Enduring Rivers of Light: waters of memory, Aotearoa & Aniwaniwa

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`... and the surface of another world evaporates around us

Invisible rivers entangle us as we travel . . .' Roger C. Echo-Hawk. 'The Water Monster'

One hundred years ago there were few dams over fifty feet high; today there are over 36,000. Global riverscapes and much of the human relationship with water have changed at visual, ecological and economic levels. Writers and artists have chosen to reflect on the cost to community memory lost beneath the reservoir. These are tales of submersion, of ecological and cultural loss, and (sometimes) recovery. Conversations survive inundation. This paper will address some writing about dams that inundate homeplaces, and in the second half will consider aspects of the indigenous politics of water and memory in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, through the installation artwork *Āniwaniwa*, by Māori artists Brett Graham (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura) and Rachel Rakena (Ngāi Tahu, Ngā Puhi). Graham and Rakena push the limits of installation practice to immerse the viewer in an experience at once visual, aural, and political. Sensory and historical awareness combine in ways that continue to affirm contemporary Māori art and the quest for justice at the river.

In much of the 'river writing' from the United States rivers are represented as exemplary yet neglected sites for learning that coax inspiration from author and the reader. Through river reflection these writers seek what Aldo Leopold's son (a noted hydrologist) called 'quasi-equilibrium' (Leopold, *Water* 66). The river essay follows vision and digression, drawing the reader into new fractals of awareness through the interplay of breath, line and image. Together, these composite forces create textual watersheds that saturate the mind. The river's flow might mesmerise, forming an angler's pastoral. Leo Marx notes 'in virtually all pastorals, the simple life is not the protagonist's birth right but a desired alternative to complexity' (Marx 56). Yet recent river essayists cannot and do not retreat to the sylvan glade—they practice a 'conditional lyricism' alive to the fragility of ecological and cultural systems (Dawson).

Opposition to dams in North America and Australasia was galvanised through appeal to the scenic, with coffee table books from the Sierra Club on the Grand Canyon in the 1960s, Peter Dombrovskis' influential Tasmanian photographs and calendars, and Peter McIntyre's oil paintings of rivers in the central north island of New Zealand. The Franklin River and 'Save Manapouri' campaigns linked water and mass protest in unprecedented ways that continue to have political and policy ramifications (Pybus & Flanagan, Wheen 263-9, Young, *Islands* 170-4, Solomon 357).

In recent decades anti-dam attention has shifted from the Western USA and Australia or New Zealand to the mega-dam projects planned for South and Central America, Africa, and Asia. Indian and Chinese dam building proceeds apace: 'The consequences of China's frenetic dam-building on international rivers are ominous' (Chellaney 236). Displacement of millions in this region reaffirms and compromises the inextricable link between cultural and biological diversity (McCully, Solomon). Rivers are regarded as story currents and ancient sites of community; as giant dams are proposed and built in areas of high indigenous populations their presence remains controversial.

People need electricity, and dams have done (and do) good for people. But their effect on riverscapes and cultural networks is profound and can be destructive, particularly to indigenous lifeways (Chellaney 236-42; de Villiers 146; Harden; McCully *passim;* Solomon chs 16-17; Reisner 186-91). Spokane poet Gloria Bird and her ancestors still called the dammed Columbia River home; they live with ecological and cultural loss: what's clean for some destroys others. It has taken a few decades for the extent of ecological and cultural damage to sink in. Now, even the World Bank, once a funder of massive damming, diversion and troubled community relocation projects, takes a more cautious stance (de Villiers 142). But for Gloria Bird and the Spokane tribe the damage has been done:

There are no illusions to be had in the aftermath of flooding dams, like love. My vision of that silver leaping and flesh so red it appeared raw and bleeding was the consequence of bad medicine threatening every living thing on the planet, manifesting itself today in mental images of man-made concrete blocks, cold and infertile. ('Illusions')

Laurie Ricou observes: 'In the mythology of salmon, a regional culture finds its selfmade instructions... Salmon is the guide on how to relate to where we set ourselves and touch the earth' (116). So when writers such as Bird, Sherman Alexie or David James Duncan face dwindling salmon stocks or dams, they lose a part of themselves.

A dam often stands as an emblem of what indigenous peoples continue to endure, continue to remember. When this experience of loss affects the heart of a culture, anger, words and memory orient a quest for justice and restoration. In much river writing a large dam or the human destruction of the river provokes a visceral response: 'possibly the reaction to dams is so violent because rivers are the ultimate metaphors of existence, and dams destroy rivers. Humiliating nature, a dam is evil—placed and solid.' (McPhee 193). The writers are, after all, witness to unprecedented human alteration of rivers that galls almost as much as a fondness for hot showers enabled by the megaliths. A dam blocks a fluvial temporality the writers ally with memory, with all forms of vitality. They grapple

with ways to recover memory or a future. They extend elegy through travel to lost rivers, tapping faith in some enduring force. This brings them closer to connections across and between human and non-human communities.

On the Columbia's lower reaches, environmental historian Richard White observes '[w]hen dip-netting sites disappeared, sites that concentrated human memories as much as fish, sites that united lineages and families in labour, sites that were valued and ancient possessions, also vanished beneath the water' (100). There is sadness, yes, and there is responsibility, a responsibility for sustenance and continuity that is shattered by the giant dams. Writer and teacher Jeannette Armstrong (of western Canada's Okanagan First Nation) understands squandered responsibility in a very tactile way, for her river home is scarred by dams across the recently imposed international border: 'The Pacific Coast is a lace work of streams, rivers and lakes flowing into the inlets, fiords and deltas along the ocean front of the mainland. . . . We still pray for the return of the salmon, even while the loss to our people creates the deepest possible grief' (181, 182). The Columbia River is suffused with 'the inexorable sadness of concrete' (Harden 239). This legacy has sparked a shift towards a riparian ethic of care: 'there is now an almost worldwide call to restore riverine nature' (Olwig 407).

The personal is political and the watershed is both. The mega-projects backed by private capital, and by states eager for engineering-inspired glory, continue to rise in the Amazonia, Yangtze, Laos or Panama, while climate-change is invoked to extend hydropower.

Large dams have created a new literary response to water. Essayists such as Kathleen Dean Moore, Scott Russell Sanders, Edward Abbey, and David James Duncan often regard dammed rivers as fallen from an untrammelled grace. 'Fallen river' texts often criticise the notion of economic progress, what philosopher Hans Jonas termed the 'utopian drive' for improvement and a 'quest to control the future' that squanders resources from the generations ahead (Jonas 21, Bowers 169). These writers are trying on some level to come to terms with the rivers and histories, species and songs that have been lost through the ongoing process of human domination of the watershed. The essays exhibit an understanding of a meandering (riverine) consciousness: for Moore, 'all essays walk in rivers' (xii). Time is fluid; natural histories, local stories and personal memories are valid as source material. When Herendeen notes '[t]he rhetoric of rivers becomes involuted: is it the river itself or the river's language that contains the key to the commentator's thoughts?' it is clear these writers are open to the 'cross-connections' between insight and riverscape; the essays—documenting river reflection—are marked by a purposeful humility (Herendeen 116; Adorno 22).

Scott Russell Sanders's account of his inundated childhood home travels 'up the stream of recollection' to record the 'obliteration' of inner and outer worlds (4). The opening sketches a rich, diverse river valley full of crops, birds, fossils and maple trees. This site is seen as an enclave, but the next paragraph qualifies this idyll: 'It is also, now, a drowned landscape.... Waters of separation, waters of oblivion, waters of death' (4, 11).

Sanders calls for a watershed consciousness where the interests of community are put before profit and biodiversity protection inform actions taken in the watershed (63).

Writing of rivers, Donald Worster hopes the stories and beliefs of the past can inform the present; we must realise the future will 'require our learning to think like a river, our trying to become a river-adaptive people. In the past, groups as diverse as the Papago Indians and the Chinese Taoists seem to have met that requirement successfully, and there is much we can learn from them' (Worster, 331). The ecology of the river is one measure of what is bequeathed to the future; the health of river traditions is another.

What do some writers lose when the giant dam goes up and the valleys fill? And what endures? Might it be story, or hope? For some of the writers I consider here, hope is a luxury. The writers have watched, awed and saddened, as the giant dams rise and they cannot dispense with a sense of loss. Ivan Illich asserts the West has de-spiritualised and de-mythologised water, turning it into utilitarian 'stuff' that is no longer integral to a living mythology. What, then, has replaced the lost sites, songs or stories? The answers are river-specific, and, as the Ganges shows, spiritual veneration does not guarantee pristine regulation.

Many of these writers visualise the river as an oracle, a source of elemental honesty. My brief survey of aspects of North American river writing affirms rivers as story currents and learning sites. This same is true for New Zealand, where '[t]he river teaches us where we have been, where we are now, and where we might be going' (Durie 6). Contemporary river works do not mistake moments of repose for anything less than conditional fragments, as isolated as the wild spaces that *might* sustain them. Yet in Aotearoa New Zealand, the elemental, indigenous river songs are not always lost, and many dormant songs, dispersed fragments, are being relearnt as part of a resurgence in Māori cultural transmission.

For Māori of the Waikato River, or of myriad other waterways that skein the valleys of Aotearoa New Zealand, home rivers are crucial markers of identity: a common greeting in Māori language, *No wai koe?*, where are you from, at heart asks *which waters are you from?* Illich's supposedly lost mythos is alive and well, and it continues to alter and often disrupt or help innovate and rehabilitate mainstream political and economic processes. In the next section I attend to the art installation *Āniwaniwa* and refer to Treaty of Waitangi settlement legislation, two disparate forms of relayed histories, limned by the power of a river:

Tooku awa koiora, ko oona pikonga he kura tangihia o te mataamuri. [My river of life, each curve more beautiful than the last.]

Verse from a maimai aroha (song of lament), King Taawhiao Pootatau Te Wherowhero, the second Maori King (cited in Ngāti Koroki Kahukura Claims Settlement Bill 2013, Clause 69 (3)).

In 2009, Justice Joe Williams of the High Court of New Zealand opened the international Indigenous Legal Water Forum with a pertinent comment: '[I]t is hard to think of a more difficult, strategic, problematic and exciting subject going into the next generation than the subject of water and it is hard to think of a sharper test within that than the subject of the rights of Indigenous peoples to water.' (Ruru 221).

The Waikato River, (at 425 kilometres, New Zealand's longest) flows northeast from the central North Island and is the ancestral and spiritual home of the Tainui tribes, including Ngāti Koroki Kahukura. In the nineteenth century, Crown troops forged their way upriver; river gunboats wreaked havoc and, as David Young puts it, a way of life was displaced:

Particularly on the upper river, the science of the theodolite barrel menaced like a cannon, superimposing itself over the sacred boundary stones and the mystic maps of the Maori...

But it was not until the twentieth century that Government surveyors returned to calculate the incalculable – to fix the eternal flow and song of the river in their own design. The era of hydro was arriving, a second conquest (Young, *Faces of the River* 97, 98).

For generations, Tainui and Ngāti Koroki Kahukura have sought to restore control over the river for customary and cultural practices, enduring warfare, land confiscations, constant legal pressures and land alienation (Giles 10-12). The struggle endures across generations as people continue to seek out and sustain a holistic relationship with the river that is central to Waikato Maori identity.

Decades of negotiation with successive governments hammered out the framework for a settlement of claims taken under the Treaty of Waitangi 1840. In 2012 Ngāti Koroki Kahukura and the government settled a long-standing Treaty of Waitangi claim regarding the Waikato River; this followed 2010 Treaty settlements over larger areas of the Waikato River. Tainui legal scholar Linda Te Aho explains the centrality of the river: 'The personification of the natural world is a fundamental feature of Māori tradition. The Waikato River is conceptualised as a living ancestor by the Waikato–Tainui peoples and is recognised as having its own mauri (life force) and spiritual integrity' (285). The government bill dealing with Ngāti Koroki Kahukura's Treaty claims offers a sense of the holistic Māori view of the river, the Awa Tupuna or ancestral river:

To Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, the Waikato River is a single indivisible being that includes its waters, banks, bed (and all minerals under it) and its streams, waterways, tributaries, lakes, fisheries, vegetation, floodplains, wetlands, islands, springs, water column, airspace, and substratum as well as its meta- physical being with its own mauri.

Ngāti Koroki Kahukura are inextricably bound to the awa tupuna by virtue of whakapapa, which derives from the creation stories of Ranginui and Papatuanuku. This interconnectedness lies at the heart of the way Ngāti Koroki Kahukura view the world and waterways and is the basis of kaitiakitanga, which dictates, among other things, that the mauri of waterways must be respected as a matter of priority. The awa tupuna has traditional healing powers and a significant spiritual relevance for Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, who regard the awa as a source of mana and an indicator of their own mauri or well-being. (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura Claims Settlement Bill, Clause 69 (7-8)).

Key features of the 2010 Waikato–Tainui Treaty settlement include the formation of a major (empowered) committee of river guardians, with representatives from the tribe, local government and central government. The committee has 50% Māori membership and oversees major river restoration projects (Te Aho, 292). The health of the river is a unifying vision for the guardians. The belated (and carefully circumscribed) recognition of Māori rights and interests in the river–as–a–whole does not alter the fact that the Waikato River is dammed at several points for power generation. If this collaborative process can work across so many variants in culture, land use and ecology, then it could serve as a model for managing other New Zealand rivers (indeed recent Treaty settlement frameworks regarding the Whanganui River accord that river full legal personality: the river has standing). Many people have a shared responsibility, and they have a shared vision.

Freshwater rights have been a government policy conundrum for decades, but in 2012 they reached full public exposure, with a claim before the Waitangi Tribunal (a permanent commission of inquiry) against government plans to sell off 49% of the four major state-owned hydroelectricity companies. An August 2012 Waitangi Tribunal report recommended delaying the asset sales until long-standing Māori rights and interests were be properly determined and accommodated. The government rejected the report's key recommendations, has sold two companies as at November 2103 (including the one using the Waikato River), and argues that the asset sales programme will not fetter its ability to settle localised Treaty river claims. Given litigation to the highest court in the land over the asset sales and Treaty issues, and ongoing protests on the streets, in Parliament and online, it is no surprise Māori water rights are coming under intense scrutiny.

It is in this historically, legally, and politically charged environment that the major collaborative installation artwork $\bar{A}niwaniwa$ by Brett Graham and Rachel Rakena uncoils. Graham has family ties to the Waikato River as a member of the Ngāti Koroki Kahukura tribe, while 'water is the visual commonality which can be found Rachael Rakena's moving image installations' (Mane-Wheoki, 'Wakas' 7).

Contemporary Māori art has been a central public face of the Māori renaissance. The 1960s and '70s witnessed a strong Māori modernist art movement. The success of 1984s international exhibition of taonga (cultural treasures), *Te Māori*, 'transformed Māori art and elevated it to a new pedestal of respectability and glory' (Mead, 'Te Māori'164). But Graham and Rakena's generation are taking Maori art to new levels and even more international venues (Mane-Wheoki 'Wakas' 5). There are more Māori art practitioners, and new partnership models for curation and collaboration, and increasingly significant international indigenous art collaborations or exhibitions. Rakena and Graham are very much a part of that international exchange (*Āniwaniwa* has travelled to the 2007 Venice Biennale and Canada's 2013 *Sakahàn* indigenous art exhibition).

A silenced river becomes integral to power generation and sport: New Zealand's champion Olympic rowers hone their technique above an inundated village:

Central to the work is the theme of submersion, as a metaphor for cultural loss. Locally, *Aniwaniwa* refers to rapids at the narrowest point of the Waikato River by the village of Horahora, where Graham's father was born and his Grandfather worked at the Horahora power station. In 1947 the town was flooded to create a hydro-electric dam downstream. Many historic sites significant to Graham's hapu 'Ngāti Koroki' were lost forever.

In \bar{A} niwaniwa water as the consumer of histories becomes the vehicle by which histories are retold. In many of Rachael Rakena's works Māori identity is explored as being in a state of flux, which like the borders of a river, are constantly being redefined. Likewise, water is churned into electricity; electricity is transformed into light. Light makes such a work possible, and in a sense returns to a new generation memories of a town now consumed by water. (Wellington City Gallery)

Francis Pound writes of the processes of 'taking, retaking, making and remaking' that enlivened and continues to enliven interactions between Māori and other New Zealand artists (299). That interchange of ideas is something Rachel Rakena is mindful of: 'In my work I explore the interstices between different cultural places—the space between them and the experiences [that happen] in that space' (200). Jonathan Mane-Wheoki reminds us that 'Whakapapa (genealogy), tikanga (custom) and taonga (cultural treasures) provide constant reference points and principles for Māori artists . . . Māori art has proved to be a potent weapon in the politics of identity and strategies of cultural survival and resistance consequent upon the arrival of colonisation' (ix).

Rakena and Graham weave those customary foundations into a digital / sculptural referential practice grounded in ancient forms and community memory. In doing so they use the viewer's sensory immersion as one pathway towards understanding some of the emotional drivers for the recognition of Maori rights over water, and the rupture of the dam. $\bar{A}niwaniwa$ is driven by the undercurrents of loss at the heart of their river story, but it also eddies that loss into renewal through an alchemy of re-imagining. $\bar{A}niwaniwa$ regifts the stories to new communities, but particularly to Graham's tribal base.

Although his art is suffused with an awareness of indigeneity, rather than using a 'blatantly political' approach, Graham says he tries 'to make the forms I deal with quite seductive, so people get interested in those issues' through a more subtle level of engagement (Graham, *Taiāwhio* 106). That engagement begins by disrupting normal viewing positions: viewers of *Āniwaniwa* are invited to lie down on mattresses and look up to the five 2.5 metre-wide sculptural forms on the ceiling, each containing a round convex video screen (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 *Aniwaniwa*. Brett Graham and Rachel Rakena. Fibreglass, video components, mattresses, audio. Five suspended fibreglass forms, each 2.5m diameter. Courtesy of Brett Graham and Two Rooms Gallery, Auckland. © The artists

One meaning of the word Āniwaniwa is confusion or distortion, 'the blackness and disorienting effect of deep water'; another is 'rainbow', a symbol of hope, the shining rays that danced on a now-drowned waterfall (White, 'Indigene' 46; Nga Pae o Te Maramatanga). The installation evokes the confusion or distortion of the Māori experience of a life now immersed beneath a reservoir.

Each separate video projected within the five 'turbines' presents Māori people undertaking daily activities (hanging out laundry, waking to school, wielding spades trying to keep gardens working, or tending fires. The protagonists are dressed in period clothing (from the late 1940s pre-dam era); they are going about their quotidian routine but are doing so whilst underwater. The mundane or normal routines, the currents of memory that spin within, are lent an eerie and surreal quality as participants seem to hover or float. Graham refers to the turbines as 'wakahuia', small carved vessels in Māori custom, contain objects of great tapu or significance. A haunting soundtrack (sung in Māori, featuring the noted singers Whirimako Black and Deborah Wai Kapohe) completed the experience. The sensory, slowed immersion in another element is deepened for those viewers who, supine, immerse themselves in the flow of images.

At the Venice Biennale in 2007, that experience occurred within the seven-hundred-year old salt warehouse off San Marco Plaza. Graham describes the space where many were lulled into contemplation:



Fig. 2 *Aniwaniwa*. Brett Graham and Rachel Rakena. Fibreglass, video components, mattresses, audio. Five suspended fibreglass forms, each 2.5m diameter. Courtesy of Brett Graham and Two Rooms Gallery, Auckland.

The Magazini del Sale was transformed into a marae [traditional Māori meeting and sleeping area] with two rows of mattresses placed beneath te 'wakahuia' containing the video projections. Once onlookers eyes had adjusted to the darkness, they could make out the subtle carvings on the forms—a homage to Tangaroa and Ruatepukepuke [respectively the Māori god of the ocean and the mortal who discovered both him and the arts of carving]—and then be bathed and immersed in the river of light, imagery and sound that flowed from one 'wakahuia' to the next. ('Aniwaniwa')

Cosseted in sound and image, the reclining viewer is likely to let the art (as a 'Trojan horse' or perhaps a Māori eel), slip into consciousness to consolidate or seed the viewer's connection with these issues (Graham, *Taiāwhio* 106).

This subtle engagement with proprioception, with memory and history, is an important component of a wider post-colonial reckoning. Graham 'remembers vividly his father telling him about the bones from the flooded urupaa (burial sites) that began to float on the water's surface as the Karaapiro Lake levels rose' (Giles 12). 'It will be obvious to most observers that ancestors are intertwined in the visual arts; they are the inspiration for much artistic endeavour. There is no art without them.' (Mead, 'Significance' 129). Graham and Rakena engage with what curator Candice Hopkins calls the 'transformative potential of beauty to address these legacies of trauma' and they do so in a way that adds

depth, heart and intimacy to that often legalistic, disruptive or bewildering process (White, 'Indigene' 39). We come here to the crucial relevance of *taonga*, those cultural treasures that carry ancestral energies and inform the present and future. Art becomes a communal practice and reaffirms identity, as Mead put it at the *Te Māori* exhibition in New York: 'The concept of *taonga* is central to an understanding of Māori aesthetics. Here we are not dealing with a theory of the beautiful for contemplation by sensitive beautiful people. Rather we have to think of power in art objects, of artistry of such magnificence that it elicits awe in the beholder and moves the self to respond' ('Te Māori' 129). Graham's sculptural forms, and Rakena's images become vessels of power and transmission, weaving loss from currents that inundate and transfigure past and prospective inundation and loss in the Pacific and Venice itself (Mane-Wheoki, 'Wakas' 7).

Significantly, $\bar{A}niwaniwa$ has played a part in Graham's tribe's own Treaty of Waitangi settlement processes. In a major *Art New Zealand* article on his work, Graham notes the installation has been used by his tribe 'extensively to express the sacrifices they have made in the name of 'progress' and to demonstrate our contribution to the nation's development.' That use has extended to presentations to the Office of Treaty Settlements, local government, the power company and other bodies, all of whom are involved in the Treaty settlement process (White, 'Indigene' 40). The work has been significant in those endeavours (Wilson). For Graham this exposure and utility 'suggests that art can have relevance beyond the seclusion of the art gallery' (White, 'Indigene' 40). In a substantial research paper, Rebecca Giles argues that white viewers she interviewed about the work 'certainly displayed a heightened awareness of the impact of the portrayed events upon the Maaori (*sic*) inhabitants' (25). Those people I have met on Graham's tribal territory seemed to regard the artwork as another relation; their eyes lit up, for it is about them and their families.

In New Zealand the trend is, incrementally, towards the resolution of grievance and the restoration of certain riverscapes, cultural and ecological: in October 2013 every single representative in Parliament agreed to the introduction of legislation for the settlement of Ngāti Koroki Kahukura's Treaty of Waitangi claims. The government now concedes Crown military action against Waikato tribes, including Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, led to 'grave injustices' and that the confiscation of Māori land in the Waikato area 'caused immense hardship' to Graham's tribe (Ngāti Koroki Claims Settlement Bill cls 9(1), 8(2)). As it notes in the legislation, the Crown seeks to atone for its wrongs, and offers a profound apology to Ngāti Koroki Kahukura; it also continues to commit to river clean-up projects, even as its other environmental law reforms policies reverse protective legislation (Palmer).

 \bar{A} niwaniwa offers an inclusive, evocative re-evaluation of loss and identity. A final sequence shows sequences of fires, enduring rivers of light emerging from recast video currents. While the images evoke the arson of a Ngāti Koroki meeting house, they also refer to the continuities and traditions that are passed on when the home fires are burning (Giles). The focus on healing and resilience remains, and continues to unfurl in international galleries and sites seven years after the first installation.

Gaston Bachelard called water 'a universal glue'—it compels, it binds, it attracts complexity. In the context of sometimes poorly understood legal and Māori rights issues, a depressed economy and ongoing racial tension, one risk in this latest water rights churn is that water, with its capacity to attract stories and draw people together, may yet be used as a force for division, when no one really wants that. As the power company that runs the dams on the Waikato River was prepared for partial sale, the company's website was filleted; any mention of the inundation of Horahora, and its attendant histories, was erased (Mighty River Power). The viewer seeks fragments, distant echoes in an electronic ether fed by the hum of turbines.

Rivers will continue to function as story channels and life-givers. They are often the repository of the oldest place names in a country, singing the memories of lost songs long after people have moved on. Sean Cubitt's insights ring true here: 'under the surface, where we go so infrequently, there it is not a question of how a woman remembers water, but how water remembers us.' In their creative engagement with the flow, their attempts to 'think like a river', these North American and Māori practitioners revision the forms and boundaries of reflection, taking us deeper into ancient, enduring currents of change and becoming.

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