

CAROLINE VERCOE
University of Auckland

Contemporary Māori and Pacific artists exploring place

ABSTRACT

This article explores the notion of 'place', extending its scope to include the ocean, history and diaspora, in relation to six contemporary Māori and Pacific artists who were involved in the Pacific(S) Contemporain exhibitions in Normandy, France in 2015. Structured into three sections, it addresses the three curatorial thematics that provided the overarching frame for the exhibitions. 'The ocean is a place' focuses on Angela Tiatia and Rachael Rakena, and acknowledges the importance of Epeli Hau'ofa's writing in relation to the ocean and Oceania as a crucial marker of identity both within its geographic location and beyond. 'History is a place' considers moving image installations by Michel Tuffery and Greg Semu, in particular referencing how they rework and reimagine colonial and art historical representations and conventions. 'Diaspora is a place' compares the photographic practices of Ane Tonga and Edith Amituanai, whose work reflects on and captures the dynamics that emerge as Pacific communities draw on and adapt cultural traditions, and negotiate relationships mediated by their migration and diaspora experiences.

KEYWORDS

Māori art
Pacific art
contemporary art
Oceanic identity
diaspora
indigenous
epistemologies
digital art
contemporary
photography

Unlike the term 'site', the notion of 'place' is fluid and multi-layered in its resonance. It can define something as particular as a specific location, or could be as broad as a vast area in space. Its meaning flows across a range of contexts – come over to my 'place', to be put in one's 'place', to 'place' something in a particular arrangement or order. Lucy Lippard's well-known assertion that 'a lived in landscape becomes a place' evokes the relationships between people,

1. The artists exhibiting in *Pacifique(S) Contemporain* were Michel Tuffery, George Nuku, Tracey Tawhiao, Natalie Robertson, Rachael Rakena, Angela Tiatia, Janet Lilo, Greg Semu, Edith Amituanai, Jeremy Leatinu'u, Shannon Te Ao, Robert George and Ane Tonga.

events and memory (1997: 7). It goes well beyond mere location and geography, to encompass the environmental, historical symbolic and the deeply personal. Intercultural relationships and colonial histories heighten these dynamics. Moreover, indigenous understandings of place have long demonstrated a complex understanding of the interrelated and contingent nature of the temporal, spatial and cultural.

Manulani Aluli Meyer draws on the dynamics of place. She incorporates them into her holographic indigenous epistemology (2013: 94–101). As a consequence of this, her frames of reference include familiar indicators of place, but also draw on Pacific indigenous concepts, redolent with what she calls ancestral memory. Indigenous epistemologies, she explains, represent a 'call for critical consciousness and respect for other ways of knowing. It is what enduring practices-in-place have developed and processed: a knowledge ethic shaped by the needs of place and people' (2013: 96). Meyer's conceptualizing of place as complex and interrelational resonates with contemporary Māori and Pacific art practices that explore issues of belonging and identity.

This article explores the dynamics of 'place' in relation to the ocean, diaspora and history, focusing on six contemporary Māori and Pacific artists who were involved in the *Pacifique(S) Contemporain* curatorial project in Normandy, France in 2015.¹ The curatorial premise of *Place in Pacifique(S) Contemporain* expanded the discursive field of place as essentially embodied within a geographic location, to encompass the expanse of the Ocean, which for centuries enabled a rich and complex network of voyaging, conquest, global migration, settlement and trade routes. It also encompasses a dynamic theatre of creation narratives that continue to inform indigenous relationships to the sea, featuring epic Polynesian ancestor figures including Maui and Tangaroa. History, too, was folded into an exploration of place and contemporary Māori



Figure 1: Tracey Tawhiao, *The Polynesian Triangle*. Art installation. Library atrium at the University of Le Havre, 2015.

and Pacific art practices. Revisionist historical discourse has become a kind of palimpsest for scholars, curators and artists to counter, challenge and re-image the past and, in doing so, offer new ways of understanding both history and the present. Diaspora, the dispersal and intergenerational experiences and collective memories of movement, settlement and belonging or dislocation were also incorporated into the curatorial construction of place. The section in this article titled 'The ocean is a place' features a discussion of the works and art practices of Rachael Rakena and Angela Tiatia; 'History is a Place' focuses on Michel Tuffery and Greg Semu; Ane Tonga and Edith Amituanai are featured in relation to the idea that 'Diaspora is a place'.

THE OCEAN IS A PLACE

The Pacific Ocean plays a crucial role in the everyday lives of communities and nations across the hundreds of island groups within its expanse. It has also profoundly affected the ways that cultural identities have developed and are understood. Epli Hau'ofa's essays 'Our sea of islands' (1994) and 'The ocean in us' (1998) stand out as key points of departure for Pacific writers, curators and artists who identify as much with the ocean as the land, and understand a sense of place and belonging as being defined as much by its landscapes as its surrounding seascapes. Hau'ofa's iconic essays set the platform for a rich discussion and exploration of the idea of a pan-Oceanic identity, grounded not in relation to ethnic identifications or geographic homelands, but defined by a relationship with the ocean. He argues that Pacific or Oceanic identity should take a regional form, defined by a proximity within the expansive Pacific Ocean.

Hau'ofa's vision of the Pacific region transcends its conventional geographic borders, and stretches beyond to also encompass migrant and diaspora homelands including the United States and Canada, joined by networks enabled by the sea. He writes,

There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power [...]. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships.

(1994: 152–53)

His essays have captivated the imaginations of academics, writers and artists who have explored the Ocean, and the idea of Oceania as a crucial marker of identity formation, alongside the importance of land and place, so closely related to experiences of indigeneity.

The agency and symbolism of the Ocean does not resonate exclusively within the Pacific. The Atlantic and Indian oceans also loom large in the collective historical and cultural imagination. In stark contrast to Hau'ofa's epic vision of Oceania, characterized as an enabling place, a nurturing world of social and diaspora networks, Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' offers the stage for a very different kind of origin myth, but one arguably equally iconic. It has become synonymous with the fraught and violent Middle Passage, the Atlantic slave trade. Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), written just one year before Hau'ofa's 'Our sea of islands' (1994), took as its point of departure the Atlantic Ocean as a pathway route for

2. *Salt and Ka Puna Te Wai, Ko Te Kāwai Puna* were exhibited for the first time at the *Pacifique(S) Contemporain* exhibitions.
3. The Slow Cinema genre draws on the cinematic legacy of directors Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman among others, and is characterized by long takes, a minimalist approach and heightened awareness of temporal and contemplative elements (see de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016).

the trans-Atlantic slavery trade, or Triangular Trade, which saw ships departing from Europe to West Africa, transporting millions of slaves to the Caribbean and the Americas, before heading back to Europe with cargos of commercial goods. The Ocean as a place of ‘catastrophic rupture’ (Gilroy 1993: 197) across which millions of people crossed from their African homelands into lives and intergenerational legacies of slavery and, for many, death is a stark contrast to Hau’ofa’s nurturing Oceania, as hospitable and generous (1994: 160). What both writers do have in common, however, is their framing of the Ocean as a means of enabling an ‘outernational, transcultural reconceptualization’ of history and the diaspora (Gilroy 1993: 17).

Rachael Rakena and Angela Tiatia have developed a number of moving image works that reference the Ocean. Tiatia’s *Salt* (2015) and Rakena’s *Ka Puna Te Wai, Ko Te Kāwai Puna (The Source of the River, the Source of the People)* (2015) take the Ocean as a point of departure to explore intergenerational relationships, environmental concerns, cultural practices and the interconnected nature of land, sea and sky.² They evoke Hau’ofa’s holistic and relational vision of Oceania. Over the past two decades, Rakena has developed a body of digital and video work that explores connections and engagements with the ocean, water and notions of fluidity, alongside the mutable and contingent space of the Internet and social media. ‘As I worked with people in water’, she explains, ‘I found culturally specific relationships between Māori and water impossible to ignore. We are island people living in a vast ocean. We belong to water just as we belong to land’ (Graham et al. 2008: 4). Hau’ofa’s idea of the ocean as a social network is developed by Rakena to also encompass the fluid and contingent space of online ‘places’.

Rerehiko (2002), a video installation, exemplifies these dynamics. It features members of Te Whanau o Kai Tahu ki Araiteuru (KTW), a group of Ngāi Tahu (South Island) tribal members of which she belongs. Made in the early 2000s, pre-social media and texting technologies, they created an e-mail network, cc-ing each other in and blending te reo (Māori language) with English in their various communications and announcements. This enabled them to maintain their cultural community in the diaspora, to share important events and to continue to support and develop their tribal identity. *Rerehiko* features members of the KTW community filmed under water, swimming and performing a range of Māori ceremonial actions including the haka. Passages from actual e-mails that had been sent between the members stream over their aquatic performative bodies, creating connections between the flow of water, tides and communications. It highlights the importance of cultural narratives relating to the sea for indigenous communities. Stylistically, the slowed-down underwater actions have affinities with Slow Cinema.³ The artist explains,

The medium of the water offered another realm, a spiritual realm, and another time, a cosmological time. Aside from the specific historical figures, *Rerehiko* includes cultural references to water, which are to do with journeying, wairua [spirit or soul], and customary relationships to the ocean, such as mahinga kai [food gathering] practices.

(Rakena 2003: 3)

Ka Puna Te Wai, Ko Te Kāwai Puna, a moving image work, offers an intimate and subtle diaspora narrative. Evoking the sparse, cinematic affect of Tracey Moffatt’s short film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), it features a grandmother cross-legged at the water’s edge of what seems to be a vast, darkened



Figure 2: Rachael Rakena, *Ka Puna Te Wai, Ko Te Kāwai Puna*, 2015. *Moving image installation*. *La Forme Gallery, Le Havre*.

space.⁴ In her lap sits her young grandchild. Around them, coconuts bob up and down in the water. The mood is reflective. She cups water over him while he plays, completely at home in the setting. As they sit, and the child becomes more animated, playing in the water but never far from his grandmother, the sounds of a Tongan song builds. *Hiva he Fuekafa*, a love song adapted from the Scottish classic *Auld Lang Syne*, performed by the all-male Tongan choir Fuekafa and composed by Afuha'amango, creates the temporal span of this work. It is the intention of the artist that as the harmonies and momentum build within the artwork, so too does the energy level of the child (Rakena 2017).

The simplicity and resonance of the joy, love and intimacy between the grandmother and grandchild is palpable. At one stage, he seems to be conducting the choir, his hands circling the air, his feet stamping in the water, much to his grandmother's delight. It is an emotional journey, beginning in a quiet, almost downcast moment, as the old lady and child sit calmly looking into the water; she seems to be dwelling perhaps on her own childhood. Its dynamic finale sees water splashing around, both are laughing, the song in crescendo. As the song comes to an end, the child turns and kisses his grandmother. The juxtaposition of the harmonic strengths of the male choir and the simplicity and intimacy of the child and elderly woman speak of the importance of grandparents and intergenerational relationships in Māori and Pacific families. This is even more poignant for the artist as they are her son and his grandmother. *Ka Puna* highlights the importance of family but also the role of music and singing together as a means of celebrating and maintaining culture.

Over the last fifteen years, Tiatia has developed a body of work based within a performance and moving image practice that typically involves simple but loaded actions, elements of endurance and a testing of her body's physical limits. While she began exhibiting in the 2000s, her approach is informed by an understanding of the issues of representation and identity politics so pervasive during the 1990s. Characteristically, she explores and challenges representations of the female Polynesian body, constructions of the exotic and tropes of femininity, both within western and Polynesian cultural contexts. Her works

4. A number of Moffatt's photographic series and films including *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), *Something More* (1989) and *Invocations* (2001) have been shot in studio settings, employing painted backgrounds and sets.

draw on familiar signifiers of Polynesia – tropical flowers, body adornment, in particular tatau (tattoos) and of course the Polynesian female body herself. Her video work *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis* (2010) features a close-up of the artist staring straight into the camera and slowly eating a large red hibiscus flower, before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and walking away. It counters exoticized popular stereotypes of Pacific beauty and femininity. This, along with her more recent performative moving image works, *Walking the Wall* (2014) and *Heels* (2014), develop her practice of questioning cultural assumptions and stereotypes of femininity and its cultural signifiers.

More recently, Tiatia has been actively researching and developing works that address globalism, diaspora and climate change. *Edging and Seaming* (2013) juxtaposes her Samoan mother at work as a garment maker in Auckland with a production line in China, reflecting on the ways that globalization has impacted on labour markets and affected local communities. *Tuvalu* (2016), *Holding On* (2015) and *Salt* were shot in Tuvalu, a Pacific atoll nation experiencing the devastating effects of climate change and global warming.

Salt, a moving image projection work, features the artist in shadow slowly walking into an ocean. Shot in Technicolor, the aesthetic evokes a nostalgic cinematic pre-digital memory. The viewer watches on as a female silhouette form walks slowly into the sunset. *Salt* embodies all of the familiar forms of a scenic tropical paradise – the exotic dusky maiden, walking away from the viewer, towards and into a picturesque island beachscape, against a dramatic moonlight glistening across the water as the skyline meets the ocean on the horizon. The suggestion of an island outline in the distance echoes the cloud forms. However, the woman does not dive into the water or turn, but continues to walk calmly forward until she is out of view under the water, disappearing from sight. Heightening the dynamics of this uncanny action, just as her head becomes completely submerged, another identical figure slowly strides forward, to repeat the same action as the first. Quicker now, more of the doppelgänger figures emerge and calmly make their way into the sea and under. The once postcard perfect scene, with its myriad of female forms walking into the ocean, takes on a disturbing viewing encounter across the three-minute looped sequence.

An evocative title, *Salt* refers not only to the saline nature of the ocean, but also to the salt in tears. It not only evokes the crucial link between communities, cultural knowledge and their connection to land, but also the very existence of this land that, unless global environmental action is taken, will inevitably be consumed by the sea. As communities are forced to leave their homelands, indigenous knowledge and customary practices and understandings so intimately connected to particular places and scapes – land, sea and sky – over time will lose their resonance. At first sight this idealized tropical setting becomes at its end an almost dystopic vision of cloned female bodies walking quietly into the ocean until they vanish beneath it. In this instance, due to climate change, the ocean, which plays such a formative and affirming role in the Pacific, is instead threatening existence and forcing a new kind of migration and exile experience on its community.

HISTORY IS A PLACE

The dynamics of place offer a rich point of departure for a consideration of contemporary artistic interventions within historical discourse, as spatial and temporal considerations are increasingly highlighting the limitations of

chronological, linear approaches. The Pacific encompasses a broad arena of encounter and exchange, both within its geographic borders and in terms of colonial and imperial engagements. These are not only enabled by its vast Oceanic terrain, but also by its histories, some stretching back across thousands of years, others centuries old.

Greg Semu and Michel Tuffery's art highlights the intertextual and blended nature of European and Pacific encounters and exchange (see Vercoe 2015). Tuffery has developed a significant body of work that ranges across mediums including print, painting, performance, sculpture, video and large-scale digital projection. Emerging in the early 1990s, he has developed an art practice that is characterized by an empirical research-driven approach that has seen him working within museum collections, communities and archives for over three decades. Often working in series, he charts a rich and diverse history of the Pacific, highlighting its cross and transcultural relationships and offering insights into how their legacies, many forgotten, still play a role in the present.

Siamani Samoa (German Samoa), a series developed from 2011, considers the period between 1900 and 1914, when Samoa was under the colonial rule of Germany. Tuffery, in particular, looks to the daily ritual begun in the period of the German colonial administration and that still goes on today, which sees the now proudly independent nation's Royal Samoa Police Band playing marching band music every morning from the Police Station in Apia, the capital, to Government Building, to raise the Samoan flag. In his signature eclectic style, Tuffery's *Siamani Samoa* has featured a number of collaborations with the Royal Samoan Police Band – who on one occasion received special permission from the Samoan Prime Minister to travel to Sydney in order to perform alongside a video installation. The art project also includes a set of commemorative coins and stamps, a series of paintings representing different Samoan and German figures, as well as a suite of *selu* (traditional Samoan decorative combs), adorned to resemble German colonial architecture and places from the period, which are now disappearing, as these buildings are being lost to urban development priorities largely funded by aid and loans from China. 'I want this work to get people talking about Germany and Samoa before everyone forgets', Tuffery says. 'There are a lot of Samoans who don't even realise they have German ancestry and there are some elderly Samoans who still speak fluent German. I love to hear other people say, "I didn't know that"' (Blake 2015).

For over a decade, Tuffery has been developing works that explore and reimagine the archives, histories and visual culture relating to the iconic figure of Captain Cook, his eighteenth-century voyages and their legacies in the Pacific. *Cookie in the Cook Islands* presents a stern and considered representation of the Captain looking out beyond the viewer, replete with flowers embellishing his ears and tiki peeking out from his collar. The painting is part of a series that depicts Cook in a range of encounters and dialogues, with the Polynesian deity Tangaloa among others, all set against a signature darkened sky. Tuffery's giant multimedia digital work *First Contact* (2012) contrasts still and animated edited projections of archival images from Cook's voyages with original contemporary images, accompanied by an electronic audio soundtrack. His dynamic blend of historical and contemporary representations and performative elements collapse the dualistic binaries that often define colonial encounters and offer viewers an alternative perspective and experience of Cook's legacy and cross-cultural engagements.

5. As part of the 'History is a place' thematic in *Pacifique(S) Contemporain*, Tuffery's *First Contact*, Tiatia's *Hibiscus Rosa Sinesis* and Semu's *Body Water*, all moving image installations, were exhibited at the *Les Grandes Galeries et La Galerie Martainville* in Rouen.

Since the 1990s, Semu has been staging impressive tableaux-style photographic images that draw on the rich aesthetic and symbolic conventions of Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-classical painting. His large-scale photographic works – *Battle of the Noble Savage* (2007), *The Last Cannibal Supper*, *'Cause Tomorrow We Become Christians* (2010) and *Raft of the Tangata Pasifika (People of the Pacific)* (2014–2016) – are examples of his restaging of European and colonial history paintings. Characteristically, he recasts the figures from a European to indigenous Pacific 'cast', often featuring himself as a central protagonist figure. While the referencing of European historical paintings is not new for Semu, *Body Water* (2015), a dual video projection onto plastic sheets, marks a departure from his signature sumptuous photographic works. The projection takes the form of a moving image installation. Two sheets of plastic hang from the ceiling, far enough apart so that viewers can walk between the 'sheets' or watch from either side as a video of water cascades down the screen/curtain showering onto the figure of a brown male body: the artist himself. Already, it is a voyeuristic scene. Also projected onto the plastic are images of women taken from Renaissance paintings, giggling and peeking at the male Polynesian body. His counter-representation and reworking of the exotic and gendered 'gaze' dynamics contrasted with Tiatia's *Hibiscus Rosa Sinesis*, which it featured alongside in the gallery.⁵

Like Tuffery, Semu's reworking and blending of cultural and historical representations change their familiar frames of reference. They offer reconsiderations of both the protagonist and subject figures' intentions and agency. These works in their historical contexts, like the Cook narratives, reflected the power and authority of English and European patronage and conquest. Within the context of Semu's photographic tableau, this authority and power becomes questioned, the grand narrative supplanted with ones of ambivalence, displacement and counter-imagery. Their approach and creative explorations share affinities with prevailing revisionist historical and art historical scholarship. The works simultaneously look backwards and forwards in terms of their frames of reference, re-imagining objectifying tropes and stereotypes, to question their agency and authority, while also positioning them firmly within a contemporary present.

DIASPORA IS A PLACE

Diaspora is a charged term that has in recent times developed beyond its historical reference to the Jewish diaspora, to become a meaningful point of identification for a range of communities living away from their homelands for generations, across the globe. The notion of 'Diaspora is a place' is driven by stories and memories, and is configured just as much by geographic places and homelands as it is by the agency and performativity of intergenerational relationships, communities and the space of 'home' in the diaspora.

Edith Amituanai and Ane Tonga have photographic practices that speak to this thematic. While referencing their urban experiences living in Auckland, their work also reflects global experiences of migration, diaspora and belonging. From the early 2000s, Amituanai has been exhibiting series of photographic works that revolve around her family, everyday life and local community. Inspired by documentary photography and a commitment to community engagement, her images do not reflect the objectifying 'othering' that can characterize the documentary genre. Capturing more intimate and personal scenes and moments, they are characteristically set in the private

space of home or community space of church, school or suburban street. At once distanced from her subjects, the images often have a familiar quality. Whether they be the domestic portraits of family and friends' lounges and domestic rituals in her *Amituanai Family* (2005) and *Ioka* (2004) series, or the large portraits of Samoan rugby players taken on the playing field in Europe, where they have moved to take up sporting contracts. As in *Dejeuner* (2007), where the images portray people, things and moments that are so important to the maintenance of community, yet often go unnoticed.

Ranui 135 (2013) is a series named after the artist's local 135 bus route from her home in suburban Ranui, West Auckland into the city. As part of her community involvement, Amituanai runs photo booths at a range of local events including Christmas parties at the local caravan park and school fairs. Exhibited as large poster-size works, as opposed to framed portraits, they feature young locals, including *Veronique Kini*, shot in Amituanai's photo booth at her Sunday School ball. Appearing comfortable before the camera, her bright yellow and red dress, dangling earrings and large purple flower in her hair stand out well against the photo booth backdrop, featuring a blue sky island scene replete with large Samoan *fale* (houses) and coconut trees in the background. *Young Girls from the Riserra Drive Neighbours' Street Party*, another photo booth shot from the series, images two young friends smiling into the camera. Six pairs of eyes look at the camera, including those of a large green snake curling around the t-shirt of one of the girls. *Cassius and Friends at the Moveit Youth Holiday Programme* again pictures young people from the artist's community, comfortable in front of the camera. No attempt is made to stage these images. Their individual titles across the series reflect not only the diverse young people that form this community, but also a myriad of stories, events and moments that locate and shape this place.

Ane Tonga's photo series *Grills* (2008) celebrates Nifo Koula, the Tongan adornment practice of having gold inlaid onto one's teeth. She explains,

My interest in gold teeth was one that started off as a joke between my sister and myself, wondering why it is that Tongan people got gold teeth. However, my inquiry was no longer a joke when I began looking at my own family and tracing the path of which my relatives (from the younger generation leading up to my grandmother) have all acquired gold teeth.

(Tonga 2014)

The series, which the artist has been developing since 2008, has broadened from an investigation of her family's motivations for getting Nifo Koula into a more wide-ranging interest in the role that permanent adornment plays both as an articulation of an intimate connection with one's homeland and as a signifier of heritage identity in the diaspora.

Not much is known about the origins of Nifo Koula. The practice of fixing gold onto teeth is centuries old. Gold as a symbol of wealth, status and royalty functions well in Tongan society. Proud of its status of never being formally colonized, the British Protectorate from 1900 to 1970 has sustained an active and dynamic royal family, with all that accompanies the privilege. Tongans have always been highly innovative and adaptive in the expression of their *anga fakatonga* (the Tongan way). From the legendary Queen Salote, who endeared herself to the world during Queen Elizabeth II's coronation festivities by choosing to ride in the pouring rain, in the procession with her



Figure 3: Ane Tonga's photo series *Grills*. On display at Galerie 65 de l'ESADHaR, Le Havre, 2015.

carriage uncovered as a sign of respect, and whose poetry, songs and *lakalaka* (group dance) are still performed today, to her flamboyant grandson, the late King George Tupou V, with his penchant for being driven around Nukualofa in London taxis. The use of gold as a high-value material, along with its charged symbolic references to royalty, status and wealth is drawn on in Tonga's exploration of it in the context of Nifo Koula.

Originally, the series focused on female members of the artist's family, spanning three generations and featuring her grandmother, mother, aunt and three cousins. Comprising six large photographs and a video work, it reflects on notions of belonging, place, beauty, relationships and cultural expression. In these partial portraits, which are close-ups of the lower half of her subjects, people are shown smiling, pulling faces, straightening hair and whitening teeth. In 2015, Tonga developed the series to incorporate male members of her family who wear Nifo Koula, as well as images of places in Tonga where they travel to have the work done.

Grills is about relationships. Across the various video dialogues, a relationship develops as the different narratives thread over and through each other. Similar to motivations for getting a tattoo, generational differences emerge between the Tongan born and New Zealand born recipients. From a sign of wealth to a marker of identity, Nifo Koula have become a signifier of being Tongan. Like the distinctive Cook Islands textiles tradition *tivaevae*, the practice of sealing gold onto teeth did not originate in the Pacific, but it has become indigenized. And over time it has become a diaspora story. The transformative and malleable capacity of gold, which can be melted and affixed to the human body, represents values, memories and place, both within families and cultural communities, as well as a connection with Tonga as a homeland. Many Tongans living in the diaspora journey back 'home', with their gold to have made into Nifo Koula.

Women in the video speak of the significance not only of the distinctive adornment practice as a marker of identity and place, but also of its intrinsic value both in monetary and personal terms. Sisters describe going back to Tonga with their mother's wedding ring, to have it melted and set onto their teeth. For others, it is less symbolic but arguably just as important. The artist's aunt, Meleane Ulukilikupeta Lose Finau Burns, wears her Nifo Koula proudly. Titled *'Ofa* (2013), which means love, the word spans across six of her top front teeth as they beam out messages of love, literally both in text and symbol. 'It looks nice and shiny and I love it', she says, 'it's my connection to Tonga'. A glint. A gleam. Hidden yet displayed, a performative action, a smile or raised lip, reveals this adornment. 'Smiling and talking will show the gold in their teeth', explains the artist's Nan. Her Nifo Koula are worn on false teeth, which feature in the exhibition in a glass of water sitting on a table. Presumably the wearer is the figure sitting in the background watching television. They smile and gleam their shine though... from the glass.

Issues of privacy, appropriation and ownership of images play out in different ways for Tonga and Amituanai. Tonga was careful not to exhibit the full faces of her relatives and friends to respect their privacy; however, subsequent dissemination of the images across social media platforms made them quickly identifiable. Amituanai also acknowledges that her photographs have found their way across the globe via social online media, adding to the imagery and connections that maintain the Pacific diaspora.

CONCLUSION

The idea of place emerges as a compelling and relevant point of departure to explore contemporary Māori and Pacific art practices. Moving away from linear, chronological approaches and avoiding familiar tropes of nationhood, geographic location and ethnicity, the nuanced nature of place offers a broader, more relational context to engage with indigenous concepts and colonial legacies within a different kind of framework. Its capacity to resonate across a broad range of considerations, from the geographic and locational, to the historic and intimately personal means that it has become a space in which these binaries seem to collapse. Indigenous understandings of place are increasingly being acknowledged as compelling and sustainable sources of knowledge, highlighting the crucial relationship between nature, natural forms, communities and notions of self.

The Ocean in particular becomes a formative and increasingly formidable marker of identity and a defining presence for Pacific communities and artists. Tiatia's digital work *Salt*, which draws on familiar exotic stereotypes of the Pacific coalescing around the female figure and tropical landscape, quickly becomes a cautionary warning despite the picture-perfect tourist destination it seems to present. Alongside Rakena's moving-image practice, which locates her tribal community and family within fluid ocean scapes, they evoke and extend Hau'ofa's notion of the ocean and Oceania as a complex and contingent network of relationships and places, just as important to a sense of self and belonging as the land. Migration and diaspora experiences also reflect more nuanced and intertextual understandings of place, which often blend personal experiences and memories with cultural traditions. Ane Tonga's *Grills* exemplifies how the dynamics of the adornment Nifo Koula resonate from Tonga, the place where this tradition emerged, to communities in New Zealand and beyond, where it signifies cultural identity in the diaspora, and

back to Tonga again – the homeland – where family members return to receive their gold teeth. The intertextual nature of history can also be explored within the discourse of place. Lippard’s notion of place as a ‘lived in landscape’ can be seen in the dynamic video installations of Tuffery. *First Contact* captures the partial and contingent nature of colonial histories and documentation, often in part a faithful account, but also fuelled by Eurocentric imaginings and sensibilities. Artists like Tuffery and Semu have mined these textual and visual records and representations in order to highlight not only how they shape and mediate the present, but also to suggest how they may be reimagined. They draw on a complex and multifaceted understanding of place, which echoes Meyer’s indigenous perspective. ‘We communicate through our world view’, she explains, ‘shaped within knowledge systems prioritized by the needs of people and the lessons of place’ (2013: 94). Affinities emerge across these thematics, highlighting their intercultural and transnational nature, and the ways that ambivalent and complex histories can over time become symbols of strength and resilience.

REFERENCES

- Blake, Elissa (2015), ‘Artist Michael Tuffery brings Samoa’s German history to life with royal band’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 July, www.smh.com.au/entertainment/stage/artist-michael-tuffery-brings-samoas-german-history-to-life-with-royal-band-20150716-gidp4x.html. Accessed 27 December 2017.
- de Luca, Tiago and Barradas Jorge, Nuno (eds) (2016), *Slow Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gilroy, Paul (1993), *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Graham, Brett, Rakena, Rachael and Hutchison, Alice (2008), *Aniwaniwa: Brett Graham and Rachael Rakena*, Wellington: City Gallery Wellington.
- Hau’ofa, Epeli (1994), ‘Our sea of islands’, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6:1, pp. 147–61.
- (1998), ‘The ocean in us’, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 10:2, pp. 392–410.
- Lippard, Lucy R. (1997), *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, New York: The New Press.
- Meyer, Manulani Aluli (2013), ‘Holographic epistemology: Native common sense’, *China Media Research*, 9:2, pp. 94–101.
- Rakena, Rachael (2003), ‘Toi Rerehiko: This research project claims and names digital arts for Maori, by centring the concepts of “space between”, “fluidity”, “immersion” and “continuum” within a Maori paradigm’, Master’s thesis, Dunedin: Otago Polytechnic School of Art.
- (2017), e-mail to the author, 24 October.
- Tonga, Ane (2014), interview in person, University of Auckland, 17 December.
- Vercoe, Caroline (2015), ‘History is a place: Pacific artists re-imagining colonial legacies’, in Clare McIntosh (ed.), *Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus*, Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, pp. 54–59.

SUGGESTED CITATION

- Vercoe, C. (2018 [2017]), ‘Contemporary Māori and Pacific artists exploring place’, *Journal of New Zealand & Pacific Studies*, 5:2, pp. 131–43, doi: 10.1386/nzps.5.2.131_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Caroline Vercoe teaches and researches global art histories and Māori and Pacific art in art history at the University of Auckland. She has particular interests in issues of race, gender and representation and has been publishing, curating and teaching in these areas for over twenty years.

Contact: School of Humanities, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.

E-mail: c.vercoe@auckland.ac.nz

Caroline Vercoe has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.



Free ONLINE ACCESS

FOR LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Intellect is delighted to offer FREE online access to scholars in less economically developed countries who may not otherwise be able to access our journals.

For more information please contact
Tim Mitchell at tim@intellectbooks.com

All educational institutions in the following countries are eligible for this offer:

Afghanistan	Djibouti	Madagascar	Senegal
Bangladesh	Eritrea	Malawi	Sierra Leone
Benin	Ethiopia	Mali	Solomon Islands
Bhutan	Gambia, The	Mauritania	Somalia
Burkina Faso	Ghana	Mongolia	South Sudan
Burundi	Guinea	Mozambique	Sudan
Cambodia	Guinea-Bissau	Myanmar	Tajikistan
Cameroon	Haiti	Nepal	Tanzania
Central African Republic	Honduras	Nicaragua	Timor-Leste
Chad	Iraq	Niger	Togo
Comoros	Kenya	Palestine	Uganda
Côte d'Ivoire	Kyrgyz Republic	Papua New Guinea	Uzbekistan
Démocratic Republic of the Congo	Lao P.D.R	Rwanda	Yemen
	Lesotho	São Tomé and Príncipe	Zambia
	Liberia		Zimbabwe

