

waka kuaka

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SPECIAL ISSUE:

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



The Polynesian Society

Waipapa Taumata Rau | The University of Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: Each of the writers in this special issue, from essayists and reviewers to poets and interview subjects, addresses chains of connection. Through many different pathways they articulate and critique discontinuities created in colonial contexts. Memory and systems of memory, from storytelling to whakapapa (genealogical ties) to colonial archives and museums, are responded to in both material and abstract ways, creating fine networks and continuities at personal and institutional levels. Disconnection and connection are the themes that bind this special issue of *Waka Kuaka: The Journal of the Polynesian Society* as we seek to amplify the words and images of Indigenous poets, artists, archivists, creatives and curators and their innovative and unconventional approaches to reclaiming memory and history making.

Keywords: Pacific art, Indigenous art, Te Rā, museums, Indigenous poetry, archives, Indigenous data sovereignty

The title of this piece is a quote from “Time to Write”, a 2022 poem by Alice Te Punga Somerville. The line is a palindrome of sorts, in that it could be read from either direction. Toggling between presents and pasts and places, the phrase forms links between micro and macro spaces, collapsing and expanding the view from either end in a dynamic loop. In the chain of indefinite articles in Somerville’s line—a room, a house, an island, an ocean—idiosyncrasies are conjured, creating space for subjectivities to multiply, reshaping the given and acceptable into something unbounded and uncontainable. Most often the chain is to whakapapa (genealogies), to memory and to histories that lead to oceans and back again.

The room where I sit to write this introduction to the special issue is an open-plan office in Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, upstairs from thousands of Indigenous treasures in storage or on display on the floors below. Documentary Heritage—manuscripts, ephemera, publications, images and digital treasures—number in the millions. The collections have been amassed in many different ways but in general are reflective of colonial dispossession, often resulting in ontological and epistemological discontinuities in the communities from which they have come. It is a profound disruption whereby genealogical links are broken—ancestors no longer known, identities lost—and discontinuities are manifold. In a museum with such a large colonially sourced Indigenous collection, provenance is not

evenly distributed (Soares 2020), and memory is denied, thereby producing and reifying social inequalities. How then can Indigenous people reclaim their right to memory in institutions narrating colonial pasts (Tupinambá 2023)?

An example of memory reclamation led by Indigenous weavers and researchers is on display at the museum. Te Rā,¹ the last known Māori sail, is on loan from the British Museum and is currently on display in *Te Rā: Navigating Home*. The opportunity to show Te Rā was negotiated as part of a collaboration with Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū² and extends on from the Royal Society Te Apārangi Marsden-funded project “Whakarahia Anō te Ra Kaihau! Raise Up Again the Billowing Sail!”³ It has been over 200 years since the sail was last seen in Aotearoa New Zealand. In 1922 Te Rangihiroa (Sir Peter Buck) set a challenge for a replica of the sail to be made, and 100 years later, the Te Rā Ringa Raupā weavers’ group⁴ completed Māhere Tū ki te Rangi, a strand-for-strand younger sibling to Te Rā. Kahutoi Te Kanawa, a highly accomplished weaver and curator at Auckland Museum, describes raranga (weaving) as pivotal in Māori cultural practice (pers. comm., March 2024). The development of the capabilities of weavers and the understanding of materials specific to Aotearoa has been accomplished over centuries. The loaned return of Te Rā is a reminder of discontinuity, of gaps and disassociations created by the absence of taonga (treasures) from Indigenous hands and minds. Māhere Tū ki te Rangi exemplifies a way in which Indigenous knowledges are preserved and are a source of technology and innovation, transmitted through nonlinear, practice-led methodologies underpinned by the importance of whakapapa (genealogical ties) and of the connection of materials and processes to tikanga (protocols) and to the whenua (land) and moana (ocean).

In addition to material investigations and recreations, photogrammetry and 3D modelling were conducted during the Marsden project. This combination of methods and analysis by weaving experts represents some of the transdisciplinary ways that knowledge and memory are reclaimed. Ultimately, as Catherine Smith, a core member of the Marsden project, said: “We need to document Te Rā and communicate the knowledge contained within her to the wider community so it won’t ever be lost again” (Workman 2018).

Weaving and the transdisciplinary approaches described above are akin to the methodologies employed by the artists, poets and writers foregrounded in this special issue of *Waka Kuaka*. Their inclusion is in part a response and addendum to the Pacific research methodologies explored in the 2023 special issue, where editors Marcia Leenen-Young and Lisa Uperesa looked at the growth and impact of emerging Indigenous scholars and the genealogies connecting them. The academic realm is one part of the growth of Indigenous research, but it also extends into art and cultural practices as diverse as the revival of hiapo (Niuean barkcloth), installation art and literature. The cover image, an artwork by Jimmy Ma‘ia‘i, is titled *Sunday Best* (2022).

The brightly coloured stack of chairs is a memory but also a nod to gafa (genealogical ties), connecting to a theme throughout this special issue. As an editorial choice it also represents the ways each of the contributors is engaged in retrieval and protection of cultural knowledge and the subjective and idiosyncratic approaches the authors choose in order to remake or forge continuities, including art making and poetry.

Archives are also increasingly affected by the presence of more Indigenous archivists seeking to improve access to Indigenous collections using Indigenous epistememes. Huni Mancini is an archivist at the Archive of Māori and Pacific Sound (AMPS), and her focus on core archival methods and data sovereignty are interwoven with her own formative experiences—experiences that underpin and determine Mancini’s commitment to serving communities and creating continuities.

Mancini’s recollection of the Tongan dance mā’ulu’ulu is echoed in Jimmy Ma’ia’i’s exploration of memory and experience within the practice of installation art and sculpture. For both writers, who they are and what they do are intertwined and deeply inform their emplaced positionality—a commonality they share with the poets Marama Salsano, Mere Taito and Ruby Macomber, who ground their contributions, as Mere says, “in meaningful experience”, whether it be Land Back protest, recognition of Rotuman diaspora or a digital workshop in Naarm (Melbourne).

Likewise for the visual artists and writers who feature in the Curatorium, a biannual feature in *Waka Kuaka*. The Curatorium was originally devised as a way for me and art historian and curator Nina Tonga to reflect on current issues in the contemporary arts of the Pacific. In this edition, however, we have handed over the feature to Cora-Allan Twiss (Ngā Puhī, Ngāti Tumutumu, Niue—Liku, Alofi) and Emily Parr (Ngāi Te Rangi, Moana, Pākehā). The pair, along with Cora-Allan’s father, Kelly Lafaiki, went on a voyage along the coast of Aotearoa New Zealand on board the *Heritage Adventurer*. Their Curatorium takes the form of a talanoa (exchange) between the two artists, each reflecting on parallels and encounters between the whenua and Cook, Tupaia and Taiata, and the shipboard artists of Cook’s voyages.

Foregrounding the voices of artists is also an intention of *Pacific Arts Aotearoa* (2023), the subject of my long-distance talanoa with artist, curator, writer and academic Lana Lopesi. In an anthology that spans decades of Pacific arts practice in Aotearoa, she has centred artists’ voices in a groundbreaking way for the arts in Aotearoa, and, as Lana and I reflect, this breaks the pattern of it usually being the work of curators like her, Nina and me to describe and situate artists and their work. *Pacific Arts Aotearoa* is a significant volume that once again reclaims the right to memory and to a storied history that speaks not only to Pacific audiences but to art and social history in Aotearoa in the way in which Lopesi articulates and manifests the plurality of contemporary Pacific creative expression.

In an earlier issue that marked new directions for *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, an undertaking was made to “expand by engaging wider communities and emerging scholars, as well as established scholars, of the Pacific” (Pouwhare *et al.* 2022: 350). Most of the contributors to this issue are new to *Waka Kuaka* and are part of the intention to prioritise transdisciplinary practices. In the same issue there was a reference to Ron Crocombe’s observation in 1992 that the first issue in 1882 had more “Polynesian authorship” than the latest copy he had received. As I mentioned earlier referring to museum contexts, uneven distribution of provenance produces and reinforces inequalities. The same can be applied to authorship. It was Te Rangihoro who not only issued the challenge to weavers in 1922 but also compared the Polynesian Society to “a canoe venturing uncharted seas” (Firth *et al.* 1992: 219). Perhaps the journal has not had an installation of plastic chairs on the cover before or featured poetry or the words and images of two Indigenous artists contemplating the coastline of Aotearoa from a ship, but it is hoped that these forms of expression provide some new coordinates for navigating from the room to the ocean and back again.

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Mahalo nui (huge thanks) to all of the new and returning authors who managed their contributions around busy schedules of work, studio and study. Mahalo also to our peer reviewers, whose work is so valuable to *Waka Kuaka* and to both our emerging and established writers. In particular thank you for your openness to reviewing writing that spans transdisciplinary approaches. I am new to this experience of editing an entire issue, as opposed to focusing solely on reviews, and I have even more appreciation for the work of editor Marcia Leenen-Young and the editors before her. Marcia’s support for the shift in content for this special issue has been insightful and encouraging. As always, Mona-Lynn Courteau’s editorial work and Hamish Macdonald’s design have helped us all shine.

NOTES

1. Te Rā (ca. 1785), or The Sail, is primarily made from harakeke (*Phormium tenax*), feathers of kāhu (swamp harrier), kererū (native pigeon) and kākā (native parrot), and remnants of dogskin. Te Rā is on loan to Auckland War Memorial Museum by the Trustees of the British Museum (Oc,NZ.147).
2. The exhibition at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū was titled *Te Rā: The Māori Sail* and ran 8 July–23 October 2023.
3. “Revitalising Cultural Knowledge through Analysis of the Māori Sail, Te Rā”, led by project founders Rānui Ngārimu, Donna Campbell and Catherine Smith. <https://teraa.co.nz/>
4. Mandy Sunlight, Ruth Port and Rouati Waata travelled to the British Museum in 2010 to see the original sail. The three weavers are current members of Te Rā Ringa Raupā, along with mentor Dr Maureen Lander, Tessa Harris and Puhirere I Te Ata Rangi Waata. Past members include Makareta Jahnke, Maikara Ropata, Kerrin Taylor and Delwyn Cunningham.

GLOSSARY

The terms in this glossary are te reo Māori unless otherwise stated.

gafa	genealogical ties (Samoan)
harakeke	New Zealand flax (<i>Phormium tenax</i>)
hiapo	barkcloth (Niuean)
kāhu	Australasian Harrier
mā'ulu'ulu	a Tongan group dance
moana	ocean
raranga	weaving
talanoa	verbal exchange (multiple Pacific languages)
taonga	treasure
tikanga	protocols
whakapapa	genealogical ties
whenua	land

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