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in a room, in a house, on an island, in an ocean



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HAERENGA/SAL FAIVA: TWO INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND THEIR CREATIVE PRACTICE DOCTORAL JOURNEYS

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ABSTRACT: This article showcases the creative work and haerenga/sal faiva (journey/creative journey) of two writer-scholar-artist creative-practice doctoral candidates—Marama Salsano and Mere Taito—who recently completed international arts residencies in Canada and Melbourne, respectively. Specifically, Marama Salsano contemplates Indigenous generosity and resistance through poetry and reflections about the creation of her *LandBack* fabric banner at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Canada, and Mere Taito presents digitally authored visual poems that were inspired by the in-person, residential gathering of her Creative New Zealand/Creative Australia digital arts fellowship in Melbourne. Ultimately, the authors of this paper draw strength from their Pacific roots and ever-widening Indigenous spaces, which allow their creative doctoral research to flourish.

Keywords: Indigenous creative practice PhD, Māori literature, Rotuman literature, Rotuman ancestral knowledge, toi Māori, Māori art, creative writing, Indigenous poetry, digital art

For the authors of this article, our work within the academy represents an intergenerational endurance of lifelong Indigenous-focused research. We are both on our own haerenga/sal faiva (journey) and we are guided at once by our ancestors, our peers, our relations—both human and nonhuman—and our descendants. The structure of this article begins with Marama Salsano’s reflections and accompanying poem, before flowing into Mere Taito’s reflections and digital poetry.

MARAMA SALSANO: INDIGENOUS GENEROSITY AND RESISTANCE

I recently watched a video of a Spanish kuia (female elder) making bobbin lace and my eyes could not keep up with her hands, which seemed to move autonomously. Muscle memory is a glorious thing. I imagine the whakapapa (genealogy, layers) of lace-making, similar to the whakapapa of all toi (Māori art), to be sustained by the generosity, support and guidance of multiple communities from multiple times in multiple places and spaces. While I need to practise more before the multiple genres of my toi practices dart



Figure 1. *LandBack* banner installed during the *Akunumustitis* (Natural Law) Ecological Engagement Through the Seasons open studio evening on 25 October 2023 at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Banff, Canada.

back and forth instinctively so as to blur the eyes of my future mokopuna (grandchildren), as a Māori (Indigenous New Zealander) writer-scholar-artist and descendant from Ngāi Tūhoe, Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki, Ngāti Porou and Ngāti Wairere iwi (tribes), I will continue to embrace toi that is multifaceted, multiformed, multitongued and multigenred. For Indigenous creatives like me who engage with work that resists Eurocentric narratives in multiple forms, Indigenous generosity is crucial to our work. Here, I contemplate Indigenous generosity and resistance by discussing my *LandBack* banner (see Fig. 1) that I created during an Indigenous visual arts residency in Canada, and end with a poem that was inspired by both the banner and my residency experiences.

The *LandBack* banner was created in October 2023 during a four-week visual arts residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Canada and was later exhibited as part of *Ma Tika! Maranga! Get Up! Stand Up! Toitū Te Tiriti*, the 2024 Waitangi Day exhibition at the Arts Village in Rotorua, Aotearoa New Zealand.

The *Akunumustitis* land-based visual arts residency provided me with time and space to engage with ngā atua Māori (Māori other-than-human ancestors) whilst being physically present on Treaty 7 whenua (land) in southern Alberta, Canada. Like the *Toi o Te Tau Hou* exhibition I took part in earlier in the year—where 20 Māori and Pacific artists from around

Aotearoa produced work as part of the Matariki ki Waikato programme—the Akunumustihis residency brought together a diverse group of eight Indigenous artists as well as Indigenous faculty. For four weeks we shared kai (food), stories, art techniques and knowledges in workshops that included eco-dyeing, pine needle and birchbark basket making, cyanotype photography, earth pigment making, buffalo bone tool making, buffalo hide scraping and drum and rattle making.

For three of the four weeks in Banff, the background of what was to become the *LandBack* banner hung on my studio wall. Part of a torn bedsheet that had been left at Banff by a previous artist, I connected with the fabric as soon as I encountered her in the remnants/rags pile of the dye room on the first day visiting our studios. However, it took me three weeks and multiple conversations with ngā atua Māori and other Indigenous artists to understand what it was that she was meant to become. The banner, which I have also used as a scarf and as a blanket, represents a wahine Māori (Māori woman's) approach to global, Indigenous calls for self-determination amidst continued colonisation that is encapsulated in the phrase Land Back. The banner was created wholly using gifted, thrifted, found and borrowed resources from whānau (Indigenous kin) at Banff. Sacred Ktunaxa ochre is stained across the bottom of the sheet, which was “flipped upside down so earth becomes sky / & sky becomes earth” (see poem below), representing the ways in which wāhine Māori must often navigate and make sense of settler-colonial, Judeo-Christian patriarchal influences and institutional systems that were not built for us. About such academic spaces, Alice Te Punga Somerville (2017) asserts, “Every day is a manifesto day when you’re an indigenous person in academia: every day involves lines in the sand, things that need defending, purposes and strategies that need to be clearly (re)stated. The stakes feel high; the structural supports feel low” (p. 66). Resisting Eurocentric narratives inside academia thus becomes a lifelong project that is made easier with the support of Indigenous whānau. Creating/crafting/critiquing within academia allows our mokopuna to see our iwi literatures, as Craig Womack (1999) states, as the canon, the tree, and not merely branches “waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk” (p. 7). For me, crafting the *LandBack* banner is a vein on a leaf on a branch of the main trunk of toi Māori, which includes all manner of written, oral and visual art.

The brown *LandBack* letters were cut from remnant fabric in the dye room, and the colourful ribbons that form words were left over from another Indigenous artist's project. The ribboned presence on the banner reflects the vibrancy of Indigenous possibilities when we realign our sky and earth, or when we have our languages back, our sacred sites and rites back, tribal autonomy and body justice. The dark-red painted kupu (words) speak of wa / hi / ne: of generational codes (ne) extending across (hi) time and space

(wa), of body sovereignty and body decolonisation in progress. Threads are purposefully left unfinished and untrimmed, symbolically making space for other wāhine to pick up threads and carry on resistance work in their own lives.

Indeed, it is still difficult for Indigenous women in settler-colonial educational institutions. If it were smooth sailing, poems like Alice Te Punga Somerville's (2022: 74) "An Indigenous woman scholar's prayer" would not exist, and prayers like "*May I meet Indigenous vice-chancellors, presidents, professors, and deans; / may they not all be men*" (p. 74) would not need to be uttered. If it were smooth sailing, questions like, "Why isn't my professor Māori?" (McAllister *et al.* 2019) or "Why isn't my professor Pasifika?" (Naepi 2019) would not still be urgent. As a wāhine Māori doctoral candidate, resisting Eurocentric narratives is ongoing and tiring. Yet, both Mere and I undertake creative/critical and critical/creative work inside and outside of settler-colonial spaces. We do this work for our future whanaunga (relations) who choose to enter these institutions, and in doing so, we seek to honour our ancestors and "carry shared histories forward in new ways, with old and new materials" (Harkin 2020: 156). This also lessens the burden on our mokopuna to "remember when we are no longer here to tell them" (Watego 2021), for if we do not carry forward our shared histories and truths inside these institutions, who will? If we do not ask thousands of Indigenous questions (Te Punga Somerville 2022) that encourage even more Indigenous questions and threads for our mokopuna to pick up and follow, who will? (Spoiler: it will be the same non-Indigenous vice-chancellors, professors, deans and decision-makers who continue to speak about and for us and raise and ask questions on our behalf.) Remembering all this and leaning heavily into my whakapapa helps—as does telling my stories, my way. Resistance is also made easier through the generosity of Indigenous scholars and creatives—past, present and future—whose influences continue to shape my various toi practices, and the practices of our next generations of mokopuna.

Wa / hi / ne

1.
the seed of me is a tangle of fibrous roots
stitching LandBack banners
& tino flags to urban landscapes
roots hook over & under land
crocheting pockets of pouhine across social media
the seed of me cyberconnects whenua to whenua &
whenua to whenua to whenua

the root of me is sacred yellow ochre
stained like blood across a torn duvet sheet

then flipped upside down so earth becomes sky
& sky becomes earth
wāhine harvest uku amidst the stars
catch planets in oceans
& grow poetry from the land

the root of me is a mess of coloured ribbons
fashioned into kupu that speak to wāhine desires
Indigibarbies want LandBack—YES
but sacred sites and rites also
tribal autonomy & body justice too
justice for incarcerated bodies
justice so the throats & ears & skin
of our mokopuna only ever feel our languages

i paint words onto my duvet in taniwha blood
the kupu speak of wa / hi / ne
of generational codes extending across time & space
of body sovereignty & body decolonisation in progress
always in progress
cos we don't have lifetimes to erase patriarchy's scars
instead wai māori is our medicine & our memory
& our whenua holds the genetic DNA of us all

2.

the ghosts of women surround me atua rei
who were present when sky & earth upturned
whose bodies are lighter than air
turning dense like pounamu around my ankles thighs
ribs & mind when i cry or doubt or stumble

wāhine ghosts taught me to desire myself
to trace the curve & strength of my shoulders
the hip dips & handfuls of flesh
perched just above my thighs
the puku pouch below which sits
my mother's whenua inside my grandmother
inside Hinetapuārau inside Papatūānuku inside me
how can i not love myself when i am all this & more

one day soon i too will be a pounamu ghost
holding my mokopuna tight or is it they who hold me
i'll kēhua in & out of their dreamscapes
wearing tulle skirts fuchsia tights
& golden tiki earrings that dangle to my waist

our mokos will narrate stories & poems & essays about us
 in all the wonderful ways that we cannot begin to imagine
 & we'll remind them that they will never be
 more beautiful young desirable & loved
 than they are in this present moment
 & in every moment thereafter

3.

i have a stingray on my back who comes to life at night
 the ink in her veins merges with mine &
 we swim Kiwa's ocean from island to island to island
 at the edge of the Pacific Parawhenuamea portals us inland
 to pools of ochre & painted archives on leaves stones & rākau
 we bleed kōkōwai from spine to arm to hand to fingers
 & saturate ourselves into this whenua
 into the collective memory of us

my phone lights up at night but we can't sleep anyway me & Whai
 fluorescent lights displace ngā whetū & not even our gills
 help us breathe tonight the night before Whiro
 me and she splash acrylics across canvas floor & wall
 we use āniwaniwa house paints named
 Sassy Smitten Sputnik Bedazzle
 Funtasia Infinity Dalek Lucifer
 the colours of happy capitalism & delusion

every night toi Māori saves our lives me & Whai
 our bodies crave whenua uku kōkōwai earth
 the taste of ancient bodies on our tongues
 & mica flakes crusted to our tails
 if blood flows in reverse on this whenua
 ngā toto o ngā tūpuna will still converge

4.

i dream of protest flags dripping with sequins & spider venom
 dried fish scales covered in biodegradable glitter
 & midnight poetry from grandmother pūngāwerewere
 whose cosmic contemplations make protest flags obsolete

i dream of wāhine who embody Indigibarbie Indiginerd
 Indigipoet & Indigiscuse-you vibes all at once
 wāhine who ctrl-alt-delete the meme of academia
 & instead open doors fix doors design doors construct doors
 to buildings we have fashioned in our wa / hi /ne likeness—
 which is to say the generational vibrations of all whenua

This section of the poem does two things: it lists the institutional structures of academia that constrict Indigenous ways of being and knowing—identified through the literary and scholarly might of Rūparake Petaia, Teresia Teaiwa, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Haunani-Kay Trask—and it purposefully disrupts them. I imagined this section of the poem as a literature review or annotated bibliography “gone rogue”. I imagined a student submitting this poem as a requirement for a lit. review/annotated bib. type of assignment and unsettling the compliant university teacher assessing the script against a rigid writing rubric. Its form is poetic. The scholars are identified on a first-name basis as if they were close acquaintances. There is a sense of exclusivity here that implies that only those in the fold know the full identity of these creatives and scholars and their corresponding texts. There are no page numbers or in-text references. The stylistic and symbolic structural violation let loose on the lit. review/annotated bib. structure raises the question— why do we insist on staying in institutions that place us in situations where we feel compelled to go rogue? Why do we put up with the fear and disrupted harmony? Why don’t we just leave? The company of insecure “haole [European] men” (or women) in the presence of “Native women” (or men) can be draining on Indigenous well-being, but we stay and persist because, as Borja-Quichocho-Calvo (p. 34) concisely writes in the second part of her poem,

We must
birth possibilities
and cultivate realities
in a place that was not created for us
and carve space for ourselves anyway.

My creative-practice research at the University of Otago, Aotearoa’s oldest university, is positioned to achieve all of the above: “birth possibilities”, “cultivate realities” and “carve space”. The critical reading of archival Rotuman multilingual texts (Rotuman textual history, literary studies) in order to write multilingual poetry (creative writing studies, literary studies) for the purpose of Rotuman language regeneration in the diaspora (applied linguistics, Indigenous studies) using digital technology (design) is a four-strand interdisciplinary weave of creative-critical possibilities and realities that is unequivocally Rotuman-centred. It is my heart’s wish that some young, up-and-coming Rotuman scholar in the future will read my thesis and see the gaps and spaces I have carved and, in turn, plug, extend and carve more gaps to their own nerdy heart’s desire. The long-term effect of research like mine and Marama’s is an intergenerational endurance of lifelong Indigenous-focused research within the academy. Swallow that academia.

Hanging out in the courtyards of universities as opposed to leaving is also strategic. These metaphorical courtyards breed opportunities for complex and purposeful Indigenous networking. There is always someone who knows someone who knows of a conference, scholarship, residency or gathering that seeks genuine Indigenous participation. These golden nodes of information are shared either on social media, through group mails, in chats or in casual conversation. Then there is, of course, the reading of a research article that diverts your attention to unexpected sources of information and opportunity. I came upon the Creative Australia (CA) and Creative New Zealand (CNZ) 2024 Digital Fellowship this way while reading up on Pacific poets who have a visual or digital element in their works. One flip of a page led to a click that led to another, and, as they say, the rest is history.

I have recently returned from the three-day meet-and-greet component of the 2024 CA and CNZ Digital Fellowship in Naarm (Melbourne). We were warmly and traditionally received in a smoking ceremony by Uncle Perry Wandin, an elder from Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung country, the traditional owners of land on which the city of Melbourne is built. The fellowship is aimed at developing the digital skills of ten artists—five from Australia and five from New Zealand—with both in-person and online workshops and mentoring collaborations over a period of six months. On the in-person programme was a session that piqued my interest—a 2.5-hour Bush Animal Workshop facilitated by Aunty Bronwyn Razem, an elder from Gunditjmara country in southwestern Victoria. I wondered about the digital medium Aunty Bronwyn would be using and whether we would be drawing, layering, collaging, animating or making the bush animal interactive. Aunty Bronwyn offered none of the above. Facing the group, she gathered and arranged her materials and tools around her. Aunty Bronwyn had three bags: one for dried grass which she called hay, the other for balls of woolly and not-so-woolly threads, and the third for glass animal eyes and plastic noses, the kind you would buy from a two-dollar shop. I was confused, and yet very intrigued. My mind was tripping over itself like a faulty fuse. But ... ahem ... I mean ... where were the digital tools? Shouldn't we be on our tablets or laptops? Dried grass? Really?? To her wide-eyed digital nerdy apprentices, she said these words to this effect: "Watch closely as I make these animals because when I am done, you will all have to make one."

I must have pulled a face at this because, unlike Marama, I am not the best at handling any type of textile-related object, even woolly thread. To clarify, a *LandBack* banner is way above my textiles capability. I almost break out in rashes imagining myself stitching one together. If you have a sewing machine, do not offer it to me for use. I will break the needles and we will not be friends anymore.

“What would you like me to make?” Aunty Bronwyn asked. We chose a dingo and leaned in with curiosity to see what Aunty Bronwyn would do next. She clumped and shaped the dingo’s hay body using her hands before wrapping woolly thread around the back and belly, making sure not to overlap the threads too much or have twigs sticking out through the gaps of thread (Figs 2a–c). She split hay clumps into ears, wrapped them and then moulded the head with more hand-shaping and thread-wrapping. She repeated the moulding, splitting, shaping and thread-wrapping process for the tail, hind and forelegs. To finish the dingo, she trimmed all the hay that had escaped the woolly threads and pressed deep-amber glassy eyes and a plastic nose into the dingo’s face for personality and character effect. Our 2024 Digital Fellowship dingo was born (Fig. 2c).



Figure 2. Photo collage of the making of a dingo bush animal with Gunditjmara country elder Aunty Bronwyn Razem: a) hay-clumping and moulding, b) thread-wrapping to create the dingo’s form, c) the close-to-finished dingo, d) my attempt: some kind of mouse. 2024 Creative Australia (CA) and Creative New Zealand (CNZ) Digital Fellowship in-person gathering, Naarm (Melbourne).

Throughout Aunt Bronwyn's process of creative-making, I watched her closely. She was seated and her feet were firmly placed on the floor. From this place of *grounding*, her hands moved between grass, thread and bags to either shape materials or fetch tools, all of which were touchable and tangible objects. Driving this force of creativity was intergenerational and cultural knowledge passed on to Aunt Bronwyn from her own elders. The presence of ancestral knowledge hovering over the workshop room was unmistakable. This knowledge held her in place: *tethered* her to her chair and manifested itself in this flurry of activity that transformed loose hay into a recognisable form. But what does this all mean in the context of digital creative practice, I wondered? How can we apply tethering and grounding from a hands-on workshop like Aunt Bronwyn's to digital creative practice? And how do we navigate the calamities of digital technology while creating with it? For starters, Aunt Bronwyn's dingo-making was useful in reminding me that any digital data created by a human person on any device metaphorically exists in clouds, but in reality, they are stored and "tethered" to tangible storage devices, servers of various sizes and data centres scattered around the globe. To state the obvious, such digital repositories are constructed by human persons with supple flesh and hard bones. Digital technology, therefore, as a tangible tool is driven by creative knowledge stored in tangible places like soft warm bodies, a.k.a. the Indigenous human brain. To this effect, then, digital creativity can be grounded in culture, language, land, flora, fauna, sea and ancestral knowledge: all the glorious things that make our bodies pulse and thrive, and us human. This was a good starting point for me to conceptualise the tangibility and grounding nature of digital technology and its many creative possibilities and outputs.

However, as with all types of technology, there are challenges with digital technology use. Aunt Bronwyn's workshop reminded me of this too. Wrapping thread around the body of the bush animal, for example, requires an extra pair of hands (Fig. 2b); the right texture of hay can be sometimes difficult to source, and the bush animal can morph into a grotesque creature in novice hands, as mine did. I had intended to make a mouse, but it turned into a half-chihuahua-half-piglet, giving new sense to the term "bush animal" (Fig. 2d). I wrote the visual poem "a star map of virtual sickness" (Fig. 3), in the first instance, to capture the challenges of working with digital technology in a creative space, but the poem can also be a response to many different and difficult online interactions that the reader may have experienced. Poetry is all-encompassing like that.

I play on the ideas of seasickness and homesickness as metaphorical consequences that could prevail if we do not ground or tether our digital practices to meaningful experiences. It has to *be more* than just showing off technical functionalities and playing with bells and whistles. The QR codes,

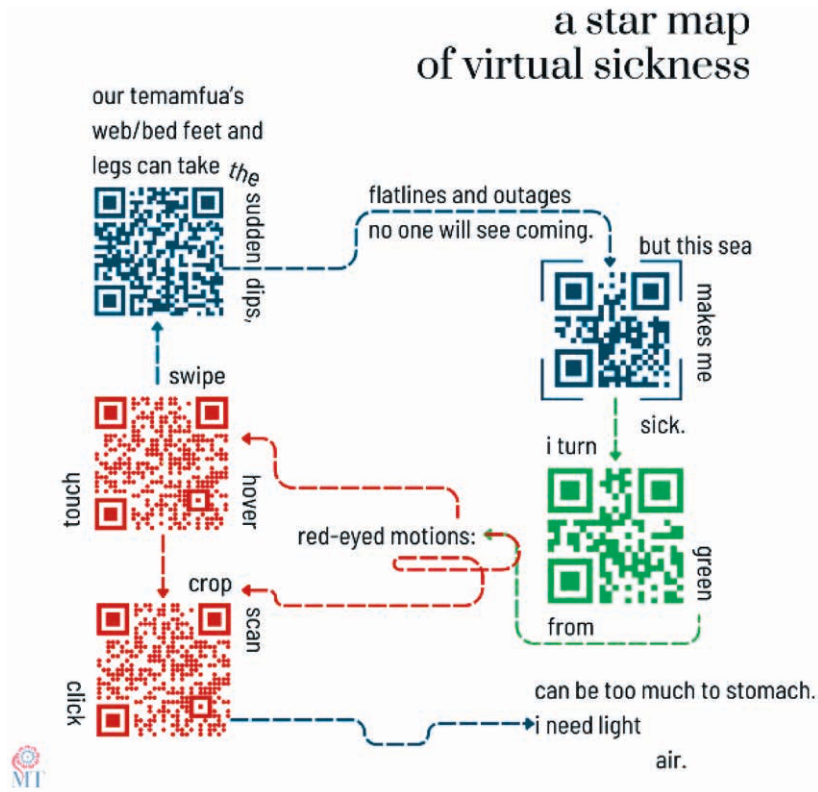


Figure 3. Poem 1: “a star map of virtual sickness”. Visual poetry digitally created in Canva Premium. Visual features: image, colour, visual sequencing, text effects (bending, vertical placement).

twisting arrows and vertical and falling placement of text I have used in the poem have both a visual and semiotic function. The QR codes represent navigational stars, and the use of twisting arrows and falling text amplifies creative-making experiences fraught with unpredictability, discontentment, trouble or danger, which can all be “too much to stomach”. QR codes sourced by Canva are either active or inactive, which further magnifies the sometimes fickle nature of creating with digital technology. Nevertheless, fickleness and unpredictability need not be our reality with digital creative practice. We can certainly carve new realities and create new possibilities of doing and making with digital technology. I explore this idea in “how to redraw a star map of virtual sickness” (Figs 4–6).

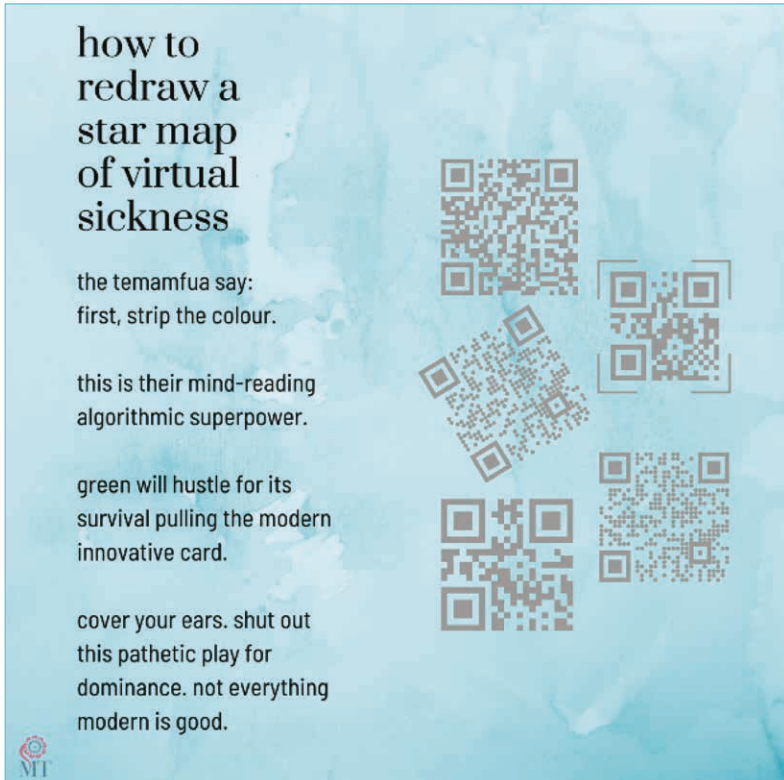


Figure 4. Poem 2: “how to redraw a star map of virtual sickness” (page 1). Visual poetry digitally created in Canva Premium. Visual features: image colour shift, watercolour texture background fill blue (sea).

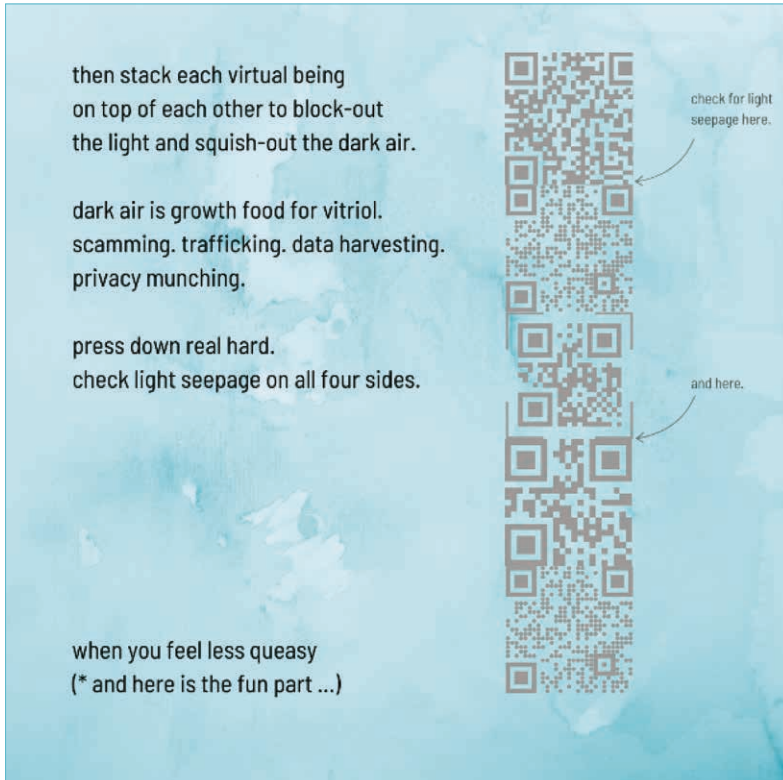


Figure 5. Poem 2: “how to redraw a star map of virtual sickness” (page 2). Visual poetry digitally created in Canva Premium. Visual features: image position shift, image labelling, as above.



Figure 6. Poem 2: “how to redraw a star map of virtual sickness” (page 3). Visual poetry digitally created in Canva Premium. Visual features: image position shift, iconic line-slashing, text effects (vertical placement), background colour shift brown (earth, land).

The solutions I offer in the redrawing of the star map are deliberately playful, literal, metaphorical and visually obscure. Obscurity cements its place in the poem because it opens up many possible readings. What I hope is not lost on the reader is the need to lean on ancestral knowledge of the *temamfua* (elders, ancestors) and Indigenous contexts such as land (a.k.a. home!), flora, fauna, language, family and community groups to make digital creative practice meaningful. Literally and figuratively slashing one's way through the codes in a downward backslash effect and changing the background fill to earthy brown brings the practitioner to a firmer place of stability and meaning (Fig. 6). When we ground ourselves as creative digital practitioners in this way, "no one gets sick down here".

To conclude, "a star map of virtual sickness" and "how to redraw a star map of virtual sickness" would not have been written had I not been hanging out in the courtyards and corridors of academia. I would not have met Aunty Bronwyn. I would not have sat in her bush-animal-making workshop and absorbed her warmth, generosity, wisdom and creativity to argue and carve a place for Indigenous knowledge in creative digital poetic practice. Finding Aunty Bronwyn through the 2024 CA and CNZ Digital Fellowship while reading up on Pacific poets that engage with visual or digital technology reminds me of Te Punga Somerville's (2022) poem "Fryer Library, UQ", in which she writes (p. 53),

*You sit in an air-conditioned archive
Working your way through boxes of paper
Underneath a picture of David Unaipon
And you don't feel as lonely
In this university place
As you have felt in others
Surrounded by people*

Indeed, may Indigenous scholars like Marama and I persevere in Western academies. May we find many more Aunty Bronwyns and David Unaipons as we research, write, argue and fight for Indigenous values. May moments of loneliness be rare, but most of all, may we never leave. However, should we find ourselves drawn to other paths of intellectual and creative engagements, may we often sojourn back to the courtyards of academia to add, build and strengthen the networks of opportunities for meaningful Indigenous engagement that hang out there.

GLOSSARY

The terms in this glossary are New Zealand Māori unless otherwise stated.

āniwaniwa	rainbow
atua rei	goddesses
haerenga	journey
haiŋaegaga	conversation, discussion (Rotuman)
haole	European (Hawaiian)
Hinetapuārau	ancestor of the Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki tribe
iwi	tribe
kai	food
kēhua	ghost, haunt
Kiwa	an early Māori navigator
kōkōwai	red-brown clay
kōrero	conversation, discussion
kuia	female elder
kupu	word(s)
maramataka	Māori calendar linked to the environment
mokopuna (mokos)	grandchildren, descendants
ngā atua Māori	Māori other-than-human ancestors
ngā toto o ngā tūpuna	ancestral blood
ngā whetū	stars
Papatūānuku	mother earth
Parawhenuamea	goddess of water that springs from the earth
paru	dirt
pouhine	a weaving pattern
pounamu	greenstone (jade) native to Aotearoa New Zealand
puku	stomach
pūngāwerewere	spider
rākau	tree
sal ŋaiva	creative journey, coined from the words “sal(a)”, meaning road or journey, and “ŋaiva/ŋaivav”, used to refer to someone who is very skilful in making things with their hands, e.g., weavers, canoe builders (Rotuman)
taniwha	supernatural being
temamfua	elders, ancestors (Rotuman)
tiki	carved figure
tino	short for tino rangatiratanga (Māori self-determination)

toi (Māori)	(Māori) art
uku	whitish clay
wahine, wāhine (Māori)	(Māori) woman, women
wai māori	freshwater
whai	stingray
whakapapa	genealogy, layers
whānau	Indigenous kin
whanaunga	relations
whenua	land, placenta
Whiro	the first night of the new moon

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