

*Methodology Issue*

## **Stitching, Threading, Binding: the Emergence of a Tuitui Methodology**

Emily Parr

### **Abstract:**

This paper recounts the development of a tuitui methodology for the practice-based PhD thesis, 'Oli 'Ula: Housing the Kronfeld Collection through Moving-Image Practice. It lays out the context and objectives of the project, and discusses the motivation for creating a methodology to encompass a diverse range of archival and artistic research methods. The paper recounts how stitching as a form of repair, and taonga as a relational thread, became propelling concepts in the project. These concepts are linked to methods through which the artworks were assembled, demonstrating how the methodology was enacted to address the objectives. The paper advocates for looking to scholars who have come before, and approaching research as a living, relational endeavour.

### **Keywords**

moving-image, museums, practice-based, stitching, tuitui

### **Research question**

My practice-based thesis explores how enlivening the systems of relation (such as whakapapa and vā) of taonga, measina, and other treasures might transform the future of museum collections; how 'housing' the Kronfeld Collection through practice-based research can enable the imagining of decolonial museum ecologies; and how tuitui, a reparative methodology emerging from my moving-image practice, might propose alternative methods for restoring relations between museum collections and their origins.

### **Research objectives**

The Kronfeld Collection was assembled by my ancestors, Gustav and Louisa Kronfeld, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Gustav, a Jewish merchant, operated a trading company throughout Moana Oceania and had a keen interest in taonga, measina, and other treasures. Louisa, a Samoan matriarch, was threaded into a web of relations that spanned the moana, and through which these treasures also circulated. The Collection lived in their Auckland home, 'Oli 'Ula, until 1939 when Louisa gifted it to the Dominion Museum (present-day Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa). The Auckland War Memorial Museum

Tāmaki Paenga Hira also holds items gifted by the Kronfelds. I first visited the Collection at Te Papa in 2011. The sorrow I felt at the taonga, measina, and treasures residing in storage, far from their origins, remained with me. After beginning my PhD in 2021, I began to wonder whether I could ‘house’ the Kronfeld Collection through moving-image practice; I began to imagine them surrounded by the light, sounds, and relational ecologies of their homelands.

### **Research Design/ Methodologies**

Early in my research, I sought to develop a methodology that emerged from my art practice (rather than be overlaid onto it). It should account for diverse methods, and enable me to operate fluidly across multiple cultural contexts, reflecting both my whakapapa and the Collection’s. Making art is how I understand the world, and often feels like a practice of stitching things together that I feel are connected. I also conceptualise my moving-image works as threading loops through space/time: a non-linear, spiralling motion. In te reo Māori, the word for sewing, threading, or binding is tuitui (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.). Although the term varies across Moananui, it has a shared lineage. Two texts were key to my formation of a tuitui methodology. Firstly, there is a passage in which Māori Marsden (Muriwhenua, Ngāpuhi) recalls an exchange in the whare wānanga with Toki Pāngari. The tohunga are discussing the potential of the atom bomb to rend the fabric of the universe, relying on a mutual understanding of this fabric as woven, rhythmical patterns of energy. Pāngari asks the question, “e taea e rātou te tuitui? ... But do they know how to sew (tuitui) it back together again?” (Royal, 2003, p. xiii). Secondly, Paul Tapsell (Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Raukawa) recalls an elder’s kōrero that “tui is an ancient weaving term that means to ‘stitch’,” and the flight of the tūi resembles this stitching motion (1997, p. 334). Tapsell connects this kōrero with taonga, observing that “each taonga represents a single genealogical thread, stitching sky to earth, atua to mortals, ancestor to descendant, generation to generation, in the descending pattern of the tui’s flight” (1997, p. 335). The reparative notion of tuitui and the concept of taonga as a relational thread became crucial to my methodological approach.

My practice-based PhD utilised archival and artistic research methods. In the museums, I traced the Collection through correspondence and acquisition records, and became attuned to tohu as I came face-to-face with the taonga, measina, and treasures. In addition to the museums’ protocols, I established my own tikanga for engaging with them. I three-dimensionally scanned and rendered selected taonga and measina as point clouds, and filmed elements that evoke their whakapapa or vā relations (including bodies of water, their earlier plant or geological forms, realms of their associated atua). I edited these moving-image recordings into a kaleidoscopic formation within a circular frame, creating rhythmical patterns.

The translucent, shimmering digital taonga and measina were placed in the centre of the circle, continuously rotating (figure 1). Articulated as ‘cosmospheres,’ the artworks propose that whakapapa and vā are forms of provenance, and that if we understand the universe as an energetical, woven fabric (Royal, 2003), then perhaps a tuitui methodology might offer a form of repair. Enlivening the systems of relation of the taonga and measina became vital for me to imagine transformation futures for museum collections.



Figure 1: Emily Parr, *Cosmosphere: Tanoa Fai'ava*, 2024, single-channel video/audio. Tanoa fai'ava: Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, FE010512.

## **Words of wisdom/ hints**

Look to the scholars who have come before you; who have articulated, enacted, and evolved culturally grounded methodologies. Tuitui was informed by whatuora (Smith, 2017; Robertson, 2016; Walker, 2024), su'ifefiloi (Refiti, 2015; Lopesi, 2021), and the ula lole (Lopesi, 2021). Research should be alive and responsive to the contexts, people, and relationships it engages with — sometimes this requires creating or adapting a methodology. I was excited by thinking through how aspects of ancestral practices and worldviews might be expressed in my contemporary project.

## **Conclusion**

I came to this research with preconceived ideas about the museum, and also what I could achieve in three (and a bit) years. Most of those ideas were overturned. I was surprised when barriers I expected were absent, and forced to reorient when I encountered unexpected ones. Often, it is at these junctures that we learn the most. I feel grateful for the dedicated time and space of a PhD to develop my art practice. Most of all, it was a privilege to engage with the taonga and measina, and to bring them out of the basement and 'into the light' so they may travel — at least in digital form — once again.

## **“Optional” Short Bio**

Emily Parr (Ngāi Te Rangī, Moana, Pākehā) is an artist/researcher living in Tāmaki Makaurau. Her moving-image practice explores relational ecologies of Te Moananui-a-Kiwa. Emily's recent doctoral project considers the responsibilities she has inherited through her ancestral legacies and, in particular, to her family's collection held by museums. She is a lecturer in AUT's School of Art + Design and a Post-Doctoral Fellow with the Vā Moana research cluster. Emily is also a research associate with Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, and a 2024 Springboard Award recipient.

## **“Optional” Acknowledgments**

Fa'afetai tele lava to my supervisors, Leali'ifano Albert Refiti, Natalie Robertson, and Layne Waerea; my essential readers/listeners, Arielle Walker and Makyla Curtis; and the many people at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum who made this research possible.

## Glossary

**atua:** ancestor with continuing influence, god, deity (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.); god, divine (Milner, 1993)

**kōrero:** speak, narrative, story, conversation (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.)

**taonga:** treasure, anything prized (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.)

**tohu:** sign (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.)

**tohunga:** skilled person, chosen expert (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.)

**measina:** cultural treasures and heritage of Sāmoa (Chitham, Māhina-Tuai, Skinner, 2019)

**vā:** distance, space (between two places, things, or people); relationship, relations (between two things or people) (Milner)

**whakapapa:** to place in layers, genealogy, lineage, descent (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, n.d.)

## References

- Lopesi, L. (2021). *Moana Cosmopolitan Imaginaries: Toward an Emerging Theory of Moana Art*. [Doctoral thesis, Auckland University of Technology]. Tuwhera. <http://hdl.handle.net/10292/14298>
- Refiti, A. L. (2015). *Mavae and Tofiga: Spatial Exposition of the Samoan Cosmogony and Architecture*. [Doctoral thesis, Auckland University of Technology]. Tuwhera. <https://hdl.handle.net/10292/9248>
- Robertson, N. (2016). Nga Whatu-Ora: We the Living Are the Seeing Eyes of Our Sleeping Ancestors. *Public*, 27(54): 132–45. [https://doi.org/10.1386/public.27.54.132\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/public.27.54.132_1)
- Royal, T. A. C. (Ed.). (2003). *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Māori Marsden*. Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden.
- Smith, H. L. (2017). *Whatuora: Whatu Kākahu and Living as Māori Women*. [Doctoral thesis, The University of Auckland]. ResearchSpace. <http://hdl.handle.net/2292/36334>
- Tapsell, P. (1997). The Flight of Pareraututu: An Investigation of Taonga from a Tribal Perspective. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 106(4), 323-74, <https://www.jstor.org>
- Te Aka Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index. (n.d.). Tuitui. In *Maoridictionary.co.nz dictionary*. Retrieved March 17, 2024, from <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/word/8666>
- Walker, A. (2024). *Mending the Kupenga: Towards a Language of Reciprocity between Ancestral Textile & Storytelling Practices*. [Doctoral thesis, Auckland University of Technology]. Tuwhera. <http://hdl.handle.net/10292/18330>