



In the Canopy: Meditations from Paparoa and Kapiti Island

Sarah Peebles 40:53 in 3 parts (2005/2022) | Panospria 110

In 2003 I was invited to Aotearoa by Matthew Leonard, the producer of the programme *Revolutions Per Minute**, to create a new radio work that would draw from Aotearoa's natural landscapes. On the North and South Islands and while in transit back to Canada through Singapore, I recorded sounds of birds, insects, amphibians and rivers. The essence of my experiences listening to the abundance of life surrounding me, life often out of sight, was reflected in a phrase that came up in conversation while visiting the Kāpiti coast: *that which is just beyond our perception*. The essence of my spending long, focused periods of time in nature while recording and while simply being – taking time – doesn't easily translate into words for me; it's nonverbal. The tree canopy, the bushes, ground, air and waters held life I could often hear but couldn't see: insect buzz and hums floating on the breeze, birds chattering in distant treetops, mysterious rummaging above my head, sudden exuberant birdsong bursting from nearby bushes. As the presence of beings shifted into my awareness, I began to ponder my initial interpretation of that phrase, wondering, *exactly what* was just beyond my perception? Were animals such as the kaka above (parrots - perhaps watching me?) or an emerging cicada, perceivable? At what point was shifting weather beyond my ability to perceive? Or the larger view: the complexity of the biosphere with Earth's constantly evolving micro- and macro communities of living things, with their individual lives, habitats and interconnections – which aspects of this infinite feedback loop lay just beyond our perception?

While in Paraparaumu, across from Kapiti Island, Kāpiti coast resident Gary Millan shared with me some of his thoughts and knowledge about the Māori *Ngā kete o te Wānanga* (Baskets of Knowledge). Referring to the third basket, *Te Kete Tuatea* (basket of light), he'd brought up the concept of “that which is just beyond our perception.” Twenty years later, I have only now come to understand and appreciate Gary's Māori context of the phrase. This knowledge kete, *Te Kete Tuatea*, “is mindful of, and pays attention to, the past, our spiritual realities, the importance of space and time, and tikanga (customs), as well as kawa (ceremonial rituals).”¹ In speaking about that which is just beyond our perception, Gary was referring to ways of knowing the world around us that are inherent to Māori ancestral experience and culture (and to many Indigenous cultures): a knowledge acquired through living one's life on the land that involves a subconscious knowledge, a sensibility, of things to come, as opposed to quantifying or analyzing our senses or experiences as we might through a science-oriented lens. This includes a dimension of the universe or cosmos beyond “the world of sense perception, the natural world around us” (yet available to seers and sages) held to be ultimate reality, *Tua-Atea*.^{2,4}

I, as a guest in Aotearoa, chose to reflect on my visceral experiences and North American sensibilities in the places I recorded sound³, savouring landscapes totally unfamiliar to me whose rhythms were beyond my grasp. This soundwork reflects those sonic, psychological and embodied explorations.

The unique relationships between Aotearoa's native plants, their historic pollinators (native birds and bees) and people can be heard in that landscape: in rich and diverse birdsong, plants rustling in breezes, subtle wing beats of digger bees hovering over sandy slopes, in the sounds of gathering and weaving of *harakeke* and *wharariki* (flax). These sounds are a fraction of the abundance and diversity of what once existed in these islands, particularly before deforestation & introduced species that occurred with European settlement – and with ongoing industrial agriculture, apiculture (with introduced bee species), industry, invasive rodents and climate change. However, these voices and the relationships they reflect, continue to thrive. They are in process. They continue to instruct, compel, inspire and inform the identity, cultures and practices of all people in Aotearoa and others (like me) who experience this incredible, dynamic place.

The forest canopy here and everywhere supports much that we cannot perceive and do not (yet) know – some of which we hear, smell, touch, see and feel; all of which is connected. The canopy itself, the life within her (including ourselves), the soil beneath her, the water she filters, the oxygen she creates, the weather she generates & moderates – all interweave to create this place, this Earth, as we know her. She is *Papatuanuku*, a living organism.⁴

* *In the Canopy* was commissioned by Te Reo Irirangi o Aotearoa/Radio New Zealand for the programme “Revolutions per Minute” (produced by Matthew Leonard), with assistance from the Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des Arts du Canada. (Initially titled, *Clear Dawn*). It is available as a free digital download on Panospria ([PAN 110, 2022](#)).

1. [Kete Tuatea for Health and Palliative Care Professionals & Ranginui as knowledge and life](#) (Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand)
2. Private correspondence with Gary Millan, November 2022.
3. Soundscape recording locations: Paparoa National Park & nearby Bullock Creek, Kapiti Island/Te Waewae-Kapiti-o-Tara-rāua-ko-Rangitāne, Oban village on Steward Island and McRitchie Reservoir (Singapore).
4. [Kaitiakitanga – guardianship and conservation](#) (Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand) & [Kaitiakitanga - A Definitive Introduction to the Holistic World View of the Maori](#) (Rev. Maori Marsden, November 1992, National Library He Tohu)

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Photo by [Steve Attwood](#): Korimako (bellbird) feeding on the nectar of harakeke flowers (New Zealand flax, *Phormium tenax*). [Korimako](#) are the major pollinators of flax, as each time they feed pollen is transferred onto the heads which is then transferred onto the anthers of another harakeke flower.
www.auldwoodbirds.com

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