



## ResearchSpace@Auckland

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There are words that are used when cultures meet – collision, encounter – that draw the reader, the listener, towards their own conclusions – a violent act, a skirting of the issues, a lack of connectivity. Then there are lived moments that take issue with these words. Picture, if you can, Nobel Laureate Roald Hoffman, speaking on behalf of the Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology 6 Conference manuhiri, inside a space that is both the actual – a lecture theatre at the University of Auckland – and the transcendent – assuming the role of marae for the purposes of appropriately welcoming guests. In this dual space, a series of roles were enacted, a number of languages spoken, several cultures connected with each other.

[insert Hoffman speaking at powhiri image here]

Professor Hoffman spoke of the need for science, scientists, to learn from the values of the indigenous culture he experienced – grounded within a concern for ethics and morality. At this moment, within the transformed space of the Owen G. Glenn Building, nothing was lost in translation. Hoffman, who at times decries the role he sometimes feels forced into as a defender of the arts and humanities to science,<sup>1</sup> was making a conscious attempt to connect, to occupy, as he calls it, “the tense middle.”<sup>2</sup>

[insert Hoffman hongiri image here]

It is this tense middle that I am interested in. I’ve been a margins-dweller much of my life, raised the daughter of a scientist and a teacher in a university town, wandering in and out of the discourses of law, and literature, and history as I formed my own intellectual identity. Professionally, I’ve become an observer; one who sits a little removed from academic practise and attempts to interpret what is going on. Aware constantly of my subject position, and theoretically constructed by Michel Foucault’s notion that one is subject to/of a discourse.<sup>3</sup>

So what was I doing at AMN6? Observing; trying to come to grips with the story. Attempting to understand Hoffman’s tense middle, which linguistically at least, reminds me so much of the idea of liminality; literally “occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.”<sup>4</sup> AMN6 walks this line – with a critical aim of the conference being to ensure that public and community events and talks surround the high intellectual discourse taking place at the centre. *The Art of the Invisible*, in which nanotech students and researchers created works of art at their microscopes; Roald

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<sup>1</sup> Interview notes, Monday 11 February 2013, in possession of the author.

<sup>2</sup> Roald Hoffman, ‘The Tense Middle’, NPR’s *This I Believe* series, July 3, 2006. Access the file here <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5519776>

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, ed. ‘The Work of Representation’ in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practises*, London, 1997, p.44.

<sup>4</sup> <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/liminal>

Hoffman's Auckland Museum Institute talk *A Science All About Change; A Very Small Show* – the schools presentation by keynotes Joanna Aizenberg, Don Eigler and Dan Nocera; these events enact the MacDiarmid Institute's mission to engender passion for science and innovation across society.

How successful can a science organisation be at dwelling in this tense middle, occupying this threshold space? During some of the downtime of the busy week that was AMN 6, I sat with Joanna Aizenberg and her husband, Michael, Krzysztof Matyjaszewski, and Adam Pron. Pron and Matyjaszewski interchanged Polish and French and both could converse to the Aizenbergs in Russian. To us, the largely monolingual New Zealanders, they spoke English. Professor Pron posited the question: could any of us give our conference talks in our native tongues? Amid laughter, the answer seemed to be no. Breaking it down into my language, that of literary criticism, the discourse of science – overwhelmingly in English – constructs the topic, creating a situation in which there are prescribed ways for talking about these things that in itself produces notions of inclusion and exclusion. To give a keynote address in Russian would quite literally find the speaker without the prescribed language in which the discourse of science is presumed to be expressed.

[insert image of Joanna w. Krzys at the Gus Fisher, laughing]

It is this discourse of science that we're trying to connect with, at a time in New Zealand, and internationally, when science literacy and the pressing need for publics and communities to be able to judge science well become increasingly important. If, as stated by the late Sir Paul Callaghan, science is to be “the compass on the voyage we must all make into the twenty-first century,” then understanding the utility of that compass is imperative. <sup>5</sup>

So we return to the possibility – or lack thereof – of engendering a passion for science and innovation across society. From my observer position – neither inside the discourse nor entirely outside it, I began to formulate a theory. New Zealand-educated scientists tend to be monolingual – at best they may have studied a language at secondary school. As adults, they speak a colloquial language, New Zealand English, and a professional language, Science. Those international scientists gathered around a table with me and others one night, moving between colloquial English, Science, Russian, Polish, and French; they are multilingual. I wonder if this embedding within several discourses in fact enables better connection, better communication? This is not a dig at monolingual New Zealanders – my schoolgirl French is now just that; my Te Reo, at least, gets used professionally, and thus remains active – but instead, an observation.

Once upon a time, to be awarded a PhD from a New Zealand university, one had to demonstrate proficiency in another language. My father studied Russian before graduating with his PhD in Electrical Engineering. Perhaps, just perhaps, this was

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<sup>5</sup> Sir Paul Callaghan, Te Papa, Transit of Venus broadcast lecture, Radio New Zealand National, 8 June 2004.

intended to give young scientists more ways of seeing the world, more diverse understandings of the publics and communities they live within? It is a given that people extol the need for going away to do one's PhD, or to do a post-doc, but perhaps more we should encourage going somewhere else – somewhere outside the English-speaking world, somewhere where the languages you take with you have no meaning. Or, focusing on earlier in the education system, prioritise the acquisition of at least one other language at primary and/or secondary school? A recent information paper published by the Royal Society of New Zealand, *Languages in Aotearoa New Zealand*, summarises the research regarding the benefits of language learning: roll-on benefits to other areas of learning, identity, brain plasticity, trade etc.<sup>6</sup>

Watching from the outside at a large international science conference like Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology 6, the benefits of language learning seem manifest. If science and its publics are to make meaningful connections, if we are to engender a passion for science and innovation across society, we need to talk and listen to each other more. Familiar with the notion of 'lost in translation' from language studies, perhaps this process can become less fraught, more fruitful, and friendlier.

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<sup>6</sup> The Royal Society of New Zealand, *Languages in Aotearoa New Zealand*, March 2013. Full text available here: <http://www.royalsociety.org.nz/expert-advice/information-papers/yr2013/languages-in-aotearoa-new-zealand/>