Dear Stronach Family:

The last few months have been an emotional rollercoaster for me. The Stronach Prize is the highlight of my career so far and I feel extremely fortunate to be able to spend the better part of this year working independently in what I love for such an important cause. Shortly after receiving the Prize, sadly my father, with whom I was very close, suddenly passed away. Coincidentally, my thesis work on which my Stronach project is based was about loss and recovery. The project has now therefore become more personal than it already was. I envision helping the Rapanui to create a space for regenerating their connections with their dispossessed landscape as much as they will be able to help me come to terms with my father’s loss and to find new ways of connecting with him. To give myself time to recover, though, I decided to delay my 9-month Stronach project such that it will now run from October 2014 to June 2015. In this first letter-home I therefore describe preliminary steps toward the start of the project.

I start this letter-home with my experience working with Te Pou Huke, the Rapanui artist who inspired my Stronach project, in Davis, California in May 2014. This experience led me to revise some points of my original Stronach project proposal. When I was conducting fieldwork in Easter Island, Te Pou and I met a Davis-based entrepreneur who expressed interest to hire Te Pou to paint a mural on the main wall for the inauguration of his kava bar in Davis:

![Figure 1](image-url)  
**Figure 1.** The mural of the Davis kava bar before Te Pou begun to paint it. Photo taken by Pablo Seward, April 2014.
The entrepreneur was well aware that kava is a sacred plant in Polynesian culture, and gave Te Pou full artistic license to paint a mural through which this aspect of kava consumption could be expressed to customers of the bar (Polynesian and otherwise). Having arranged Te Pou’s trip to California, I accompanied him as he brainstormed and sketched tentative designs for the mural and then began to execute them:

One of the most interesting aspects of this process was how Te Pou conceived of the act of making the mural. For Te Pou making the mural was much more than a job, much more even than the precise deployment of artistic skills; it was a chance to open a new space where to relate to the beings he was painting and a chance to research and learn more about kava (which though quintessentially Polynesian cannot be grown and therefore was never used in Easter Island). In my thesis one of the topics I inquired into was how through art certain Rapanui people may interact with emplaced other-than-human persons generically known as *varua*. My assumption was that this aspect of art for

**Figure 2.** The mural of the Davis kava bar about 2 weeks in. Photo taken by Pablo Seward. May 2014.
the Rapanui would not be present for Te Pou when painting the mural, for he was doing it in a place and context so foreign to those normal in the island. However, as Te Pou told me one morning while he was painting the mural:

The *varua* are with me here, now. In the shower every morning I recite *hakaara* [genealogy] and I feel their presence. I also feel their presence in intimate moments with the characters I paint on the mural. Like now, as I paint the forehead of this *maori* [expert] I remember my grandfather and there he is! Yesterday I almost fell from the scaffolding as I was walking backwards. But suddenly I felt an urge to turn around and I did not fall. It was the *varua.*

The final form of the mural, as seen below, is one that can be summarized by the figure of time-through-space. The depth of the mural is a metonymy for time. Time, in turn, is doubly signified. On the one hand, there is the time of kava preparation, and, on the other, the historical time of Polynesians. As the viewer explores the depth of the image on the mural, he or she goes deeper and deeper into both the ritual aspect of kava preparation and consumption, and Polynesian history. The mural seems to be saying that through the sacred temporality of kava we may appreciate the continuity that reveals the intimate and inalienable connection between Polynesians today—fully clothed, as “modern” as any of us—and *maori*, the experts of time immemorial. Though the physical appearance of Polynesians depicted on the mural changes throughout history, the ritual aspect of kava does not (in fact it pervades this history), signifying that in a deep sense the ancestral is still alive today:

![Image of a mural](http://www.yelp.com/biz/root-of-happiness-davis)

**Figure 3.** The bottom half of the mural on the background of the completed bar scene. Photo from: [http://www.yelp.com/biz/root-of-happiness-davis](http://www.yelp.com/biz/root-of-happiness-davis)

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It would be strictly incorrect to say that Te Pou is representing a certain mental image that he has of Polynesian culture in relation to kava today. Though Te Pou made a sketch of the mural before he began to paint it, the process of painting the mural was a step-by-step improvisational process: it did not involve re-presentation but a constant presentation. He underwent the production of the image in dialogical engagement with those he was creating along the way: each creation led him to a new one. Each of the main characters depicted on the mural, any Polynesian person could discern, is representative of each of Polynesia’s major cultures, including the cultures of Hawaii, Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, and New Zealand. Each of these characters carried Te Pou through the nearly impossible work of synthesizing Polynesian cultures on a mural painting. Over the course of painting the mural, Te Pou would often step down the scaffolding and go up to the second floor of the bar, where he would then stare at the characters from a distance and relate to them. In the process of making the mural, these characters had an agency of their own that cannot be subsumed to Te Pou’s agency as artist.

As mentioned above, my experience observing and participating with Te Pou in the creation of the kava bar mural inspired me to slightly amend my Stronach project. The main purpose of the project remains the same: to create a space where, through performance, Rapanui people may reclaim their dispossessed past. However, whereas originally this space was going to consist of a cultural center, now it is going to include the space of fiction, in the form of a collaborative illustrated account of the Rapanui’s colonial history. After receiving the Stronach project, I became increasingly aware that in order for the Rapanui to reclaim ancestral practices, there must first be work by which the colonial history that mediates the relationship of the ancestral landscape with contemporary Rapanui persons may be processed and incorporated into Rapanui history, rather than stand as a break with this history. With numerous oral historians and community members I will travel the island, visiting specific places with key colonial histories. In each of these places (and in some of the places, more than once), an oral historian will narrate an a’amu [tale], which involves relating to the persons who being part of the place’s history are still present in the place as one tells the place’s story. These numerous performances will be recorded in text and image and then compiled into a book.

While in Chile I invited professional digital illustrator Antonia Lara to take part in the project (see http://antonialara.blogspot.com/). Antonia has already published an illustrated book (Támaro y la Vasija Originaria) about indigenous relations with the ecosystem. Antonia will accompany the oral historians and me and will portray the a’amu in real time with sketches. I will do so as well but through the medium of fiction (in its multiple genres). The idea is that through relations between images and texts, as well as through the use of different genres of text, Rapanui history may be portrayed more in its context and texture than in its abstracted form and through openly polyphonic discourse, rather than as a function of a certain point of view or teleological assumption. The community will actively participate in the project not only through oral historians, but also as members in regular workshops. After a couple months of collecting, illustrating, and fictionalizing a’amu, I will hold a series of free communal workshops where any Rapanui individual may come to co-assemble the final product. Other than allowing for a
community engagement with the Rapanui’s colonial history, this revised version of my project will allow me to manage the result of the project more carefully and even continue working on the project after June 2015. Also, as a book, the product of the project will be more accessible to audiences outside of Rapa Nui. Other than providing an archive to the Rapanui for the work of regenerating connections with a traumatic past, the book may serve policy-makers to develop an “alter-politics” (Hage 2012), that is, a politics that not only recognized another way of being, but also takes it seriously. The book, in its condition of reproducing an ontology that ignores Cartesian assumptions entrenched in our Western thought, may also serve scholars to “decolonize thought” (Viveiros de Castro 2014).

Though my project officially begins in October (when I arrive to Easter Island), I have already taken successful preliminary steps. I have proposed the project to Rapanui Press, the only publishing company that is exclusively dedicated to books about Rapa Nui. Rapanui Press is committed to books that are experimental in design, so they found my project extremely interesting. I am hoping to formalize my relationship with Rapanui Press soon. I have also successfully begun to review other works that have been done and that have a similar concept. I have found *Maus*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning comic about the Holocaust, particularly influential. I have also reviewed the work of Bertolt Brecht. One of the aspects of *Maus* that I would like to incorporate into my project is to include the process of making a work in the work itself, which is a technique that I think Brecht took the farthest. I am also in the process of reviewing the artistic work of Chester Brown, Chris Ware, Marjane Satrapi and David B., as well as the theoretical work of Alfred Gell and W.J.T. Mitchell.

I finish this letter-home with promising some more action and less thought in my second letter… So excited for what there is to come!

Thanks for all your support,

Pablo

*Works Cited*
