

2019 MIEGUNYAH STUDENT PROJECT AWARD SUMMARY

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This report is the outcome of a 2019 Mieggunyah Student Project Award, and is the result of independent research undertaken by the student.

My research and resulting creative response for the Mieggunyah Student Project Award, was a riposte to a book of tapa cloth specimens collected on the three voyages of Captain Cook to the islands of the southern hemisphere, belonging to the Russel and Mab Grimwade bequest collection. The lengthy title of the book was the first thing that intrigued me: *A catalogue of the different specimens of cloth collected in the three voyages of Captain Cook, to the Southern Hemisphere; with a particular account of the manner of the manufacturing the same in the various islands of the South Seas; partly extracted from Mr Anderson and Reinhold Forster's observations, and the verbal account of some of the most knowing of the navigators: with some anecdotes that happened to them among the natives.*

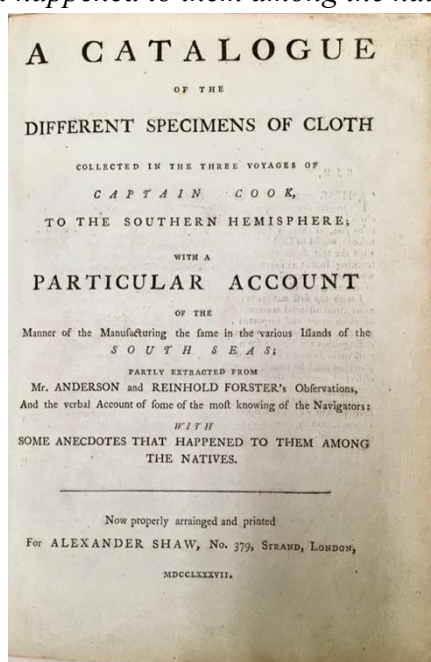
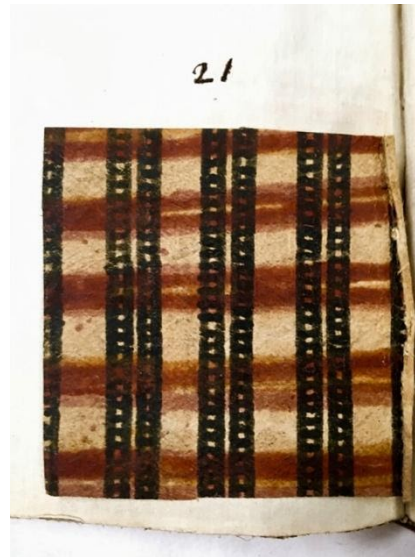


Figure 1 Front cover & Figure 2 Title page of a *Catalogue of the different specimens of cloth collected in the three voyages of Captain Cook*.

I anticipated that much political and social complexity would reside in this small, innocent and aesthetically fetching book. I guessed that this book might roar, that it would be loud and robust and speak to me, belying its temporality. I arranged for the book to be brought to the reading room and I raced in one afternoon to have my first encounter.

The book was smaller than I had anticipated, wrapped in white, crisp tissue paper. Inside the tissue paper lay the waif-like book with a gorgeous, faded marbled cover of red, green, yellow and grey. I was struck by the fragility and the ephemeral quality of the book and the hint of dusty decay, of the oxidised lignin yellowing the pages along its fore edge. It was required that the book rest on a cushion.

When I gingerly opened the book and cast my eyes upon the tapa cloth specimens, all perception of the book's fragility dropped away. I was immediately struck by the 'nowness', vibrancy and life-force of the cloth samples. Each small rectangle of cloth seemed to hold the sun. I imagined the vigorous song and conversation, robust and rhythmic work and the musculature of the women's arms who made the cloth. Those sun-drenched and dyed tapa cloth specimens called to me across more than two hundred years.



Figures 3 & 4 Tapa cloth samples 20, 21 and 25. All perception of the fragility of the book dropped away.

I was fascinated and troubled by the fact that these small rectangles of tapa cloth had been so disconnected from their original purpose, that the human connection and utilitarian nature had been severed. These tapa cloth specimens had been repurposed as stimulus for spectacular parlour stories, bound in a pretty book. They had been segmented and separated, no longer able to unfold the full impact of their magnificent patterning and removed from the bodies of their wearers. It seemed to me brutal and destructive to have cut these samples and destroyed the whole. And yet, after some further research, I was able to understand that specimens, taken out of context and repurposed for education and instruction, can take on a different meaning, just as potent as their original purpose, and that specimens decontextualized, can allow for a transmission of understanding quite unique from the item in situ. Still, I felt that taking something as ensconced in cultural context as tapa cloth and sectioning it up for the edification of a bunch of colonisers, spoke volumes about the entire murky conundrum of colonisation.¹

Art Historian and Art Critic Carol Armstrong writes that natural specimens “straddle temporal boundaries, preserving the thing itself, exhibiting its past and its present tense at once.”² Anne Secord, Natural History Scholar at Cambridge university, “advances the case

¹ Nicholas Thomas, ‘Specimens of Bark Cloth, 1769’: the travels of textiles collected on Cook’s first voyage, *Journal of the History of Collections*, Volume 31, Issue 2, July 2019, Pages 209–220

Nicholas Thomas writes: From a postcolonial angle, barkcloth samples and sample books could appear essentially reductive, as performing a sort of violence upon textiles which had lives as total, enveloping fabrics, that wrapped – or were otherwise tangibly connected to – human bodies throughout a person’s life, from the moment of birth to the rites of death. But from another perspective, there is a place for samples in the appreciation and understanding of cloth, as there is for fabric swatches.

² Maria Zytaruk. "Preserved in Print: Victorian Books with Mounted Natural History Specimens." *Victorian Studies* 60, no. 2 (2018): pp185-200. www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/victorianstudies.60.2.04.

for mounted specimen books”; she sees mounted specimen books as educational instruments and as tools to train others in field observation³

The late Janice Neri, author of *The Insect and the Image*, uses the term ‘specimen logic’ to describe the visual strategy by which “natural objects are ‘decontextualized’ and rendered as discrete, contoured specimens on the page”.⁴

The tapa cloth samples residing in the Specimen book, although extracted from their environment, remain potent objects for collection and display. The observer of the specimen is able to imagine themselves in relation to the cloth and take mental possession of it.

Neri furthermore talks about the ‘stubborn materiality’ of a specimen: when mounted, they affect change, cause the pages they are affixed to, to buckle, or three-dimensional objects sometimes resulted in “bleeding through to adjacent pages making double images of itself”.⁵ A number of the tapa specimens in the catalogue were stubbornly insistent on their materiality, printing themselves on their adjacent pages, particularly the more vivid reds and yellows. The specimen book spoke to me with this ‘roar’ of ‘stubborn materiality’, perhaps too, an insistent plea.



Figures 5 & 6 Evidence of the ‘stubborn materiality’ of the tapa samples “bleeding through” to the adjacent page.

³Zytaruk. "Preserved in Print" *Victorian Studies* 60, no. 2 (2018).

⁴Zytaruk. "Preserved in Print" *Victorian Studies* 60, no. 2 (2018).

⁵ Maria Zytaruk. "Preserved in Print: Victorian Books with Mounted Natural History Specimens." *Victorian Studies* 60, no. 2 (2018): pp185-200. www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/victorianstudies.60.2.04.

My research style for this project was non-linear and multi-disciplinary, rhizome like; making connections between heterogeneous concepts, finding intersections; residing and immersing in little magic zones where disparate ideas were abutted and conjoined, and within this liminal space I found my stance and my learning.



Figures 7 & 8 Non-linear and multi-disciplinary rhizomatic research. One element of my research and creative response was to acquire the skills of traditional paper marbling. I applied this technique to eggshells, which symbolically surrounded my alien polymer book. Marbled eggshells, Marbling dye, on primed eggs, Fiona Martin 2019

Learning customarily involves for me, a mix of writing, dancing, dressing up, imagining, academic research, conversation, listening to music, experimenting. My learning is immersive, Stanislavskian, a ‘becoming’, a bit of madness and obsession. My research is embodied, and it colours my life for the time I am involved, then as relieved and as happy as I am to shed it and shrug it off, it nonetheless leaves a legacy of change: in action, outlook and attitude.

One element of my aggregated research, sought to find varied evidences of the author/traveler/artist’s power and influence when writing a travelogue, making art or responding to a place creatively or scientifically. I wanted to find evidence of the impact of the author’s subjective words. Similarly, how did photographs, artworks, poetry, specimen samples and anecdotes sway the attitude of the reader, (the receiver) of the biased knowledge. Further, I was interested in the the broader, lateral impact on societal views and attitudes. Political theorist Xavier Guillaume looks to a non-European and non-modern travelogue to provide a heuristic which will “decenter the European centeredness and modernist core of contemporary theories of international relations.”⁶ He looks to classical Greece and Herodotus’ travel literature; how Herodotus’s travelogues ‘translated difference into the realm of sameness’. Guillaume suggests that documenting difference does not have to perpetuate the identity/alterity nexus that was cemented especially by eighteenth and nineteenth century travel literature; that this nexus can be reconceptualised.

⁶ Hannah Georgis. “A Brilliant Travelogue that Presents Africa through a New Lens” *The Atlantic* November 11, 2018

I researched the Nigerian author Emmanuel Iduma, who wrote *A Stranger's Pose*; an African travelogue. Iduma writes from a lens of instinctive kinship with his country. He writes to undo the condescending, Western renderings of the continent and to address the lacuna left by imperial history. He “observes rather than ogles and belies the white outsider’s gaze”.⁷ His work is restoratively influential. Further research led me to Han Mui Ling: *From Travelogues to guidebooks: Imagining Colonial Singapore*. Ling suggests that the transition from the traditional travelogue to the more modern guidebook was a discursive repetition of colonial practice, that place-making is integral to colonialism, that the colonial encounter is dependent on the export of notions, systems, and practices that displace indigenous forms or recreate them in the image of the colonial power.⁸

We can find this in the art practices of colonial painters who often found it difficult to discover resonance or a sense of place within the Australian landscape, so they used their knowledge of European landscape painting and notions of the aesthetic ideal to inform their work. Michael Francis Ryan writes about commercial for-profit colonial artists who removed certain undesirable aspects of the landscape in his paintings in order to render them more appealing.⁹ Kieran McInnes writes about the 17th Century Claudian, Acadian ideal and the painters who used picturesque conventions in their painting to make the anonymous colonial terrain appear more familiar.¹⁰ For the same reasons familiar birds and animals were introduced and European gardens were nurtured to allay a pining for home.

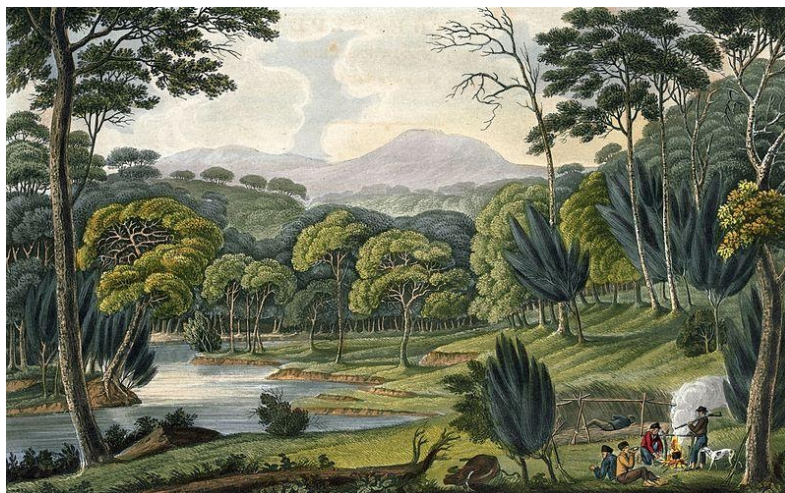


Figure 9 Joseph Lycett *View upon the Napeans*. Aquatint with hand colouring 1825

Cultural hegemony is embedded in the control over definitions of people and places. Travel writer Perets Hirshbeyn a Yiddish, Eastern European anticolonialist drew analogies in his writings and analysis, between oppressed Jews and oppressed Indians. Hirshbeyn wrote about colonial powers and their fierce rivalry as a ‘snatching up ‘of parts of the world and he disapproved of the Western desire “To hear only its own voice to the exclusion of colonial

⁷ Georgis. “A Brilliant Travelogue” *The Atlantic* 2018

⁸ Han Mui Ling. "From Travelogues to Guidebooks: Imagining Colonial Singapore, 1819-1940." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 257-78.

⁹ Michael Francis Ryan. “Does Early Colonial Art provide an accurate guide to the nature and structure of the pre-European forests and woodlands of South-Eastern Australia?” (Master of Forestry Australian National University, November 2009)

¹⁰ Kieran McInnes, “An Investigation of European Painting Conventions with Reference to Contemporary Australian Landscape Painting” (Master of Fine Arts by Research, University of New South Wales, 2011)

K McInnes - unsworks.unsw.edu.au

subjects”.¹¹ Yet Paul Carter in his book *The Road to Botany Bay* investigates the concept that blending the British ideals with the reality of the new colony may have been an attempt at assimilation and a unifying of the traditional with the new.¹²

I fell in love with the catalogue of tapa cloth specimen book, I imbued it, imagined it and felt it in all of its vulnerability, musculature, vitality, violence and opposing forces. The book is an allusion to colonisation. The syntax and word choices of the anecdotes, the cloth, the colours of the dyes the marbling of the book’s cover, the categorisation, all tightly bound, inescapable from each other, vying for space, seen only in part, encased in tradition, disconnected and decontextualized, overlaid with different tradition.



Figures 10, 11, 12 & 13 Labels inside the covers of the specimen catalogue containing and restraining and contextualising the tapa cloth samples within.

It tells of greater things, more important business, secrets, anger, love, sex, death, war. It is a heavy book, it is a pivotal book, it speaks, it sings, it roars, and it whispers.

The resulting artistic work which I created, was a fictitious alien Specimen book set in an imaginary dystopian future, 300 years hence.

¹¹ Mariusz Kałczewiak. “Anticolonial Orientalism: Perets Hirshbeyn’s Indian Travelogue.” *In geveb* (July 2019)

¹² Paul Carter. *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.



Figure 14 Marbled paper for front cover of alien polymer book, paralleling the tapa specimen book. Marble dye on alum prepared parchment, Fiona Martin 2019

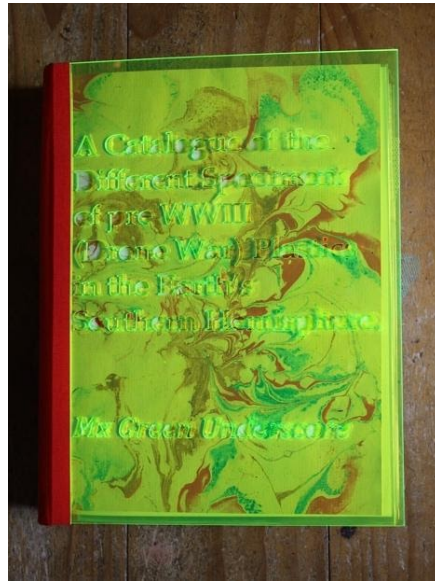
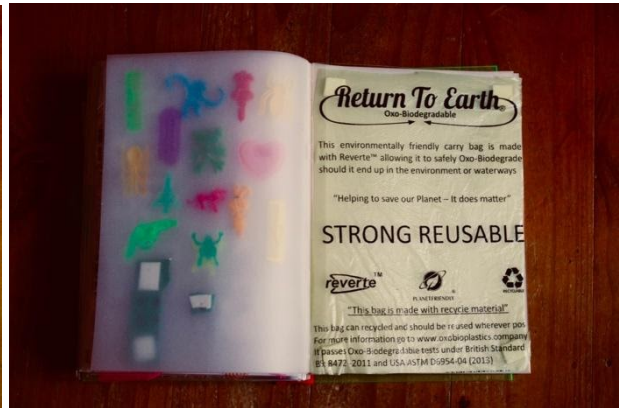


Figure 15 Front Perspex cover of the alien polymer book. Laser-cut Perspex. Fiona Martin 2019.

This alien specimen book is a fantastic transmogrification and a ghostly and playful pastiche of the original tapa cloth specimen book. It is a stamping and an embossing and a folding forward of concepts to bring about a reframing of historical notions and concepts. The stubborn materiality of the original tapa cloth, with its force of presence, has spread out and beyond the yellowed pages to capture a crazy notion that is in part trying to open avenues of thought and pondering.



Figures 16 & 17 Samples of Earth plastics in the alien specimen book. Fiona Martin 2019

The year is 2379, a young polymer colloid scientist named Green Underscore, from the planet > Greaterthan, travels to a post Drone-War Earth, to collect samples of precious late 21st century domestic use plastics. A specimen book is created which will reside in stasis for millennia, in an intergalactic library. A tome filled with anecdotes, specimens and poetry, stained with the author's personal and cultural overlay. The voice of the Earthling is diminished, unrecognised and unaccounted for; apart from what emanates from between the lines and in the energy held within the clipped and edited specimens contained within the book.



Figures 18 &19 Samples of Earth plastics in the alien specimen book. Fiona Martin 2019



Figure 20 Still from animated work in the creation of the character Mx Green Underscore. Manipulated photography, Fiona Martin 2019

The book is entitled: *A Catalogue of The Different Specimens of pre WWII (Drone War) Plastics in the Earth's Southern Hemisphere Collected on the Three Voyages of the Trireme with a particular account of the Manner of Manufacturing and utilisation in the domestic context of the same, by humans, particularly prior to Earth's government caveats and restrictions; and an examination of plastic nomenclatures through the compositions and translations of Earthling poetry in English by polymer colloid scientist and sociologist With some anecdotes that happened to Zir and members of the crew, amongst the Earthlings. Noblesse Oblige. With privilege comes obligation.*

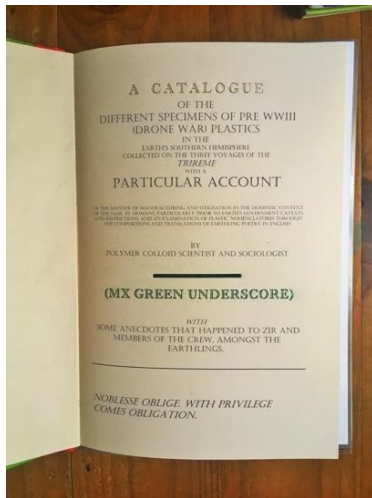


Figure 21 Title page of *A Catalogue of the different Specimens of WWII Drone War Plastics*. Fiona Martin 2019

Figure 22 *The Alien specimen book in situ at the Dulux Gallery*. *Noblesse Oblige* Fiona Martin 2019

Figure 23 *Marbled eggs in situ, Dulux Gallery, Noblesse Oblige*, Fiona Martin 2019



Figure 24 *Noblesse Oblige, With Privilege Comes Responsibility* Dulux Gallery December 2019. Artist: Fiona Martin.



Figure 25 Focus your phone on the QR code to connect to the audio on Soundcloud. *A Brief History of the Earth from the Early 21st Century to the Present Day.*

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