What's for - Decolonial - Dinner?

by Tania Willard

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For HUM's last publication of 2019, Indigenous Canadian artist and curator Tania Willard explores the collaborative work of the BC Collective Aotearoa and Louisa Afoa, currently presented in the exhibition Transits and Returns*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery. With a focus on Indigenous practices from Canada and beyond, the exhibition also includes the work of New Zealand artists Edith Amituanai and Ahilapalapa Rands and is co-curated by Lana Lopesi. This essay, which extends from our main coverage of European-based projects, signals our aspirations to further our reach to other geographical regions in 2020.*

> *Life brings life, it's valuable*
> *So I eat what comes from the ground, it's natural*
> *Let your food be your medicine (uh huh)*
> -Dead Prez (Be Healthy, Let's Get Free, 2000)

I remember the sun-faded image of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* in my great-aunt's kitchen. I would look at it a bit mystified, not understanding the whole Christian reference, but also noticing the effects of sunlight diminishing and undermining the surface of the image, turning its jewel tones into faded pastels

and echoes of colours. As a Secwépemc and Syilx Indigenous household in a small colonial town in Chase, BC, my great-auntie's house and what we ate there would have been very different B.C. – *Before Christ*. Traditional foods, like salmon, deer meat, berries and roots would have been the main fare. Food is, of course, a deeply cultural experience and, as a result, it is an indicator of colonial (and christianising) negative health effects – for instance, increased rates of diabetes have affected Indigenous Peoples globally – but settler introduced foods in combination with traditional foods are also creating new cuisine. As decolonial Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith puts it, "These two categories [colonizer and colonized] are not just a simple opposition but consist of several relations, some more clearly oppositional than others."[01] Though Tuhiwai-Smith is referring to an analysis of the impacts of colonisation on Indigenous Peoples, these sets of 'relations' as opposed to binaries speak to the ways in which the hybridisation of cuisine reflects complex colonial and anti-colonial narratives.

These intersections of food, colonial experience and Indigeneity are rich grounds for artists to position their work. The work of BC Collective Aotearoa – BC stands for Before Cook /Before Columbus – with the artists Louisa Afoa in a recent exhibition, *Transits and Returns* at Vancouver Art Gallery in Vancouver BC Canada, does exactly this. Curated by Indigenous curators Tarah Hogue, Sarah Biscarra Dilley, Freja Carmichael, Léuli Eshrāghi and Lana Lopesi, the exhibition focuses on Indigenous artists from Canada, the United States, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The collective exhibition had its beginnings in 2018 during a visiting curatorship at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Brisbane, Australia and developed through iterative exhibitions and symposia at IMA and Artspace Aotearoa, which culminated in *Tran sits and Returns* at Vancouver Art Gallery (28 September 2019 to 23 February 2020). The curators frame the twenty-one Indigenous artists in the exhibition around complex themes of Indigeneity as self-determined and expansively positioned in the current moment. Specifically, the exhibition reflects the duality of Indigeneity as being rooted in ancestral homelands, while also expressing the enduring mobility, migration and exchange Indigenous Peoples have always engaged in. Enacting 'worlds

beyond colonial borders',[02] the exhibition emphasises the collaborative curatorial concepts over a singular vision, that engages with the ocean waters as a 'site of exchange'.[03] This follows the name of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa in the Māori language: translated as the Great Ocean of Kiwa, which predates the colonial naming of the Pacific Ocean and, as a starting place, reconfigures these sites as possibilities of future decoloniality. This review concentrates on the work *Hākari as Guests* (2019), by The BC Collective with Louisa Afoa (Sāmoa), as a specific work that speaks both to the dialogical curatorial concept and to my own understanding of ideas, materials and imaginings.



BC Collective (Cora-Allan Wickliffe and Daniel Twiss) with Louisa Afoa, *Hākari as guests*, 2019, Niuean hiapo, Lakota ceramics, beaded napkins, velvet tablecloth, dining table, chairs, chandeliers with cut acrylic shapes, vinyl wallpaper, Courtesy of the Artists. Photo: Maegan Hill-Carroll, Vancouver Art Gallery.



BC Collective (Cora-Allan Wickliffe and Daniel Twiss) with Louisa Afoa, *Hākari as guests*, 2019, Niuean hiapo, Lakota ceramics, beaded napkins, velvet tablecloth, dining table, chairs, chandeliers with cut acrylic shapes, vinyl wallpaper, Courtesy of the Artists. Photo: Maegan Hill-Carroll, Vancouver Art Gallery.

The BC Collective formed in 2017 and comprises artists Cora-Allan Wickliffe and Daniel Twiss who, within the circle of their extended whānau, often understood as family, bring together their Ngāpuhi, Taniui, Niue and Lakota ancestries. The Māori concept of whānau also forms the basis for their deeply relational and collaborative practice. In their work *Hākari as Guests*, produced in collaboration with Afoa, this takes the form of a dinner table installation, which is both on exhibition in the gallery and activated outside of the gallery by way of dinner events. The formal table setting as installation is refined with custom chandeliers, beaded napkins, wallpaper, dishes and implements set atop a crushed velvet tablecloth draped over a long table.

Though BC Collective does not directly reference 'B.C.' (as in 'Before Christ', or perhaps 'British Columbia' as another resonant point), when describing their collective name as Before Cook and Before Columbus, I infer the twelve place settings and twelve apostles in *the Last Supper* as the missionary and christianising colonial forces coming into play here. In *da Vinci's The Last Supper*, the artist depicts the moment when Jesus Christ announces that one of the apostles will betray him; in *Hākari as Guests*, I interpret the betrayal as colonisation itself. When I remember those echoes of colour fading in the face of the sun in my great-auntie's kitchen alongside this installation, I realise that the same sunlight that slowly eroded my great-auntie's cheap eighties wall art is the same sun that fed the paper mulberry trees used for the Niuean hiapo barkcloth.[04] This permeating sunlight, filtered over oceans, time and Indigenous lands is a sovereign-sun, the sun as the true monarch, the ascendent and supreme power feeding life, creativity and self-determined futures. The hiapo barkcloth is featured in the table setting installation as both placemats and the larger scale wall hanging, *Harvest* (2019) by Wickliffe. Wickliffe's practice of making bark-cloth or hiapo can be seen as indigneous resurgence, Annisnabe author Leanne Simpson describes this as "embodied resurgent practice...resulting in the creation of not just points of disruption but collective constellations of disruption, interrogation, decolonial love, and profound embodiments of nation-based Indigeneity."[05] Wickliffe's hiapo practice is revitalising this art form which has suffered a loss of practitioners in the wake of colonisation. The process of harvesting philosophy and skill in making the hiapo is an important frame with which to contextualise the *Hākari as Guests* installation and in these gestures the artists invite us to witness a cycle of feeding. The sun that fed those mulberry trees is spiralling out in an expanding universe of continuum – feeding the art, feeding our ancestors, feeding the plants used to make the bark-cloth and ink, feeding the bodies of artists who make projects to feed others. In this cyclical ecology, a kinship of feeding – a whānau or extended family dinner – is implied. This is Indigenous relational art, such as Nicolas Bourriard's 'relational aesthetics'; however, interconnected Indigenous values precede this contemporary art theory (our 'auntologies' predate art ontologies).

I propose Indigenous relational practice is not relational to art but art itself is considered 'as relations'. This is an Indigenous art practice that echoes the saying used both in ceremonial and every day Indigenous lexicon, *All My Relations*. This statement embraces the deep ecologies of interconnectedness between the human and non, the four-legged, the winged ones, those that swim and the earth that supports us all. In combination with this relational practice, the decolonial aesthetics in BC Collective's work also challenge 'taste': "Aesthetics, as many other normative frameworks of modernity, was used to disdain or ignore the multiplicity of creative expression in other societies."[06] In this work, 'taste' (i.e. food) symbolises the deep ties – conceptual, philosophical and cultural – that encode Indigenous relationships to the land and waters.



Cora-Allan Wickliffe, *Harvest*, 2019. Photo courtesy Cora-Allan Wickliffe.



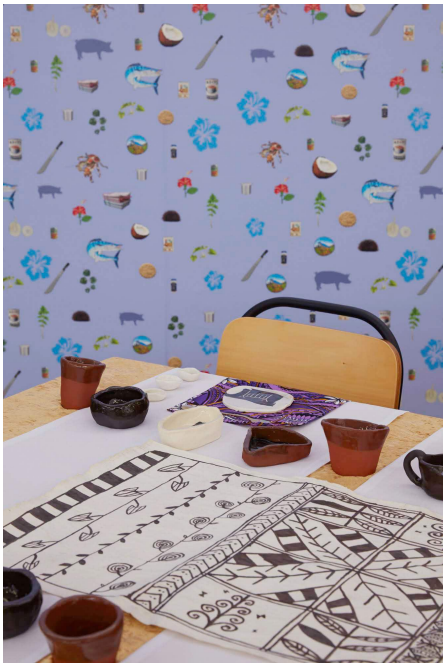
BC Collective with Louisa Afoa, *Kai as Koha*, 2019, installation view, *Layover*, Artspace Aotearoa. Photo: Sam Hartnett.



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BC Collective with Louisa Afoa, *Kai as Koha*, 2019, installation view, *Layover*, Artspace Aotearoa. Photo: Sam Hartnett.

In the *Hākari as Guests* installation, the objects are not the sole focus of the work. Instead, the objects are indicators of suggested 'relations', which I think of in contrast to American feminist artist Judy Chicago's 1979 *Dinner Party,* wherein the work functions as a monument to feminism, albeit in a post-modernist sense of monument, which is to say anti-monument, (but post modernist *an ti-monument* that still functions as *monument* when Indigenous, Black, Queer and POC histories are not centred). In Chicago's *Dinn*

er Party, there is a place setting for Sacagawea, situating her within an American historical context (specifically, Sacagawea's role in the Lewis and Clark Expedition that crossed the American West from 1804-06s). Where BC Collective and Afoa's installation *Hākari as Guests* (2019) importantly diverges from this idea of reframing the historical, is not only in thinking about who is remembered but about how history is carried and who carries it. In *Dinner Party*, history is amended by feminism, but in *Hākari as Guests* one thinks of how history can be carried as living story, fed by each Indigenous body over time, space and territory. As scholar Tuhiwai Smith articulates, " The critique of Western History argues that history is a modernist project which has developed alongside imperial beliefs about the Other."[07] In contrast to Chicago's socio-historical feminist monument, *Hākari* as Guests is truly an anti-monument. It actively dissolves into a relational ecology and is subsumed by the monument of living Indigenous bodies, whose histories and futures are nourished with each moment of sovereign sunshine. Where the two works, Dinner Party and *Hākari as Guests,* do have affinity is in a deeper reading of Sacagawea's herstory. In this narrative, history tells of Sacagawea's practical savvy and know-how: during difficult times in the Lewis and Clark Expedition, when there was little to no food and the travellers faced starvation, Sacagewea dug camas roots.[08] Through her *lived* Indigenous experience, Sacagewea knew her land, and she knew her food and all the cycles of life and generations that this encompassed.

In this same vein of *Indigenous knowing* as defined by James S. Frideres,[09] the BC Collective and Afoa activate their installation through dinners that feature traditional foods and hybrid cuisines. These feature specific dishes which speak to the artists' experiences and ancestries: Indian tacos (fry bread with chilli, lettuce, tomatoes and cheese on top), kina (sea urchin), lu´au (corned beef with coconut and onion wrapped in taro leaves) and pineapple pie are on the menu. Lakota designs inform the ceramic wares; a central setting is reserved for a vessel (purchased on eBay) by potter Winnona La Pointe, Twiss' grandmother. The small ceramic plates are used to serve each dish. If you have been at a North American Pow Wow you know what an Indian taco is, and that it's often served on a styrofoam or paper plate, but here the

thoughtful gestures of hand made ceramics and details that created this table setting is the conceptual underpinning of the work, giving reverence to each item. The ceramic plates and spoons are hand-formed, just like the hand-beaten hiapo and the hand-beaded napkins: the traces of ancestral muscle memory are encoded in material choices and the knowledge of making. Presiding over the top of the table are three black acrylic chandeliers with dangling silhouettes of kererū (the New Zealand wood pigeon), this perhaps makes a comparison with the refinement of kererū feathers that can be used for Māori cloaks, and the sparkling crystals of a traditional chandelier. Set in front of the various dishes used to hold the kina (sea urchin), Indian taco and taro leaf wraps, Buffalo-horn drink vessels complete the table setting. Akin to European still life paintings that feature the 'horn of plenty' as a symbol of abundance, the buffalo horn represents the ecological, aesthetic and philosophical knowledge transfer that Indigenous Peoples have with food.



The BC Collective with Louisa Afoa invited guests to feast together at the Chief Joe Mathias Centre on the Capilano Reserve in the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation). Photo courtesy Cora-Allan Wickliffe.



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Exhibition curators Tarah Hogue and Lana Lopesi, guest, the BC Collective and Louisa Afoa at the exhibition opening, Vancouver Art Gallery. Photo courtesy Cora-Allan Wickliffe.



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Afoa's vinyl wallpaper adjacent to the table setting depicts commercial brands and country food imagery against a bright teal colour stretching from floor to ceiling. Colonial-settler-introduced ingredients, such as flour, pigs and tinned meats, hover like social media emojis in a repeating pattern. This is set alongside sea urchin, machetes and coconuts, which create a pop referenced pattern of packaging and ingredients present in the foods eaten in the activation of the work, as well as in each artist's family communities and contexts. Afoa, an artist of Sāmoan descent living and working in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, brings an

Indigenous, diasporic content to the work. The comfort foods recall family and culture back home, while also asserting the plurality of Indigenous identity, belonging and migration. Afoa's wallpaper is another kind of 'auntology' that recollects story, family and nostalgia as a way of relating knowledge.

The collective work, in both the functional/installation of the art objects and their corollary activations, are markers of time, adaptability and continuum. As the pattern repeats across the surface of the wallpaper, so too the pattern of our daily activities and the daily negotiation between Indigeneity and colonial systems plays out in every-day acts. This table setting is for guests only, and who we as Indigenous People invite as our guests extends our kinship or whānau as a practice of Indigenous governance and as inter-territorial protocol. Moreover, the word 'guest' is ironic when we think of all the ways Indigenous Peoples have been imposed upon and how current land acknowledgments, at least in North America, are usually phrased something along the lines of, "We are grateful guests in such and such a territory" – raising the question, 'Who actually invited you?' The installation is activated by inviting guests to the table, which serves to acknowledge community and cultural workers, as has happened on several occasions with *Kai as Koha* (2019) at Artspace Aotearoa. In the Vancouver Art Gallery iteration of *Hākari as Guests*, protocols addressing land and being a good guest were followed by acknowledging the gallery's location on unceded Indigenous lands, with overlapping territories, of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Səl̓ílwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh), Stó:lō and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nations of the Coast Salish Peoples. BC Collective with Afoa acknowledged the territory by inviting guests and feasting together at the Chief Joe Mathias Centre, located on the Capilano Reserve in the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation). These acts are not merely an addition of public programing for the work but embed the work itself in a decolonial framework that attempts to eat away at the many ways colonial narratives have come to frame Indigeneity.

There are twelve place settings in *Hākari as Guests*, but when the work is activated the whānau circle grows to encompass additional guests – and those guests in turn bring their families, their histories, their ancestors and their lands with them. And all the food eaten in the art event, and that we eat in our homes, has been

grown and will grow under a sovereign sun, which will keep shining for billions of years until one day its own light undermines its own surface and its 'Last Supper' is itself. Until then I will skip the *hors d'oeuvres* to have a look at what's for – decolonial – dinner.

Footnotes

01. Smith, Linda T., and Ebooks Corporation. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, London, 2012;2013;2016; 27.

02. Ibid.

03. Tarah Hogue, Sarah Biscarra Dilley, Freja Carmichael, Léuli Eshrāghi and Lana Lopesi. *Trans its and Returns*. Vancouver Art Gallery, 2019.

04. Hand-beaten and painted tapa cloth or bark.

05. Simpson, Leanne B., and JSTOR (Organization). *As we have always done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2017, doi:10.5749/j.ctt1pwt77c.

06. Vázquez, Rolando, and Mignolo, Walter, *Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings*, July 15, 2013, accessed at: www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial- woundsdecolonial-healings/

07. Smith, Linda T., and Ebooks Corporation. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, London, 2012;2013;2016.

08. A root in the lily family, which grows in the Columbia River area.

09. Frideres, James S, Indigenous Ways of Knowing. *First Nations in the Twenty-first Century*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford U Press, 2011.

Biographies



BC Collective Aotearoa was founded by Cora-Allan Wickliffe and Daniel Twiss in 2017 and launched at the Corban Estate Arts Centre. BC (standing for 'Before Cook and Before Columbus') was initiated as a way to share, engage and exchange Indigenous ideas and concepts, and is dedicated to supporting Indigenous practitioners and community events.



Louisa Afoa is an Auckland-based artist and curator whose work explores social trends among diasporic communities through time-based media. Her films are made in honest response to both her immediate surroundings and community, and it is this quality of honesty which allows Afoa to transcend communities and tell stories in a way that is easy for an audience to interact with. Recent exhibitions include *I'll see you at Orion*, Corban Estate, 2017 (solo); The *Cold Islanders*, Waikato Museum, 2017; *New Perspectives*, ARTSPACE 2016; and *Influx*, ST PAUL St Gallery, 2016.



Tania Willard, Secwepemc Nation, works within the shifting ideas of contemporary and traditional as it relates to cultural arts and production and with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. She has worked as a curator in residence with grunt gallery and Kamloops Art Gallery and her curatorial work includes *Beat Nation: Art Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, a national touring exhibition first presented at Vancouver Art Gallery in 2011. As Assistant Professor in Creative Studies at UBCO (Kelowna BC), currently her research focuses on *Secwepemc aesthetics/language/land and interrelated Indigenous art practices*. Willard's projects include BUSH gallery, a conceptual space for land-based art and action led by Indigenous artists.

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