rev* 126(6):817-840. https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000154

Archives New Zealand. 2024. What te Tiriti o Waitangi says in English and te reo Māori. [O]. Available: https://www.archives.govt.nz/discover-our-stories/the-treaty-of-waitangi/what-te-tiriti-o-waitangi-says-in-english-and-te-reo-maori
Accessed 25 September 2024.

Brown, B. 2001. Thing Theory. *Critical Inquiry* 28(1):1-22.

Cooper, A, Paterson, L & Wanhalla, A (eds). 2015. *The lives of colonial objects*. Dunedin: Otago University Press.

Dillon, B. 2011. *Ruins: Documents of contemporary art*. London: Whitechapel Gallery.

Dunedin Public Libraries. [Sa]. Taieri River - He Purapua | Scattered Seeds. [O]. Available: https://dunedin.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/199832
Accessed 1 July 2023.

Fluence, T. 2015. A vocabulary of water: How water in contemporary art materialises the conditions of contemporaneity. [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Haraway, D. 1988. Situated knowledges. *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575-599. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

Harris, CI. 1993. Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review* 106(8):1707-1791. https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787

Heidegger, M. 1962. Traditional language and technological language. Translated by W Torres Gregory. *Journal of Philosophical Research* (23):129-145.

Jennings, C, Sutton, N, Greig, K & Aukaha (1997) Ltd. 2021. Berwick Forest Archaeology and Heritage Management Plan. Unpublished report to Wenita Forest Products. Southern Pacific Archaeological Research.

Julian, JP, De Beurs, KM, Owsley, B, Davies-Colley, RJ & Ausseil, A-GE. 2017. River water quality changes in New Zealand over 26 years: Response to land use intensity. *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences* 21(2):1149-1171. https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-21-1149-2017

Jung, C. 1969 [1954]. *The archetypes and the collective unconscious. C.G. Jung collected works volume 9 part 1*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Kaziboni, A. 2024. Exclusion and invented water scarcity: A historical perspective from colonialism to apartheid in South Africa. *Water History* 16:45-63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12685-024-00339-4

Kritzman, L. 1991. Melancholia becomes the subject: Kristeva's invisible 'Thing' and the making of culture. *Paragraph* 14(2):144-150. https://doi.org/10.3366/para.1991.0011

Lowe, N. 2023. *Mother's Ruin*: Refracting the imperial gaze. Unpublished document submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts. Otago Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga, New Zealand. https://doi.org/10.34074/thes.6191

Mills, K. 2013. Who owns the Wai? – Briefing Paper. [O]. Available: https://briefingpapers.co.nz/who-owns-the-wai/ Accessed 1 July 2023.

Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ. 2020. *Our freshwater 2020: Summary of New Zealand's freshwater reporting*. Wellington, New Zealand.

Mirzoeff, N. 2023. *White sight: Visual politics and practices of whiteness.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Plastic Pills. 2021. Lacan – mirror stage, desire, imaginary and symbolic "I". [YouTube]. [O]. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBhYq7HqLXo Accessed 16 July 2023.

Prickett, M & Joy, MK. 2024. Aotearoa New Zealand's new Government proposal to remove hard-won protection for waterways will worsen the country's freshwater crisis. *Inland Waters* 14(1-2):37-48. https://doi.org/10.1080/20442041.2024.2335738

Ruru, J, Abbott, M & Stephenso J (eds). 2011. *Making our place. Exploring land-use tensions in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Dunedin: Otago University Press.

Simanowsky, R. 2011. *Digital art and meaning: Reading kinetic poetry, text machines, mapping art, and interactive installations*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Stoler, A. 2016. *Duress: Imperial durabilities in our times*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Strack, M. 2011. Bounding the land: Cadastral framework on the Taieri, in *Making our Place. Exploring land-use tensions in Aotearoa New Zealand*, edited by J Ruru, M Abbott & J Stephenso. Dunedin: Otago University Press:101-114.

Te Runaka o Ōtākou. [Sa]. Language history – Te Runaka o Ōtākou. [O]. Available: https://www.otakourunaka.co.nz/language-history Accessed 1 July 2023.

Tuck, E & Yang, KW. 2012. Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1(1):1-40.

Tyson, L. 2006. *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge.

Veracini, L. 2010. *Settler colonialism: A theoretical overview.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Webster, A. 2024. Water and history in Southern Africa. *The Journal of African History* 65(1):22-29. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000021

Žižek, S. 2009 [2008]. *Violence: Six sideways reflections.* London: Profile Books.