

**Megan Tamati-Quennell**

## **Introduction to “History and Sovereignty”**

### **Abstract**

*This essay introduces the second section of “Grounded in Place: Dialogues between First Nations Artists from Australia, Taiwan and, Aotearoa,” a special issue of Pacific Arts. “History and Sovereignty” includes papers by First Nations artists Vernon Ah Kee (Australia), Chang En-Man (Taiwan), and the Kaihaukai Collective (Aotearoa/New Zealand).*

**Keywords:** *First Nations, contemporary experience, autonomy, cultural practice*

The first section of “Grounded in Place” explores “History and Sovereignty—enmeshed concepts for First Nations people—through the work of artists Vernon Ah Kee (Australia), Chang En-Man (Taiwan), and the Kaihaukai Collective (Aotearoa/New Zealand). The three articles discuss First Nations’ experiences, social justice, Indigenous connections to land, knowledge systems that have evolved over millennia, and cultural practices that have continued or transformed since colonisation, framing these issues through broader concepts including contemporary experience, deep histories, Indigenous autonomy, and self-determination.

In an interview, Vernon Ah Kee discusses his recent exhibition *nothing important happened today*, held at Brisbane’s Spring Hill Reservoir in 2021. The reservoir, a remarkable example of underground architecture, is also the site of the first public executions of two Aboriginal men, a fact acknowledged in Ah Kee’s powerful exhibition. His project mined the history of the site but also the wider history of violence, including the lynchings and killings of Aboriginal people and people of colour, sometimes legally justified. The exhibition title references a seemingly innocuous declaration from 1776, attributed to the reigning British monarch, King George III. Ah Kee uses it to explore false narratives, the construction of history, and to illuminate the entrenched “history of denial” of the brutality that occurred through the colonial process and that continues today in Australia.

The beginning of Chang En Man’s essay “Snail Paradise Trilogy” includes a song written by the artist presented in a customary manner. The song refers to the cultural significance of an Indigenous Taiwanese traditional food: the giant African snail. In her paper, Chang describes her projects that have drawn on knowledge from the Indigenous matrilineal line of her family. These included the gathering of recipes and the creation of textiles, videos, and installation works all focused on the giant African snail, an exotic species that was introduced to Taiwan as a food in the 1930s by the Japanese during their occupation. Chang uses the snail to consider Taiwanese history and its relationship to the world and to explore the resilience of culture, its independent transformation, and the response of culture to external influences.

The final essay in this section, by Ron Bull and Simon Kaan as the Kaihaukai Art Collective, is anchored by the concept of *mana i te whenua*—authority from the land. The collective’s projects are focused on food sovereignty, *mahika kai* (customary food gathering practices) of the Ngāi Tahu (Indigenous peoples of Southern New Zealand), and *whakapapa*, the layered Māori relationship with land, water, and sea. Their essay discusses the group’s invited response to the exhibition *Tamatea: Legacies of Encounter* that was held at Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand, in Wellington, in 2019 and 2020. While the museum show centred a painting by William Hodges depicting Tamatea (Dusky Sound), the Kaihaukai Art Collective’s curatorial project that responded to it expressed the Ngāi Tahu history of Tamatea and its more recent history as a site of early cultural encounters, including Cook’s second voyage to New Zealand in 1773. The collective presented a narrative, four-part feast response to the show that addressed cultural collisions and the ongoing environmental devastation of Tamatea.

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