

***At the Forks: Where Indigenous and Human Rights Intersect***

First published on: August 9, 2021

Volume 1

Journal site: <https://ojs.lib.umanitoba.ca/index.php/forks>



---

**Niimaamaa, The Forks**

Honoure Black



*Niimaamaa*, made from polished painted steel, copper, and core ten metal

**Artists:** KC Adams, Jaime Isaac & Val Vint, 2018

The Forks, or *Niizhoziibean*, Winnipeg, MB

**Photographer:** Helen Fallding

**The Earth is said to be a woman. In this way it is understood that woman preceded man on the Earth. She is called Mother Earth because from Her come all living things. Water is Her lifeblood. It flows through Her, nourishes Her, and purifies Her.**

**— Edward Benton-Banai<sup>[1]</sup>**

## At The Forks

*Niimaamaa* is located on the South Point path, which is located along the most southern point of The Forks in downtown Winnipeg. In 2018, South Point was renamed by Elders, Clarence and Barbara Nepinak, who were offered *asemaa* (tobacco) to uncover the name for the path, now also known as *Niizhoziibeana* or ‘the place we come together’.<sup>[2]</sup> Here, directly on the path, *Niimaamaa* stands as a colossal thirty-foot tall sculpture made of polished painted steel, copper, and core ten metal. The word *Niimaamaa* in Cree, Ojibwe, and Michif translates to ‘my mother’ in English.<sup>[3]</sup> She was designed collaboratively by Indigenous artists, KC Adams, Jaimie Isaac, and Val Vint<sup>[4]</sup> with curatorial support from Julie Nagam and the GLAM collective.<sup>[5]</sup>

Geographically, the historic site of The Forks in Winnipeg overlooks the land and rivers of the Red and Assiniboine, in a place called *Nestawe’ya*, or ‘three points.’ The Cree pronunciation is *Nistawayak* (NES-TAH-WAY-YAK) referring to the mouth of the Assiniboine River, and to events that happened there.<sup>[6]</sup> This place is not just about two rivers (the Red and the Assiniboine), but a storied place where people came from three directions along the rivers to meet, share, create a community, and to make life for a millennia.<sup>[7]</sup> Changing the official name from The Forks to *Nestawe’ya* would demonstrate an act of reconciliation through language and ceremony.

As a work of public art, *Niimaamaa* is the gatekeeper to *Nestawe’ya*, unified with nature; She is part of the sky, trees, and the landscape. Although She is incredibly large, She does not block a single vantage point. She holds an immense amount of negative space, which allowed me to move through and inside her womb. She is the personification of the earth, of water, and of the responsibility of Indigenous women as the keepers and carrier of water. She represents the sacred understanding of women and water:

She has a special relationship to the waters of the Earth, big and small. From the waters at the doors of life, such as the follicular fluid that bathes the primordial



*Niimaamaa*, made from polished painted steel, copper, and core ten metal  
**Artists:** KC Adams, Jaime Isaac & Val Vint, 2018  
The Forks, or *Niizhoziibeana*, Winnipeg, MB  
**Photographer:** Helen Fallding

## *At The Forks*

ovum, the dew on the grass in the dawn and at dusk, to the waters of the great oceans, she causes them all to rise and fall. Her constant ebb and flow teaches us that all Creation is related, made of one breath, one water, one earth. The waters of the earth and the waters of our bodies are one. Breastmilk is formed from the blood of the woman. Our milk, our blood and the waters of the earth are one water, all flowing in rhythm to the moon.<sup>[8]</sup>



Niimaamaa

**Artists:** KC Adams, Jaime Isaac & Val Vint

**Photographer:** Helen Fallding

**It is a woman that is both the literal and figurative carrier of water; in ceremonial water walks, water fetching for family and community, and as the mother who carries her unborn child in her watery womb. I see *Niimaamaa* as a story of female sacred power and as the giver of life.**

As I stood inside her pregnant womb, it was as if I was her child, not yet born. I was surrounded by her spirit and framed by different symbols representing the land, water, and constellations that trickle down her seven cascading strands of hair. The artists placed these constellations in the work to remind visitors and the community of the seven sacred Indigenous teachings: love, respect, courage, humility, honesty, wisdom, and truth.<sup>[9]</sup> Under her womb, *Niimaamaa* is kneeling on the Earth in a gesture of humility and reverence, and with her face turned towards the sky, She proudly welcomes the eastern sun on her face. Her posture is meant to represent rebirth, as observed by the teachings of the

medicine wheel.<sup>[10]</sup>

While I stood inside her womb, I was acutely aware of my own settler colonial heritage that participates in the destruction of natural water resources, the theft of Indigenous land, and ongoing extractive land-based practices. Although I felt connected to the work as a mother who has given birth to two powerful daughters, I am also mindful that I am a respectful visitor. *Niimaamaa* stands as a maternal reminder that I must continue, as a woman in this world, to nurture and educate not just my children, but all children; to guide them to contribute to a decolonial future in a 'good way', and to work towards reconciliation on this land we call home.

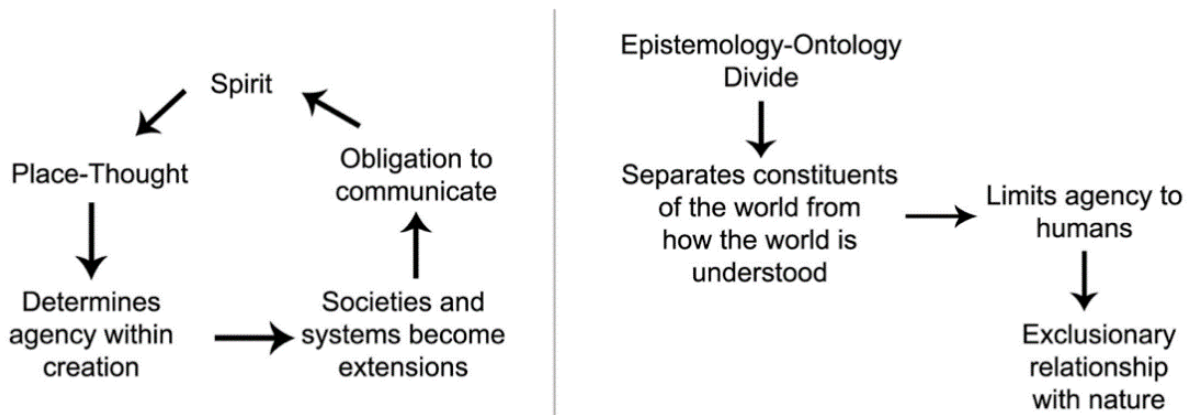
## *At The Forks*

Around the base of *Niimaamaa*, Adams, Isaac, and Vint have incorporated the landscape into their design. Indigenous plantings of sage and burdock grow for the community to harvest and use in ceremony, and recently, a bench has been installed to encourage further contemplation. Set into the pavement stones below my feet is a great serpent that stretches from *Niimaamaa* all the way to Main St. I interpret this snake as a symbol of fertility and the renewal of life. Just beyond *Niimaamaa* through the wooded path, a new geothermal



*Niimaamaa*  
**Artists:** KC Adams, Jaime Isaac & Val Vint  
**Photographer:** Helen Fallding

Midewiwin lodge has been built to further decolonize The Forks and offer a new Indigenous place for communities to gather and celebrate.



**Figure 1.** V. Watts: Western and Indigenous Cosmologies  
 “On the left is a depiction of how an Anishinaabe and/or Haudenosaunee cosmology might be represented. On the right, the process by which a Euro-Western meta-understanding can contribute to colonization of these Indigenous cosmologies.”

As a scholar, I have been inspired by Vanessa Watts’ framework for Indigenous *epistemological-ontological* worldviews (see Fig 1). I believe that the left side of her diagram illustrates the philosophy of *Niimaamaa*. Watts writes that the spirit and the land should be understood as the literal embodiment of the feminine, of First Woman, by which many Indigenous origin stories find their inception.<sup>[11]</sup> When I reflect on the site-specificity of *Niimaamaa*, Watt’s continues with, “Place-Thought is an extension of her circumstance, desire, and

## *At The Forks*

communication with the water and animals – her agency.”<sup>[12]</sup> She explains that if the land and the earth and the water are female:

Where waters flow and pool, where mountains rise and turn into valleys, all of these become demarcations of who will reside where, how they will live, and how their behaviours toward one another are determined. Scientists refer to this as ecosystems or habitats. However, if we accept the idea that all living things contain spirit, then this extends beyond complex structures within an ecosystem. It means that non-human beings choose how they reside, interact and develop relationships with other non-humans. So, all elements of nature possess agency, and this agency is not limited to innate action or causal relationships.<sup>[13]</sup>



*Niimaamaa*

**Artists:** KC Adams, Jaime Isaac & Val Vint

**Photographer:** Helen Fallding

Therefore, if land is akin to place, “territories [are] imbued with social meaning that form the basis of social life sustaining political economies and informing cultural and community practices.”<sup>[14]</sup> For Indigenous peoples, it is a relationship with the water, air, plants, animals, all animate and inanimate things that bind everything together.<sup>[15]</sup> Today, during a time [when clean drinking water is unavailable to many Indigenous communities](#), *Niimaamaa* takes on additional activist meaning, challenging us to acknowledge the progress that we have yet to make for our communities regarding natural resources, as well as the colonial destruction that has been caused to many Indigenous communities for the control of water. *Niimaamaa* actively participates as a symbol of decolonization in space and place. Her site-specific location (re)minds, (re)tells, and (re)maps The Forks for visitors who seek to learn about the past or see themselves in the future. As Ann Wilson states: “Everyone has a responsibility to care for the water.

Women, however, carry the responsibility to talk for the water.”<sup>[16]</sup>

## Acknowledgement

## *At The Forks*

We thank Helen Fallding for permission to feature the photographs.

### About the Author



#### **Honoure Black**

[Honoure Black](#) is settler woman, mother, daughter and partner, living in Winnipeg, Treaty One Territory. She is a PhD Candidate in Design and Planning at the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Architecture and a 2021-2024 SSHRC Doctoral Scholarship recipient for her research concerning public art in Canada. Her dissertation is currently titled: *Insurgent Public Art, Decolonizing Settler Colonial Urban Space in Winnipeg, Treaty One*. Honoure is also a sessional instructor for both the School of Art and the Faculty of Architecture, often teaching courses in art history, environmental design, landscape theory, and interdisciplinary research methods. In her spare time, Honoure loves to garden, camp, hike, and travel with her family.

Her latest publications are “Re-Creating This Place: Indigenous Public Art At The Centre Of Turtle Island”, co-authored with Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair in *HOLDING GROUND: NUIT BLANCHE AND OTHER RUPTURES*, Edited by Julie Nagam and Janine Marchessault and “Decolonizing the Design Process with Five Indigenous Land-Based Paradigms”, co-authored with Shawn Bailey and Lancelot Coar, Toronto: Canadian Architect, May 2022, v.67, n.3.

### Notes

[1] Benton-Banai, E. (1998). *The Mishomis book: the voice of the Ojibway* (1<sup>st</sup> University of Minnesota Press ed.). Hayward, WI: Indian County Communications, p. 2.

[2] The Forks Market. (2018, October 2). *Niizhoziibeana: Honouring our Indigenous heritage*. The Forks. [www.theforks.com/blog/253/niizhoziibeana-honouring-our-indigenous-heritage](http://www.theforks.com/blog/253/niizhoziibeana-honouring-our-indigenous-heritage) [accessed December 2020].

[3] Ibid.

[4] [KC Adams](#) is multimedia Cree, Ojibway, and British artist and educator based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. [Jaimie Isaac](#) is an artist and Curator of Indigenous and Contemporary Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, as well as co-founding member of the Ephemerals Collective. Val Vint is a multimedia artist and educator based in Winnipeg.

[5] More information about the GLAM collective can be found at: <https://glamcollective.ca>

## *At The Forks*

[6] Sinclair, N. (2019, November 2). Archaeology unearths proof of huge 1285 meeting. *Winnipeg Free Press*. [www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/archaeology-unearths-proof-of-huge-1285-meeting-565452942.html](http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/archaeology-unearths-proof-of-huge-1285-meeting-565452942.html). [Accessed November 2020].

[7] From the south, the Anishinaabeg traveled up the Red River and joined with communities to eventually birth the Selkirk Treaty of 1817 that officially welcomed Europeans and helped grow the Red River Settlement and the Métis Nation. From the north, the Cree forged through Lake Winnipeg to travel and meet their relatives who had created communities all the way down the Red River and to the mouth of the Assiniboine River. From the west, the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota (also called the Assiniboine) traveled east along the Assiniboine River and forged deep trading histories while hunting bison along their migratory path. In-text and footnote information taken from Sinclair, N. (2019, November 2). Archaeology unearths proof of huge 1285 meeting. *Winnipeg Free Press*. [www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/archaeology-unearths-proof-of-huge-1285-meeting-565452942.html](http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/archaeology-unearths-proof-of-huge-1285-meeting-565452942.html).

[8] Szach, N.J. 2013. *Keepers of the water: exploring Anishinaabe and Métis women's knowledge of water and participation in water governance in Kenora, Ontario*. Master's of Natural Research Management, University of Manitoba, p. 28.

[9] The Forks. (2018). *Niimaamaa*, [www.theforks.com/attractions/niimaamaa](http://www.theforks.com/attractions/niimaamaa). [Accessed December 2020].

[10] Ibid.

[11] Watts, V. (2013). Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1): 20-34.

[12] Ibid., p. 23.

[13] Ibid., p. 23.

[14] Battell Lowman, E., & Barker, A. (2016). *Settler: Identity and colonialism in 21st century Canada*. Fernwood Publishing, p. 48

[15] Ibid., p. 52

[16] McGregor, D. (2008). Anishnaabe-kwe, traditional knowledge and water protection. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 26(3): 26-30.

### Reference

Battell Lowman, E., & Barker, A. (2016). *Settler: Identity and colonialism in 21st century Canada*. Fernwood Publishing.

Benton-Banai, E. (1998). *The Mishomis book: the voice of the Ojibway* (1<sup>st</sup> University of Minnesota Press ed.). Hayward, WI: Indian County Communications  
Cariou, W., & Sinclair, N. J. (2012). *Manitowapow: Aboriginal writings from the land of water*. HighWater Press.

## *At The Forks*

McGregor, D. (2008). Anishnaabe-kwe, traditional knowledge and water protection. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 26(3): 26-30.

Sinclair, N. (2019, November 2). Archaeology unearths proof of huge 1285 meeting. *Winnipeg Free Press*. [www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/archaeology-unearths-proof-of-huge-1285-meeting-565452942.html](http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/archaeology-unearths-proof-of-huge-1285-meeting-565452942.html)

Szach, N.J. 2013. *Keepers of the water: exploring Anishinaabe and Métis women's knowledge of water and participation in water governance in Kenora, Ontario*. Master's of Natural Research Management, University of Manitoba

The Forks Market. (2018, October 2). *Niizhoziibeana: Honouring our Indigenous heritage*. The Forks. [www.theforks.com/blog/253/niizhoziibeana-honouring-our-indigenous-heritage](http://www.theforks.com/blog/253/niizhoziibeana-honouring-our-indigenous-heritage)

The Forks. (2018). *Niimaamaa*, [www.theforks.com/attractions/niimaamaa](http://www.theforks.com/attractions/niimaamaa)

Watts, V. (2013). Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1): 20-34.