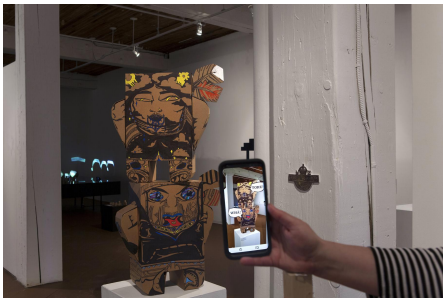
Charting the Constellations of the Oceans, Rivers, and Islands

by Julie Nagam

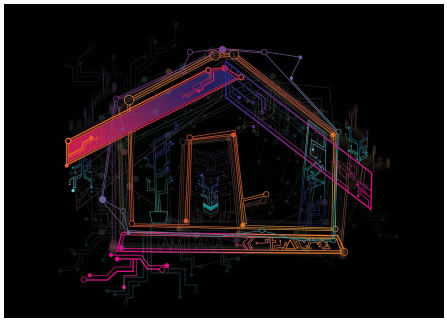
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Louise Pōtiki Bryant, *Tūātea* still from Mana Moana Digital Ocean and Nuit Live 2020.



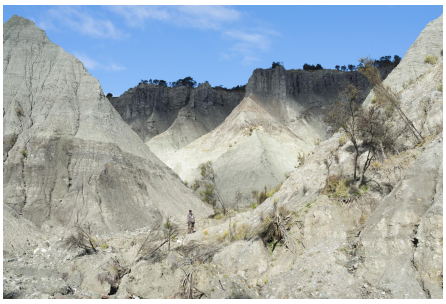
Detail of Reweti Arapere artwork in *InDigiNous Aotearoa: Virtual Histories, Augmented Futures* at Urban Shaman Gallery in 2017.



Kaaterina Kerekere, still from *Te Rawheoro* and *Takuahiroa* in Nuit Live 2020.



Johnson Withira, still from *Tangiwai* in Nuit Live, 2020.



Still of video work in Nuit Live (2020), *Te rerenga pōuri o ngā parawhenua ki Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa* by Natalie Robertson, Graeme Atkins, and Alex Monteith.

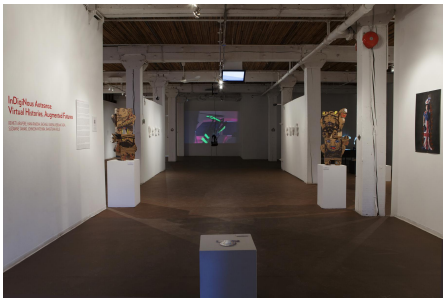
Scholar and artist Dr Julie Nagam writes about her new collaborative project, The Space Between Us *and past collaborations undertaken with artists and curators from Aotearoa. Working with thirty-one partners from Canada, the United States, Hawaii, Alaska, Greenland, New Zealand, Finland, Australia, and Norway, Nagam is interested in forging new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, in Turtle Island (North America) and internationally, and exploring the potential to transform public space with digital and new media.*

Charting new routes leads to distinctive pathways—water and land bind us, and at the same time create massive distances between places. The space between us, or the *v*ā, which is an Indigenous concept central to several Pacific Island cultures of personal and cultural stories of identity through space and time, represents a mapping of identity—of "the space between all things which defines and makes us a part of the unity that is all".[01] Mapping and charting the waterways is an opportunity to connect with new people, land, flora, and fauna. For millennia, under the

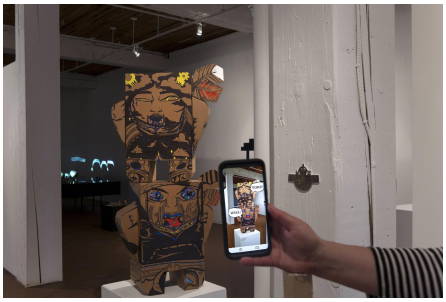
constellations of the night sky, we have recognised the potential of a dream-like state that can guide us to different islands across the archipelago. The connections between the Pacific islands and Turtle Island (North America) are as complex as the different geological regions of our continental waterways and land formations. The prairie landscape of boreal forest, marshlands, and inland lakes imitates the never-ending ocean skyline that dominates the Pacific. Manitoba, or Manitowapow, where I am from and currently live, is a place that "illustrate(s) the harshness and the beauty of life".[02] Its name originates in the Cree words Manitou (great spirit) and wapow (sacred water). This great spirit echoes through this place, where the creator sat at the rock petroforms of Manitou Api, a powerful place of healing and knowledge. Manitoba is the heart of Turtle Island and its grounding force, as the location where the creator chose to sit, and because of its relationship to intricate river systems that become transmission lines of communication between land and water. I feel its magnetic force when I am drawn to move through our river/lake systems to the Pacific Ocean to build connections to Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud, and the many other Pacific islands. At the heart of this connection could be the fire that rests deep below the ocean, sparking a connection to our sacred fires on Turtle Island. Like moths drawn to light, we draw connections to fires in distant locations, forging bonds between knowledges and embodied practices.

In the following paragraphs, I will map out the routes I have charted across the Pacific specifically focused on Aotearoa, the projects that have come about through my relationships to artists and scholars there, in particular building on existing projects to build a new partnership called *The Space Between Us*, and the transformational power and significance of digital media practices to this arts community and beyond. Since 2005, I have found myself drawn to this fire underneath the water, travelling over 14,000 kilometres across the Pacific to territories embroiled in cultural exchanges of Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous methodologies, such as learning-by-doing, mentorship, collaboration, and intergenerational, practice-, and land-based knowledge. These exchanges have been happening for as long as Indigenous people have been charting the stars to navigate new

lands and bodies of water. Leading by example, as I was taught, I am embarking on a new eight-year project called *The Space Between Us*.[03] It will ask: Can we transform public spaces such as university campuses and downtown cores to forge new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, in Canada and internationally? With thirty-one partners from Canada, the United States, Hawaii, Alaska, Greenland, New Zealand, Finland, Australia, and Norway, this partnership is forged in shared experiences of colonialism and by the potential to transform public space with digital and new media. In New Zealand, the partners are Massey University, Pātaka Art + Museum, The Dowse Museum, ĀPŌPŌ, Auckland University of Technology (AUT), and the University of Auckland; these relationships have been cultivated over the last ten years through various projects and cross-cultural engagement. This long-term collaborative project will allow us to consider how we approach the differences and similarities between various geographic- and culturally specific Indigenous worldviews. Interwoven ways of knowing and creating unlock the potential to develop new research creation in cultural collaboration and develop exciting new approaches to knowledge by understanding where differing worldviews intersect with and deepen each other.



Exhibition entrance for *InDigiNous Aotearoa: Virtual Histories, Augmented Futures* at Urban Shaman Gallery in 2017.



Detail of Reweti Arapere artwork in *InDigiNous Aotearoa: Virtual Histories, Augmented Futures* at Urban Shaman Gallery in 2017.



Johnson Withira, *Knowledge Flows,* Nuit in your Neighbourhood, 2020.

In 2011, I made my first trip to Aotearoa, where I started to build a long-term relationship with AUT, meeting senior lecturer and photographer Natalie Robertson, whose work I later curated into Nuit Blanche Toronto and with whom I continue to collaborate today. On that same visit, I witnessed Lisa Reihana's early video work in the Auckland Art Gallery, which led to my curation of *in pursuit of Venus* in 2013 as part of imagineNATIVE film and new media festival in Toronto. This work was later selected to represent New Zealand at the Venice Biennale in 2017. When it returned to Canada in 2019, I was able to curate the completed work *in pursuit of Venus,* [*infected*] at the Art Gallery of Ontario, as part of imagineNATIVE's twentieth anniversary. Reihana's artwork, with its recreation of a 19th century French wallpaper into a panoramic moving image or live action video, demonstrates the potential of digital and new media to create social change and transformation by invoking our shared experiences with

colonialism and narratives of the doctrine of discovery as I have argued elsewhere:

> In her work, Reihana has restaged, reimagined, and reclaimed the panoramic wallpaper by altering its original presentation in print form to live-action video. She has brought each character alive with the breathtaking precision of Māori and Pacific cultural practices and embodied knowledge. Each person on the screen thus resists the static colonial misrepresentation and instead begins to articulate their relationship to their cultural knowledge and space. Over the past five hundred years the colonial imagination has continuously placed Indigenous bodies into pleasing, romantic, and noble positions with a total disregard for the colonial gaze that debilitates Indigenous relationships to the body, sovereignty, and self-determination. The colonial gaze is directly confronted in Reihana's multi-channel installation, which unpacks the civ/sav dichotomy through the cultural specificity of its details. In this work, there is a direct refusal of Eurocentric understandings of linear time. The work instead mobilizes temporal displacements through the rupture of the moving characters on the 2D screen background, and the merging of past, present, and future.[04]

This central premise of time, space, and place is beautifully articulated in moving images and digital media works, in particular this work by Reihana.



My relationship to Aotearoa continued to grow and develop through shared learning of embodied knowledge as a scholar/artist. In 2016, I was invited to attempt to re-create a geographically specific installation from 2011, *where white pines lay over the water*, which was first shown at A-space gallery in Toronto, and then remounted at Pātaka Art + Museum as part of a collaboration with Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg, Manitoba. As with *in pursuit of Venus,* [*infected*], my goal was to unpack concealed geographies, in this case of Toronto, and reimagine this place through a multivocal visual and sound-based narrative. My installation was part of a larger exhibition in New Zealand titled *if we never met*, which brought together Sonny Assu, Jordan Bennett, Maria Hupfield, Geronimo Inutiq, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Amy Malbeuf, Kevin McKenzie, Julie Nagam, Theo Pelmus, Kristin Snowbird, Adrian Stimson, and Charlene Vickers into conversation with works by Ngaahina Hohaia, James Ormsby, Wi Taepa, Le Moana, and the SaVAge K'lub.

At the same time, Pātaka hosted the second tri-nations (CAN, NZ, AUS) curators exchange. The first exchange had taken place the previous year in Brisbane, Australia, during the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT8), and in 2017 the same group of curators, scholars, and directors came to Winnipeg, Manitoba, for the third annual symposium of the Initiative for Indigenous

Futures (IIF) titled, *The Future is Indigenous*. This event, which I hosted and organised, brought together a critical mass of artists, community activists, curators, and academics to present their visions of the future of Indigenous people. Over forty-five speakers from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, and the United States held multidisciplinary conversations about Indigenous art and media, scholarship, and cultural innovation.

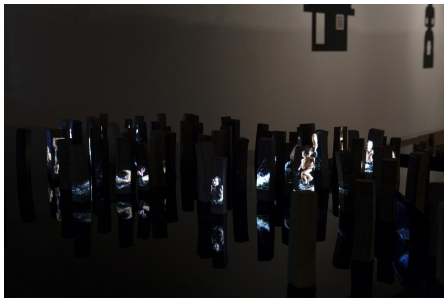
Furthermore, Reuben Friend, director of Pātaka, and Daina Warren, director of Urban Shaman, decided to collaborate again to present the exhibition *InDigiNous Aotearoa: Virtual Histories, Augmented Futures* at Urban Shaman Gallery in 2017, which built on the strong digital media creation of Māori artists over the past twenty years, and more specifically on the previous digital media exhibition *Techno Māori: Māori Art in the Digital Age*, 2001. *InDigi Nous Aotearoa* included seven Māori artists: Reweti Arapere, Hana Rakena, Rachael Rakena, Kereama Taepa, Suzanne Tamaki, Johnson Witehira, and Rangituhia Hollis. It ran in conjunction with the Indigenous Video Game Arcade and Virtual Reality (VR) Stations, which showcased games from the IIF *Skins* workshops: Dr. Elizabeth LaPensée's *Thunderbird Strikes* and Upper One Games's *Never Alone*, the *2167* VR projects, and the *Art Alive* VR experience from Pinnguaq which were in direct dialogue with the work of the Māori artists. There were hands-on makerspace activities, such as digital workshops, with over 350 attendees. These various events cultivated long-term relationships between New Zealand and Canada that have since resulted in new projects and artist collaborations, such as *The Space Between Us*.



The Future is Indigenous Symposium with Video Game Arcade and Virtual Reality Stations at Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2017.



The Future is Indigenous Symposium with Video Game Arcade and Virtual Reality Stations at Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2017.



Rachael Rakena and Hana Rakena's artwork in *InDigiNous Aotearoa: Virtual Histories, Augmented Futures* at Urban Shaman Gallery in 2017.



Opening for *InDigiNous Aotearoa: Virtual Histories, Augmented Futures* at Urban Shaman Gallery in 2017.

Indeed, one of the connectors drawing us together has been the long-standing history of Indigenous artists as leaders in digital media creation; as I have already written, there is a long thread that connects us to older media that was once new. For example beading, weaving and tuffing were all new forms of media in their times. This history has been integral to the international relationships that have been formed, offering crucial points of connection between artists in Turtle Island and the Pacific Islands. Covid-19 has only amplified a shift to and reliance on the virtual and the field of digital media and strengthened its ability to forge new routes and links across oceans. This was certainly so with the 2020 edition of Nuit Blanche Toronto, which sits within *The Space Between Us* project as its first public manifestation.

Nuit Blanche Toronto is the largest annual public art exhibition in North America, drawing 1.2 million people in a twelve-hour night.[05] In 2020, Nuit Blanche Toronto presented fifty-five BIPOC artists, including a large number from New Zealand and Australia, who engaged with the public through streamed content (Nuit Live), augmented reality (AR) and VR (Nuit in Your Neighbourhood),

Nuit podcasts (Belonging to Place), and public talks (Nuit Talks). This programming included a twelve-hour live stream of digital projects and archival images, the launch of the fourteen-year online archive with over 1,400 artworks, and a series of AR and VR artworks. Nuit Talks, a series of eight online webinars, involved over forty people—including Karl Chitham (Director of The Dowse, New Zealand)—engaged in broad conversations about public space and art in the new social order, including key arts leaders and creatives from Canada and abroad. The Belonging to Place podcast reached a large international audience with the voices of Aotearoa artists and scholars Dr. Ngarino Ellis, Kaaterina Kerekere, Racheal Rakena, Michael Bridgman, Dr. Johnson Witehira, and Natalie Robertson amplifying local histories and relationships to space and place. Nuit Live combined art and technology in works ranging from video art to VR/360 film, 3D digital sculptures, live performances, DJs, and a fashion exhibition, the Nuit archive. As the inaugural artistic director, I was thrilled with all these virtual additions and the possibilities they created for new adventures in ground-breaking creative engagement through public art into the future.



Kereama Taepa, *Ki Te Ao Matihiko* still from Mana Moana digital Ocean and Nuit Live 2020.



Kereama Taepa, *Tāne* in Nuit In Your Neighbourhood, 2020.



Louise Pōtiki Bryant, *Tūātea* still from Mana Moana Digital Ocean and Nuit Live 2020.

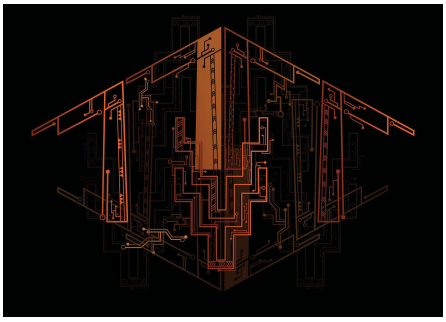


Johnson Withira, still from *Tangiwai* in Nuit Live, 2020.

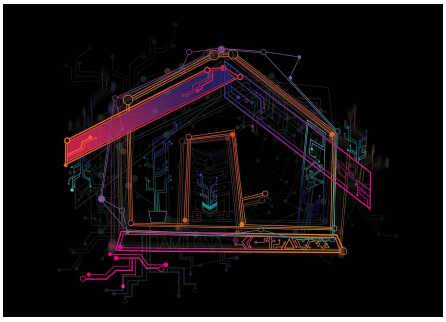
This virtual model will continue to deeply impact work undertaken in the creation of digital media content, showing a way to expand our move online and creating connections when travel is restricted. It was clear that the long-standing wealth of knowledge in digital media that these artists possessed set Nuit Blanche 2020 apart in a number of ways, creating, for example, a different means of audience engagement and allowing us to reach a broader public. It may have felt and looked different from previous iterations of the all-night festival, but the overall programming endeavour remained to create a feeling of exploring art in public space and the excitement of discovery, wonder, and awe it brings. It was mind-blowing to have AR/VR created in the digital realm by over twenty commissioned artists from all over the planet.

What made this experience of an art festival unique was the level of intimacy and control it afforded audiences. Although there was AR/VR commissioned pre-Covid-19, it was not at the scale that happened with a full virtual event. Nuit in your Neighbourhood, for example, allowed viewers to place artworks in their hands; they could view them over water, try them on, take a selfie, photograph

them on their kitchen table, or tag a wall in their street. The benefits of digital media as a means of Indigenous self-representation and storytelling were also apparent. Digital media artist Kereama Taepa explored notions of innovation through emergent technologies in order to extend the customs/traditions of the past. His work grapples with innovation and responds to our ever-changing environment. For Nuit Blanche 2020, Taepa created an AR work titled *Tāne* after a prominent atua (deity) in Māori cosmology. Tāne is the son of Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father) who split his parents apart in order to create the world of light. The idea of deities appearing in people's private and public spaces is shifting new ground for public engagement with art. In his work *Knowledge Flows*, Johnson Witehira used a series of moving bright colours to demonstrate the relationship between tiki figures and the river. Kaaterina Kerekere created a AR work titled *Takuahiroa*, which brought to life the embodied knowledge and complex knowledge systems of the meeting house, or marae.



Kaaterina Kerekere, still from *Te Rawheoro* and *Takuahiroa* in Nuit Live 2020.



Kaaterina Kerekere, still from *Te Rawheoro* and *Takuahiroa* in Nuit Live 2020.



Kaaterina Kerekere, *Takuahiroa* in Nuit In Your Neighbourhood, 2020.

The fluidity of the virtual and of digital media was mirrored in the recurring theme of water; in particular, our relationship to and responsibility towards oceans and rivers, which underpinned many works. For Nuit Live we wanted to create that connect between the Circumpolar region, Pacific, and North America by featuring an

adapted version of *Mana Moana*, a project originally curated by Rachael Rakena and Michael Bridgman in Wellington featuring artists Te Rina Warren, Kereama Taepa, Kura Puke, Stuart Foster, Kurt Komene, Hinemoa Erueti Waikerepuru, Louise Pōtiki Bryant, Michel Tuffery, Jess Feast, Rob Thorne, Cathy Livermore, Johnson Witehira, Warren Maxwell, Tina Ngata, Terri Ripeka Crawford, Regan Balzer, Horomona Horo, Laughton Kora, and Dr. Karlo Mila, as well as Bridgman and Rakena. These artists, and the further 20 international artists involved in the Canadian iteration, wove art and technology into new collaborative works ranging from video art to VR/360 film and 3D digital sculpture. They also drew on connections to Pacific routes that speak to our relationship with water as the thing that connects land masses, and the need for collective action to ensure its survival.

Directly linked to the undercurrents of artwork presented in *Mana Moana* was the three-channel video work *Te rerenga pōuri o ng*ā *parawhenua ki Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa* (2019) created by artists Natalie Robertson, Graeme Atkins, and Alex Monteith. This work brought forward the environmental impact of the sediment pouring out of the Waiapu River, calling out the mass erosion over the past century that has had a devastating impact on the coast and ocean. Designer/artist Johnson Witehira created two animations, *Tangiwai* and *Knowledge Flows*, as well as an AR work. On the one hand, his work is simply about the experience of the exotic—the alien-like arrival of a colonial ship, coming through a gateway portal that appears to bend space and time—and talks about the wonder and awe experienced by Māori and Europeans alike as they first encountered one another. On the other hand, the work also talks about how two people(s) might have overlapping yet vastly different experiences of the same reality.



Still of video work in Nuit Live (2020), *Te rerenga pōuri o ngā parawhenua ki Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa* by Natalie Robertson, Graeme Atkins, and Alex Monteith.



Massey University gathering and planning for *The Space Between Us* with Racheal Rakena, Karl Chitham, Julie Nagam and Heather Galbraith.



Image of BBQ gathering at Rachael Rakena's home with Reweti Arapere, Johnson Witehira, Julie Nagam and whanau, 2019.

As I aim to present through *The Space Between Us*, digital and new media art can create new paradigms for community engagement in public spaces and my hope is to continue to share how this knowledge can benefit Indigenous and racialised people, especially youth, as I continue to ask what kinds of decolonial tools we can use to build an Indigenous future within arts organisations and institutions with colonial histories and systemic barriers. Indigenous new media production can build long-term capacity in underserved communities and transform public space as part of the larger project of decolonisation. I am excited to continue the long history of building connections between the Indigenous peoples of North America, the Circumpolar region, and the Pacific in *The Space Between Us*. Bringing together artists, scholars, and cultural workers from different disciplines and countries, this project will fuel creation grounded in the confluence of Indigenous embodied and cultural knowledge resulting in new artworks, which will allow us to trace the application of digital and new technologies such as robotics, artificial intelligence, VR, new media, older media, and design.

This kind of work requires a relationship with community that is collaborative, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial; that is, a partnership. Just as the constellations reflect the ways we chart how we move across the night sky, so does our relationship to space, place, and time. Understanding the complex shared colonial histories of many large and small islands across the archipelago will have a great impact on our global practices into the future. Nuit Blanche Toronto 2022 will explode with the excitement of once again being able to gather in public space, hosting *Mana*

Moana, and our international guests Rachael Rakena, Johnson Witehira, Kereama Taepa, and others with great manaaki and care. For, each time we meet we bridge the waterways and the land together to create new conditions for collaboration and reciprocity, for past, present, and future generations of Indigenous and racialised makers, curators, and scholars in both hemispheres. Connections can be a catalyst for the radical transformation of place and create the conditions for social change as we embark on this new voyage into the great ocean and rivers to be guided by the constellations lighting up the night sky.

Footnotes

01. Albert Wendt, "Afterword: Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body", in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, ed. Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 46.

02. Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair and Warren Cariou, "Introduction," in *Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings from the Land and Water* (Winnipeg: Highwater Press, 2011), 4–8.

03. See www.thespacebetweenus.ca/.

04. Julie Nagam, "Deciphering the Digital and Binary Codes of Sovereignty/Self-Determination and Recognition/Emancipation", in "Indigenous Art", ed. Heather Igloliorte, Julie Nagam, and Carla Taunton, special issue, *PUBLIC Art, Culture, Ideas* 54 (Winter 2016): 83.

05. See www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/festivals-events/nuitblanche/.

Biographies



Dr. Julie Nagam is Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Arts, Collaboration, and Digital Media and is Associate Professor in the department of Art History at the University of Winnipeg. She is the Director of Aabijijiwan New Media Lab and Co-Director of Kishaadigeh Collaborative Research Centre (www.abbijijiwanmedialab.ca). Dr. Nagam is the inaugural Artistic Director for Nuit Blanche Toronto (2020 and 2022), the largest public art exhibition in North America. Her SSHRC-funded research includes digital makerspaces + incubators, mentorship, digital media + design, international collaborations, and place-based knowledge, and includes leading a partnership grant (www.thespacebetweenus.ca/) with over 30 partners in seven countries. She is a collective member of GLAM, which works on curatorial activism, Indigenous methodologies, public art, digital technologies, and engagement with place. As a scholar and artist she is interested in revealing the ontology of land, which contains memory, knowledge and living histories. Her artistic work has been exhibited internationally, including in Brazil, France, New Zealand, and England, which includes solo and group exhibitions. Nagam's scholarship, curatorial and artistic practice has been featured nationally and internationally. She was the Concordia University and Massey University (NZ) Scholar in Residence for 2018/19, and will be the Terra Foundation Visiting Scholar at the University of Sydney (AUS) for 2021-22. www.julienagam.ca

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