

Echoes, Visions: A Potluck House Manifesto

Preface

We are a Polynesian clan. We are religious, mythological, Shamanist. *Hau* does not begin with us; yet it flows through us. We are a practice of and experiment in the social. We practice and experiment with intention.

Five is the number of fingers on a hand, and our living project has a tactile tangibility. It is as real as our imagination(s) permit. We offer, thus, five declarations: projectiles aimed at disruption(s) of the present, conceived as echoes of the past and visions for the future. We list them above and unravel them below.

(1) *We are a Polynesian clan.*

Sometimes we read Marcel Mauss. Sometimes we find Mauss's masterpiece *The Gift* buried under stacks of textbooks and coursebooks, dirty clothes and dirty pans. Sometimes we find it an uncanny – yes, uncanny – representation of Potluck House.

"To understand completely the institution of 'total services' and of potlatch, one has still to discover the explanation of the two other elements that are complimentary to the former. The institution of 'total services' does not merely carry with it the obligation to reciprocate presents received. It also supposes two other obligations just as important: the obligation, on the one hand, to give presents, and on the other, to receive them. The complete theory of these three obligations, of these three themes relating to the same complex, would yield a satisfactory basic explanation for this form of contract among Polynesian clans..." (Mauss 13)

To give, to receive, to reciprocate: such is Mauss's triangulation of potlatch obligation, and such is our potluck trinity. In this sense, the "total services" Mauss identifies among his (dubious, slippery) category of Polynesian clans share a structural isomorphism with the staple project of Potluck House – namely, the hosting of potluck dinners. We give, we receive, we reciprocate: food. So too with our guests. Given such conditions – they are a "form of contract," if you wish – we too are a dubious category. We too are slippery.

We are a Polynesian clan.

(2) *We are religious, mythological, Shamanist.*

Mauss's potlatch and Potluck House's potlucks thus share certain parallels. Such is the work of Mauss's echoes. Yet let it be known: we cannot share Mauss's affinity for the idiom of totality. By his definition our service is total; but his definition is flawed. Claude

Levi-Strauss would inherit Marcel Mauss's university chair, and with it Mauss's proto-structuralist leanings. The structuralism of our post-, then, lies in part in *The Gift*. Forgive us, Marcel! – but we find such gestures towards totalizing analysis facile and preposterous, even authoritarian. In response to Mauss's apparatus of the total, we submit a politics of the fragmentary.

“The North American potlatch has been well enough studied as regards everything concerning the form of the contract itself... For the potlatch is much more than a juridical phenomenon: it is one that we propose to call 'total.' It is religious, mythological, and Shamanist, since the chiefs who are involved represent and incarnate their ancestors and the gods, whose name they bear, whose dances they dance and whose spirits possess them.” (Mauss 38)

We believe that indications (fabrications) of the total always hide in the serial conjunction: here, “religious, mythological, and Shamanist.” The “and” proposes the end of a list, the closure of a stable whole, a picture of a homeostatic social landscape. Lies. Our description of the social tends instead towards a prescription, and (! – easy now) a sense of the future's changeability. The social: fragmentary in being never totally whole, endlessly malleable in being never totally stable.

We take our cue from Michel de Certeau, who proposes asyndeton as the textual device par excellence for the production of absence, the acknowledgement of “something not here,” the exposure of total presence as hegemonic deception. Asyndeton, in short, is a technology of erasure – it produces the disappearance of the serial conjunction, the insertion of gaps (voids) between words in a series. From “religious, mythological, and Shamanist” to “religious, mythological, Shamanist.” The series comes un-glued; its closure is no longer complete; each word is a little more alone; they are not linked as they once were. Asyndeton is the advancing tide: it separates the continuity of a landscape into a seascape of archipelagos. We are glad for this fragmentation, it makes us smile, for the production of such spaces-between is a necessary pre-condition of the vision of changeability we propose. Stability dissolves, and Polynesian clans live on islands.

We are a Polynesian clan. We are religious, mythological, Shamanist.

(3) *Hau does not begin with us; yet it flows through us.*

Nonetheless, we are ambivalent about our status as island-dwellers, for much of the evidence of our being as such – and it is all around us – gives us pause. Labyrinthine subway systems, deafening (if fragile) networks of air travel, the ever-expanding technologization of communication, the (albeit generally environmentally welcome) ossification of overland travel, whether by foot or by wheel: the spaces between us have always existed – our relations to each other have never been immediate, un-mediated – but we cannot help being troubled by the means we now have to traverse these distances.

Taking the 1 Train from Morningside Heights to Times Square invisibilizes the Upper West Side (a small crime); flying from Beijing to Ulaanbaatar erases the Gobi Desert (a

severe crime); sending a text message or email eviscerates aural communication (a more ambiguous crime, but still seemingly a crime). Morningside and Ulaanbaatar, Beijing and Times Square, we and all of you – islands in an overtly new archipelago, atomized in part by the very outriggers we've dreamed up to convey us.

Mauss's *hau*, which he alludes to here as a "special intrinsic power," is one form of elixir for this illness we identify.

"The potlatch is also a phenomenon of social structure: the gathering together of tribes, clans, and families, even of peoples, brings about a remarkable state of nerviness and excitement... Finally, even from the juridical viewpoint...we must add this: the material purposes of the contracts, the things exchanged in them, also possess a special intrinsic power, which causes them to be given and above all to be reciprocated." (Mauss 38)

Special intrinsic power, *hau*: the spirit of the gift, the autonomy of the gift, the self-objectivity of the gift, the auto-erotica of the gift. Its onanism, as it were. Like Marx's commodity form, the spirit of the gift is that strange paradox that exists beyond quotidian materialism (does not begin with us) yet possesses the everyday with all the force of institutional power (it flows through us). *Hau* thus partakes of a basic logic of the social, already partially worked out in Aristotle's *Ethics*. All human beings are born into pre-existing communities, Aristotle tells us, and in that sense the social is irreducibly a priori. And yet, whence the social if not from human beings? So too with *hau*: the spirit of the gift precedes us, even as it courses through us.

It is *hau*, Mauss tells us, which causes things to be given, received, and especially reciprocated – and so it produces a centripetal vector, something that mitigates against the centrifugal atomization we diagnose. It is the gift in the outrigger canoe, the visionary redemption of modernity's fragmented archipelagos. It is, simply, the coming together of people for purposes of exchange, the crossing of voids – *necessary* and potentially *revolutionary* voids, as we suggest, but voids nonetheless, the void of the Gobi erased by the airplane – in the production of dynamic relationships.

We submit: *hau*, the intrinsic power of the gift, exists in our potluck dinners; it directs giving, receiving, reciprocating; it is balm for our island lives. *Hau*: the spirit of the gift: the spirit of the potlatch: the spirit of the potluck. The unknowability of our urban archipelago fades on a warm Friday evening. Dishes accumulate, people accumulate, conversation rises, and suddenly we know, we are sure, and we smile: gatherings of tribes and clans produce "a remarkable state of nerviness and excitement." Polynesian clans enjoy nerviness and excitement.

We are a Polynesian clan. We are religious, mythological, Shamanist. *Hau* does not begin with us; yet it flows through us.

(4) *We are a practice of and experiment in the social.*

We congregate around a singular sense of social identity (we are a clan), yet that identity

partakes of a pluralizing and de-centering dissemination (we are religious, mythological, Shamanist, *heterogeneously*). Such is our distribution of the social: we are singular plural.

“It is a question of practicing singularities, that is, that which gives itself and shows itself only in the plural. The Latin *singuli* means ‘one by one,’ and is a word that exists only in the plural. Ipseity exists only as singularly distributed. Insofar as one can speak in the following way, ipseity is ‘itself’ distribution, dissemination, the originary sharing of that which never *is – ipse itself* – and is nowhere present as such, ‘in person.’ *Iipse* ‘is’ its own dispersion.” (Nancy TK)

“Being” singular plural, following Jean-Luc Nancy, means locating the *logos* of our idealism in the materiality of the quotidian. As such our vision becomes instantiated in a practice, as it were, of everyday life: meetings, cooking circles, dinners and breakfasts, late-night snacks and various comings and goings. We practice insofar as we apply (ideas). We experiment insofar as we test (ideas). Practice, then, comes to double as experiment: the backward glance of our potluck-as-echo merges with the forward glance of our potluck-as-vision. The intervening production of an ever-mobile present manifests itself as that practical social experiment we call Potluck House.

We offer this experiment as a kind of hope and a prayer, a melody composed for the future, a contrapuntal ritornello that begins as a solo and ends in full orchestral bloom. The changeability of the future; a liberating sense of a pluralizing seascape; our willing submission to *hau*’s demand that we join together socially: such is the timbre of our echoes and visions. It builds like a welcome tide. It finds us on our island. It washes our toes in the sand.

We are a Polynesian clan. We are religious, mythological, Shamanist. *Hau* does not begin with us; yet it flows through us. We are a practice of and experiment in the social.

(5) *We practice and experiment with intention.*

Potluck House epitomizes the accident, not because it came about by chance, but because it is directed towards an adversarial engagement with a gripping systematicity that admits of no mistake, no exteriority. We propose the other of deliberation: we are non-deliberation, deliberately. Our intention is non-intention.

Derrida has written of Bataille’s laughter in the face of Hegelian dialectics, his destruction of German idealism through something like the ribald under-discourse Bakhtin read in Rabelais . So too do we laugh: we are not dialectically recoverable. Such is our intention – escape through creative production, resistance through the nomadology of our local knowledge, the production of lines of flight in the arteries of the urban *nomos*. We are like Deleuze: we paddle our Polynesian canoes to the holey spaces of Eisenstein’s *Strike*.

But our intention can never be whole. Mauss quotes Tamati Ranaipiri, a Maori who could be said to narrate (at length, admittedly) our ambiguity:

“I will speak to you about the *hau*....The *hau* is not the wind that blows – not at all. Let us suppose that you possess a certain article (*taonga*) and that you give me this article.....Now, I give this article to a third person who, after a certain lapse of time, decides to give me something as payment in return (*utu*). He makes a present to me of something (*taonga*). Now, this *taonga* that he gives me is the spirit (*hau*) of the *taonga* that I had received from you and that I had given to *him*. The *taonga* that I received for these *taonga* (which came from you) must be returned to you. It would not be fair (*tika*) on my part to keep these *taonga* for myself, whether they were desirable (*rawe*) or undesirable (*kino*). I must give them to you because they are a *hau* of the *taonga* that you gave me. If I kept this other *taonga* for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the *hau*, the *hau* of personal property, the *hau* of the *taonga*, the *hau* of the forest.” (Mauss 11)

Mauss mobilizes Tamati Ranaipiri’s words as a recapitulation of the way *hau* is very much outside of us, despite its coursing through us. Without having created *hau*, we are beholden to it: it is the spirit of the gift. *Hau* guides our intention; *hau* is the horizon of our possibility. Yet within the limits it prescribes – its limit is one way to imagine the structural limits of the cultural, the way in which “culture” builds an architecture of action, a space *with borders* within which we act with relative (never complete) freedom – we mark out our intention to construct a communal zone, a zone of autonomy (always temporary) that knows its boundaries disrespectfully while playing freely within them.

Thus we offer Potluck House as an intentional accident. We offer our communal operations as both a diagnosis of social ills (echoes) and a prescription of a social future (visions). Through the production of our open space – a space in which it is most often a gift economy of food that serves as the tie that binds – we address our ambivalent status as a Polynesian clan. We do not pretend that our humble experiment, however semantically attributed, can alone produce the visions we dream. Yet our vocabulary does not accommodate despair. Like Jean Genet we have bound our lives to failures sanguine, deeply and without regret. *Un captif amoraux*: we too, prisoners of love.

Perhaps, finally, we read too much. Perhaps what we’ve done with our project is staged a picaresque drama of our own, a theater of knight errantry for a new century. From our point of view, nothing could be more acceptable. Mauss and others give us lenses, material for the experiment we practice. His potlatch is our potluck, his *hau* a bowl of pumpkin soup. At times we traffic in cumbersome language, but don’t let us fool you. We are island-dwellers, after all: it is the everyday we are after, a *practice* of the everyday. Otherwise, like, we’d only be eating coconuts. Dig?

Thus: some plain language to bring in the pinky of our five-fingered manifesto. Whence? Mauss’s epigraph, of course – a selection from the *Havamal*, an old poem (he tells us) of the Scandinavian Edda. Laughter for laughter.

With weapons and clothes
Friends must give pleasure to one another;
Everyone knows that for himself [through his
Own experience].
Those who exchange presents with one another
Remain friends the longest
If things turns out successfully.

One must be a friend
To one's friend,
And give present for present;
One must have
Laughter for laughter
And sorrow for lies. (Mauss 1-2)

Yes. We are a Polynesian clan. We are religious, mythological, Shamanist. *Hau* does not begin with us; yet it flows through us. We are a practice of and experiment in the social. We practice and experiment with intention.

Works Cited

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. W.W. Norton, New York: 1990 paperback ed.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Info TK.