

Article

# Composting Layers of Christchurch History

Rebecca Ream

Independent Researcher, Masterton, Wairarapa 5810, New Zealand; rream@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This is a poetic compost story. It is a situated tale of how I gradually began to shred my fantasy of being a self-contained responsible individual so I could become a more fruitful response-able Pākehā (for the purposes of this paper, a descendant of colonial settlers or colonial settler) from Christchurch (the largest city in the South Island of New Zealand), Aotearoa (The Māori (the Indigenous people of New Zealand) name for New Zealand) New Zealand. Poetic compost storying is a way for me to turn over Donna Haraway's composting ethico-onto-epistemology with critical family history and critical autoethnography methodologies. To this end, I, in this piece, trace how I foolishly believed that I could separate myself from my colonial family and history only to find that I was reinscribing Western fantasies of transcendence. I learnt by composting, rather than trying to escape my past, that I could become a more response-able Pākehā and family member.

**Keywords:** composting; colonial history; critical family history; critical autoethnography; Donna Haraway; Pākehā; Aotearoa New Zealand

## 1. Introduction

All manner of critters and lifeforms wriggle around in this natural cultural situated compost pile (Haraway 2016): Words made from keyboards, angry mouths, blood red flesh, sea and estuary smells collide. It is a bumpy, sometimes humble, sometimes bumptious compost (see Haraway 2016). It is without soft rhythm or harmonious happy endings. It is slushy and cold in the shade. It is dry and barren when the sun hits and the mud is baked dry, along with the eroded bare hills, knaggy lifeless soil and the lips of people that speak too much or not enough.

Still, the shade is a relief from the bright sun and the slushiness breeds many fertile lifeworlds that live quite happily in the muddy holes in the broken pavements in east Christchurch. In the winter, the bare hills warm people's backs and the smell of the ocean is vitally uplifting. The people too, in this compost, once they have finished shouting and raving, hold each other in the warmest of embraces and the laughter that erupts is so infectious it reverberates and taints and stains any imagined 'purity' running through minds and bushy wet mountains.

Compost storying is Haraway's (2016) latest call for salvaging, and staying with, troubled worlds. It is about response-able composing and decomposing wherein rich matter and meaningful matters are already entwined. Haraway's (2016, p. 31) composting philosophy pierces the boundaries of the self-contained human figure in Western traditions, making way for theories from mud and muddles that are always in the making.

Vitally, for this chapter, composting is about what we, earth critters, 'inherit in the flesh'. That is to say, composting is a recognition that we—human and not—inherit whom we touch within any encounter. In this sense, "partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds are consequent upon worldly subject [ . . . ] shaping entanglements" (Haraway 2016, p. 13). Such collisions, are at times violent and certainly non-innocent but find fertility in their contingency and capabilities of response (Haraway 2008, 2016).

I use composting in this article to work out "how to face settler heritage differently" (Haraway 2011, p. 5) by adding to the Harawayan compost pile, Bell's (2014, pp. 174–75)



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and Rose's (2004, pp. 12–13) meditations on Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of responsibility within their work on Indigenous-settler colonial relations. In particular, I am interested in the way Bell and Rose take up his provocation that we (in Levinas' case, humans) are already responsible for others, an insight that resonates with Haraway's (2008, 2016) and Barad's (2010, 2014) arguments that nothing exists before relation (human or not), the foundation of which informs both theorists' sense of response-ability.

My own sense of response-ability was aroused whilst scrambling around in the Tararua Ranges<sup>1</sup> and by my family in Christchurch that demanded attention. I had attempted to pretend I was not from where I was from; that I was not another violent compost layer of Canterbury<sup>2</sup>. I tried to tell myself that it was not my responsibility that my ancestors took part in irreparably devastating Kāi Tahu<sup>3</sup> livelihoods, because I was not them. Realising the folly of my self-contained pretence, my exterior began to tear, leak, decompose.

Two broad methodological strands are vital accomplices for my (de)composition, the first one being Sleeter's (2015, 2020) 'critical family history'. Sleeter's critical family history is important for White scholars in particular, given her own argument that there is a lack of social and cultural context in the work many White researchers produce when exploring their own family histories. The 'critical' in critical family history aims to address this and confront any desires by White cultures to erase, or gloss over, for example, how one's genealogy is situated racially. In the case of Pākehā, 'critical family history' is necessary in accounting for the colonial context in which ancestral families lived.

The other fecund methodological thread in this composting pile—closely aligned to critical family history—is critical autoethnography. Critical autoethnography was a necessary way for me to explore what troubled me about my family. In this sense, I use critical autoethnography in this piece not as a way to link the singular ('self') to the universal (see Denzin 2003, p. 268), a common interpretation of autoethnography. Rather, the critical autoethnography used here is implicitly relational and situated, drawing on critical theory to interrogate one's place in the world (Jones and Harris 2018; Mackinlay 2019). Put simply, critical autoethnography is a composting collaborator, being an uncertain tricky enterprise (Mackinlay 2019) that 'stay's with one's troubles' (Haraway 2016). In fact, whilst writing a draft of this article in academic prose, trouble rose as I realised my writing was not evoking what I wanted it to and I was compelled to change form; but as Liz Mackinlay (2019, p. 11) says:

[T]here is always already uncertainty around what [critical autoethnographic writing] will be. Will [it] take the form of a short story, poetry, fiction, novel, photographic or visual essay, script, personal essay, journal, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose [ . . . ] or perhaps all of these things at once?

I am drawn to Mackinlay's words, particularly the ones about fragmentation and layering. These are the compost methodologies I use in this paper as I "ruthlessly" (Mackinlay 2019, p. 11) ripped up most of the words I had written to form a sense of fragmentation, layering, composing and decomposing (see Haraway 2016).

Thus, this article takes a poetic shape, weaving theory with story in an attempt to illustrate how composting breaks down the Western binary between words and flesh, or matters and matter (Haraway 2016). I use composting in this piece then, to show how I learnt the fertility of response-ability through encounters with my family and the unsettled violence that we have inherited as Pākehā from Christchurch New Zealand.

## 2. Compost Layer One: Responsibility

It is Christchurch, Canterbury, in the 1990s.

The heavy weight of responsibility  
pulls my shoulders down  
as I watch my mother  
sit in her chair.

She is not angry anymore  
what a quiet  
Shameful relief.  
*How can I escape?*

The fire of rage has dissipated.  
Soon she will fade away entirely  
and be brought back to life by  
electroconvulsive therapy.  
ECT.  
*How can I escape?*

I am desperate  
to make her happy  
but I can't.  
*How can I escape?*

I can't ease her suffering  
of being  
a mad solo mother beneficiary  
with three daughters  
during Ruth Richardson's  
Ruthless Cuts  
([O'Connell Rapira 2019](#)).  
We dwell unhappily  
in a city built on  
marsh and much  
dirty desperation  
that every generation  
feels.  
*How can I escape?*

Feeling responsible makes me weak and raw.  
I'm 14  
and I hate myself.  
My mother is shouting.  
Then all four of us are screaming.  
*How can I escape?*

I'm anxious and scared  
and burning all the time  
with shame  
and rage  
my skin  
red and inflamed.  
*How can I escape?*

I despise the  
streets of Christchurch  
White trash Skinheads  
middle-class rugby heads  
yelling and screaming  
pumping the gas  
in their loud modified cars  
breaking beer glass after beer glass.  
Thumping heavy metal music,

petrol fumes and smog  
suffocate me.

*How can I escape?*

Daylight Victorianism:  
Putting on the Avon River  
The Garden City:  
Full of boxed hedges  
colourful roses  
and rhododendrons  
bedded  
in evenly cut squares.

*How can I escape?*

And still,  
my mother  
sits in her chair  
year  
upon year  
unable to muster the care  
I need.

*How can I escape?*

I don't fit in  
at church  
I'm too queer.  
I don't fit in  
at any school  
I'm too weird.  
I don't fit in  
at the university  
I'm too working class,  
too brazen,  
too angry,  
"too much" my mother says.

I am sculling  
cheap rum for total obliteration.  
Taking pills to make me fly  
out of there.  
Get me out of here.

*How?*

I cut the cord—  
a dripline  
filled with guilt and shame,  
and become  
self-contained.  
Sealed off from my family  
from Christchurch.  
Free from contamination,  
so I may be relieved  
of my miserable responsibility  
and the conservative racist place that stains  
and revolts me.

### 3. Compost Layer Two: The Fantasy of Purity

I am in the Tararua Forest Park  
Wairarapa, Aotearoa.  
Far from the dirty White trash streets,  
and Victorian England gardens  
of Christchurch.

Lush green foliage  
of Indigenous beech and podocarp trees  
flank me.  
Sun streams through  
the leaves gently blowing in the breeze,  
and dances on sparkling clear waters.  
Waterfalls rush and gush over uneven boulders  
pīwakawaka<sup>4</sup> flit over the track before me  
Tails fanned.  
They twitter;  
and tūi<sup>5</sup> melodiously call,  
shimmering in the light  
with proud white tufts  
on their chests.  
Kererū<sup>6</sup> swoop  
Wearing their green purple  
cloak.  
I choke  
On the sublimity—  
the ecstasy—  
the fantasy of purity.

Hot and sweaty  
I submerge my body  
in fresh mountain water,  
to ease my inflamed skin  
and heart.  
*I have escaped!*

I scrub the grit and grime  
of smoggy Christchurch  
the dry dust of barren Canterbury  
from me.

I wash the pain of guilt and shame  
from my thoughts and flesh,  
blissfully unaware what foolishness  
I was floating in.

### 4. Compost Layer Three: Trouble a/Underfoot

But walking back one day,  
under blue skies  
and leafy canopies,  
the bright skies over Tararua began to fade  
and became rather grey  
and cloudy,  
troubling and worrying.  
The tree-colour dulled

as the sun disappeared  
and the roots became slimy from the rain.  
My feet slipped  
and I fell.  
Branches tore my skin,  
warm trickles of red leaked.  
My hands sank through the dirt  
as I knelt  
on bloody knees  
on muddy leaves  
and [Haraway \(2008, 2016\)](#)  
laughed at me.

She teased me for thinking I could get away  
with living in a Western Fantasy  
of purity.

She bellyached over  
the way I pretend I can transcend  
the trouble  
the mud and muddle  
of where I was born:

White Canterbury  
home of the Crusaders<sup>7</sup>  
and sheep farmers,  
river punters  
and monarchy lovers,  
where the city of  
Christchurch,  
The Garden City  
has planted over  
Māori histories.

There is no escape,  
she said.

I am from my mother,  
mum.  
You are in my face.  
*Get out of my face!*  
But you can't.  
And I can't escape from  
the years of rough touch,  
(like you rubbing my chest with Vicks when I was sick  
and your wedding ring pressing into my skin),  
your motherly love.

I can't get rid of the imprints  
we made whilst  
scrambling under the sofa cushions  
for money to buy milk;  
or visiting the hospital  
where we would walk  
so slowly  
to get ice-cream.

I still remember the nights  
when all four of us would get drunk  
and be happy  
sitting and singing  
in the colonial city,  
a church of Protestant Christ  
apparently.

Without choice  
threads were formed;  
binds were made;  
knots were tied;  
that bound me to that place.  
and you mum.  
You (and me)  
woven together  
by force  
we who were born from  
ancestors who arrived on  
the First Four Ships—  
part of the White hordes that filled Christ's Church  
with his Protestant work ethic.

And so it was in  
my sanctuary,  
my purity  
my family-free fantasy  
that my Christchurch kin came crashing through.  
It was in the soil and sweat of Tararua  
where I leaked my mother  
and her mother  
and my grandmother's mother  
and my great grandmother's mother  
and my great great grandmother's mother,  
and my great great great grandmother's mother,  
the English working-class colonist Elizabeth Harper.  
On my hands and knees I touched them  
as they touched me.

So it was there,  
skin to soil  
rock, tree trunk,  
bloodied and bruised,  
that I am painfully taught  
history cannot be erased ([Barad 2010](#), p. 266).  
That subjects are formed through encounter,  
and the past is not a relic to be preserved or ignored  
but permanently inside of my limbs and thoughts.  
The past is an act of relation,  
inherited in the flesh.  
"Partners do not pre-exist their relating"  
([Haraway 2008](#), p. 165):  
Flesh and blood as matter—  
and *that matters*  
([Barad 2014](#); [Haraway 2008, 2016](#)).

By virtue of my red flesh and blood;  
 My angry anxious upbringing,  
 I am always response-able  
 towards my family from Christchurch  
 and the mess we caused.  
 And ignoring that (Bell 2014)  
 makes me  
 the worst coloniser of all.

### 5. Compost Layer Four: Inheriting in the Flesh

Haraway teaches  
 fleshy inheritance is what we are made of,  
 who we have touched, and retouched,  
 who has touched and retouched us,  
 human and not,  
 over the course of our lives  
 and deaths.

Barad says (Barad 2014, p. 81), “the past is always open”:  
 Facing history is  
 “to acknowledge and be responsive [ . . . ] to open oneself up”  
 (Barad 2010, p. 264 in Barad 2014, p. 183)  
 to our situated stories  
 to speak with our material ghosts;  
 like feeling generations of the city’s hard winter frosts  
 or enduring the memories of squeezing  
 into that tight Victorian box.  
 Or inhaling the heaviness of Christchurch smog  
 season after season:  
 To understand that  
 our bodies and faces are our inheritances  
 and who we are,  
 and who we are to become  
 (see Barad 2010, p. 264 in Barad 2014, p. 183).  
 This is compost—  
 kin-in-the-making.

My mother’s mother is long dead  
 but she lives in the frame of my face,  
 my nose,  
 my body fat and aches.

Mum’s mum was not a nice woman:  
 Self-contained in a hardened shell  
 to stop the truth seeping out  
 about her father.

Mum, what *have* you inherited?

Before being sent to  
 St Joseph’s Catholic Convent School  
 away from preying touch,  
 nana was a Protestant.

Her mother,  
 Jessie Elizabeth

born 30 April 1906,  
cleaned the post office  
like nana did when she became a wife and a mother  
([Evans and Evans 1994](#)).

Cleanliness is next to Godliness  
is the Protestant Work ethic  
that my mum and her three children  
inherited, even if we were Catholic.

We are  
a White working-class family  
from Church of England, Christchurch  
where the Cathedral sits in the centre.  
But we are not clean  
No matter how hard we scrub  
We are (the) dirt(y) poor.

Stained with sexual assault,  
thick like blood,  
soaked with crime and alcohol:  
Nobody talks about it—  
instead we all carry it  
in our inflamed flesh.

Jessie Elisabeth was the daughter of Ethel May.  
Ethel May married a working-class Brown  
From Dunedin<sup>8</sup>—why did they stay in Christchurch?

Ethel May and Thomas Brown  
lived in the working-class suburb of  
Woolston.

Thomas Brown worked at the  
Woolston Tannery ([Evans and Evans 1994](#)),  
making flesh and skin  
wearable, bearable.  
The Tannery was opened in 1874  
by Gustav Lindstorm  
cementing Woolston  
as an industrial hub.  
The Tannery is now  
Cassels & Sons Brewing Co,  
my sister's 'local'.

Before she was married  
Ethel May was a Harper,  
the daughter of  
Alfred Benjamin:  
Born in 1856, Heathcote,  
near Woolston  
([Evans and Evans 1994](#)).

Heathcote:  
The place where  
Dr James Earle  
bought a farm and a plot in town in 1851.

The going rate was  
120 pounds for approximately 60 acres  
([Retter 1977](#)).

Earle was a surgeon,  
the Randolph's surgeon.  
The Randolph was one of the  
First Four Ships  
that arrived and colonised  
Canterbury in 1850  
([Evans and Evans 1994](#); [Evans 2007](#); [Retter 1977](#)).

Earle was also a squire's doctor in Norfolk England  
who employed John Harper.  
So John went from working for the squire,  
to working for the surgeon  
and he and his wife Elizabeth sailed  
to New Zealand,  
to the 'New World'  
accompanying him  
([Evans and Evans 1994](#)).

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It is December 1850.  
Lyttelton  
The Randolph ship arrives  
but the barracks are overcrowded  
tents and shanties have been erected—  
there is no running water,  
there is no sewerage system:  
It is summer in the 'New World'.  
Elizabeth was used to rough conditions—  
she had given birth to a child on board,  
but not this.  
With new born and toddler, Elizabeth  
refused to find refuge  
in the smelly squalor  
and walked over the hill to the 'Heathcote'  
(Ōpāwaho) River.  
There she stayed in a cave  
awaiting their new home  
working on the doctor's farm  
([Evans and Evans 1994](#)).

Elizabeth's grit has been inherited by us  
passed through her son Alfred Benjamin.

The coarse sense of  
staunch independence  
(like when Elizabeth caught her husband cheating  
and sent him to the shed)  
([Evans and Evans 1994](#))  
is the husbandless Jessie Elizabeth  
When he was imprisoned.

It is also my husbandless mother

storming around  
in her raggedy shorts and purple jandals  
lined with grime.  
Her roar at a family perpetrator:  
Her love scratchy but sure.

My youngest sister too  
blowing plumes of smoke  
steadying her grip and grit,  
matriarch in the making.

And my niece  
at the tender age of three  
spreading her fire  
everywhere she pleases

and I laugh so hard when mum tells me  
nana told her husband to eat grass  
from the back yard  
when he asked one night,  
“What’s for tea?”  
and he did.  
And then there is me  
pretending to be  
shy quiet sensitive  
but really,  
as rowdy and abrupt as these women  
that are my family.

## 6. Compost Layer Five: Responsibility

Our family inheritance  
is the gruff in our speech  
the clenching of our teeth  
the sweat when we are cleaning  
and the hurt in our feet.

Our inheritance is open  
ghostly ([Barad 2010](#))  
troubled  
unsettled:  
Handed down, literally  
through tough hands  
and rough touch.

But the land our family settled on  
was always unsettled.  
and no matter how hard  
we settlers tried  
the foundation of our new homes  
was always going to leak  
the past.

Christchurch was built on  
Marsh ground—wetlands.  
To the unsettled settlers:  
Swamp, mud, quagmire  
(see [Cubrinovski et al. 2011](#)).

A seasonal sign  
was drainage  
when it rained (Retter 1977, p. 187).

To cover up the problems  
roads were built because  
tussock-covered streets  
“were no longer acceptable”  
(Retter 1977, p. 187 )  
in a British Colonial City.  
Bridges too were built  
over all the waterways  
so settlers could make their way.  
But floods continued  
to raise problems for  
unsettled settlers  
trying to settle on  
ground made for shifting.

July 1861  
the Christchurch paper, The Press:  
A plea to the municipal council  
the night fog of the city smells like sewage!  
Settlers are sick  
because of their untreated, uncontained waste (Retter 1977).

Edward Dobson,  
the provincial engineer,  
proposes a cheap solution:  
Raise the land.  
Raise the level of the streets  
so all manner of runoff  
may run into the rivers (Retter 1977).  
But did anyone ask why drainage was such a problem to begin with?

Before the passing of  
The Canterbury Association Land Acts,  
that allowed construction of roads, railways canals,  
forests to be felled,  
diversion and damming of rivers and streams and  
the drainage of wetlands for farms and  
building Victorian private properties  
(Fairburn 1989; Waitangi Tribunal 1991, p. 504),  
Christchurch was  
the site of many mahinga kai<sup>9</sup>  
(Tau et al. 1992).

1848 (just two years before  
hordes of colonists arrived on four large ships)  
the “hit-man of colonisation”,  
(Walker 2004, p. 103)  
Governor George Grey  
ordered a hit  
on Kāi Tahu,  
katiaki<sup>10</sup> of the largest piece of land  
any iwi<sup>11</sup> had

in the country  
([Waitangi Tribunal 1991](#)).

Henry Tacy Kemp  
Native secretary to Wellington  
dirty deed appointee  
arrives in Akaroa.

The beautiful hilly costal land  
That lives in my chest  
Where my mother  
pushed me into the world.  
Where she had me baptised  
and blessed.  
Where we  
walked along the beach together  
where we laughed  
and celebrated my birth  
where we commemorated  
the signing of  
The Treaty of Waitangi<sup>12</sup>  
Between the Crown and Kāi Tahu . . .

Kemp promised to preserve  
'reserves'—but he reversed his words.  
He promised partnership—  
it is all in the deed.

But what kind of partnership can there be?  
when most of that Southern Island  
was sold for 2000 pounds ([Waitangi Tribunal 1991](#))?  
Between 13,551,400 and 20,000,000 acres  
all gone to the Crown.

Does that make your eyes water?  
It makes mine well.  
So I blink blink blink but  
it is still 2000 pounds.  
Paid in instalments—  
lest the 'natives' spend it all  
at once.

In the end Kāi Tahu  
were given "minuscule" reserves;  
areas in which people were "confined";  
areas that were "barely capable of maintaining"  
people at "a mere subsistence level" ([Waitangi Tribunal 1991](#), p. 388).

But all mahinga kai were protected—  
that's what the deed says, right?  
The English words are written in black and white.

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Kāi Tahu:  
People of Te Wai Pounamu<sup>13</sup>.  
The island home of Pounamu<sup>14</sup>  
gifted from the rivers.

Their mahinga kai:  
 The sandy salty estuaries and seas.  
 The fresh water wetlands  
 plants and trees.  
 In fact, what became Canterbury  
 was one large mahinga kai actually (Tau et al. 1992).

Larders brimming with ground birds,  
 parrots, ducks,  
 eels, flounder, lampreys  
 and white bait (O'Regan 1989, pp. 253–54).

That Kemp promised to protect.  
 (Waitangi Tribunal 1991). But instead,  
 we shat in them.

### 7. Compost Layer Six: First Southerners

Potential partners of compost worlds  
 Compost response-ability  
 offering “fruitful possibilities”  
 for talking with Kāi Tahu.  
 Hearing and sharing with Kāi Tahu,  
 listening and reciprocating,  
 learning our obligations  
 (Bell 2014, p. 175).  
 Facing our defecation.

Learning:  
 Te Tiriti o Waitangi.  
 Honouring promises  
 and land deeds.  
 Understanding that Kāi Tahu  
 would never cede  
 their livelihoods,  
 their sovereignty, ever  
 (Waitangi Tribunal 1991).

Why would anyone relinquish  
 Such bounty?

Alluvial soil;  
 blood lines of rich history;  
 veins dug over slowly  
 with each other.  
 A home  
 hundreds of years  
 in the making (O'Regan 1989).

Blood line one, Waitaha:  
 From the Ūruao canoe  
 east Polynesia (O'Regan 1989).  
 Ancient foundations  
 for the South  
 Te Wai Pounamu (O'Regan 1989; Potiki 2016).

Blood line two, Mamoe:  
 Migrated south

16th century.  
 Kāti Mamoe  
 said to be  
 descendants of  
 Hotu Mamoe,  
 a woman (O'Regan 1989; Potiki 2016).

Blood line three, Ngāi Tahu:  
 From the east  
 near where Mamoe used to be.

Kāi Tahu Whānui<sup>15</sup>:  
 People from a world  
 of fishing in double-hulled canoes,  
 trekking over mountains  
 planting, cultivating  
 breeding certain species,  
 gardening, hunting,  
 subsisting and trading  
 prolifically.

Kāi Tahu:  
 People outside our Western self-contained fancies  
 of harmony.  
 A culture I hardly know of  
 not *really*.

For Kāi Tahu  
 are not an Other  
 to soothe our troubled 'self'  
 or a culture to fill our empty shells.

What *have* we done?  
 What *have* we become?  
 and what are we *doing*?  
 because of that fact-fiction

#### 8. Re-Turning the Compost/Re-Turning (to) Christchurch

Well, I'm re-turning (to)  
 Christchurch  
 when kin and kind  
 come to mind,  
 a Harawayan  
 etymological game.  
 Words as flesh;  
 ancestors.

Kin and kind:  
 Both derive from  
 the Greek *genos*  
 and the Latin *genus*  
 showing me how  
 'race' and family  
 is about belonging,  
 where you come from.

Becoming Pākehā  
is about family  
and nurturing  
our capabilities of response  
not innocently or guiltily  
but staying stuck in the colonial mud,  
the muddle of who we are.

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It is my sister's birthday.  
We are sitting at "the brewery" (her local)  
with our mum.  
Woolston Cemetery  
is 120 metres away  
Where Elizabeth Harper (de)composes.  
The Heathcote River flows  
between the cemetery  
and the pub  
where we are sitting—  
where mum's great grandfather worked  
tanning hides.  
We don't know this yet.  
We are not a shiny clean  
Family From the Suburbs —  
A family from colonial wealth and  
colourful flowers  
where history records are ordered and kept  
(in expensive furniture—probably old too),  
to show who was and  
who was not on  
The First Four Ships.

We are working-class muddlers,  
unsettled colonial settlers  
who have inherited our ancestry  
in our jaws, noses and grunt and grit.

I realise this is me  
learning decoloniality:  
Practising  
not ignoring  
my response-ability ([Bell 2014](#))  
in the place I am from.

I have only just begun  
and it's already uncomfortable  
thinking of what I'm sitting on  
in East Christchurch.  
Layers of violent history.  
Our White belonging  
cemented in the dirty streets.

But I also sense my mother's warm touch  
and recall that playful glint in her eyes at times  
when she is not so low.

I feel my sister's tight hug—  
 strength and softness all at once.  
 I am lifted by my three year-old niece's cheeky smile—  
 and I feel afflicted, infected  
 with compost love (see [Haraway 2003, 2016](#)).

My re-turn to Christchurch  
 was not a return from whence I lived  
 as an overly anxious responsible youth.  
 It was a re-turn:  
 A re-turning of Christchurch compost layers  
 comprising;  
 "a multiplicity of processes,  
 such as the kinds earthworms revel in  
 while helping to make compost  
 or otherwise being busy at work and at play:  
 turning the soil over and over—  
 ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it,  
 burrowing, all means of aerating the soil,  
 allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life"  
 ([Barad 2014](#), p. 168).

From within this family then,  
 (perhaps like an earth worm)  
 I begin to comprehend,  
 we, Christchurch Pākehā  
 could re-turn  
 our attention to the violence we caused  
 to pay the price  
 of how and why and where we belong.

We Pākehā do really need  
 to sort our shit out.

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## Notes

- 1 The Tararua Forest Park (government owned and managed) lies in both the Kāpiti and Wairarapa regions of New Zealand, both situated at the bottom of the North Island, western and eastern respectively.
- 2 The region in which Christchurch lies.
- 3 Largest Māori iwi/tribe of the South Island.
- 4 A New Zealand fantail.
- 5 A New Zealand parson bird.
- 6 A New Zealand wood pigeon.
- 7 Local rugby team.

- 8 Southern town in New Zealand.
- 9 Food gathering place.
- 10 Guardian/caretaker.
- 11 Tribe.
- 12 The Treaty of Waitangi was a document written by William Hobson (1792–1942) the then governor of New Zealand and was eventually signed by 540 Māori chiefs, including Kāi Tahu, as it travelled from Waitangi around the country. It's main purpose was to signal a formal partnership between Britian and Māori despite the obvious breaches perpetrated by Grey and Kemp, for example, in the following years (O'Regan 1989; Waitangi Tribunal 1991; Walker 2004).
- 13 South Island.
- 14 New Zealand jade.
- 15 Collective name for Waitaha, Mamoe and Ngāi/Kāi Tahu.

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