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Indigenous Futurisms,
New Media and Contemporary Assertions of Indigeneity

Ka mua, ka muri: walk backwards into the future

Samoan cultural commentator Patrick Thomsen introduced his recent essay 'One Samoan Identity to Rule Them All?' with the assertion, "Identity is of grave importance for all who are thrust into the mystifying space of diaspora existence."[1] This contention is true not only for indigenous people in diaspora but also for those living within colonised lands. The threats to indigenous culture that arise from colonisation, migration and subsequent attempts of assimilation often force people to retreat to a protector position, one of advocacy for what is real, or authentic parts of their culture. The preservation of culture is indisputable, in the context of its threat of extinction. However, such a position can often lead to its essentialisation, as Thomsen argues further; "To essentialise is to boil away the diversity in the human experience and to cherrypick specific generalising traits that you believe represents all who carry a certain label. But in essentialising our narratives, our interpretation of history becomes one-dimensional too."[2] What Thomsen argues for is a "new way in framing" that "allows us all to participate in an inclusive way that doesn't leave any Samoan behind."[3]

The ways in which we live and exist in the world, or ways of being, are constantly in the process of evolution. As new technologies arise, and medical discoveries drive greater understanding, societies adapt accordingly. Arguably, indigenous ways of being are amongst the most adaptive given the multiple waves of colonisation they have survived, with inherent, abrupt introductions of new technologies, philosophies and theologies. In the current 'digital world', such societies are continuing to adopt and adapt, with indigenous-determined digital spaces just as necessary as those in real life. Yet, not only are indigenous people keeping pace, as Academic Dr Suneeti Rekhari has stated, "Indigenous people continue to stretch and challenge the boundaries of [digital] media use",[4] but they are forging ahead. As Rekhari continued, they "are themselves media producers, and are active participants in the processes of production, dissemination, regulation, reception, and innovation."[5]

This presents the contradiction though, that these digital technologies and in particular the Internet are both the greatest outcome and the most significant agent of globalisation—this same globalisation that has been said to further the effects of colonisation for indigenous societies. This is what Rekhari refers to as a "double edged sword" as digital technologies and the Internet both provide "avenues to challenge and empower, while at the same time contain and reinforce cultural hegemony",[6] as a knowledge of these globalised technologies is still required. She further claims that, "It is likely that the long term survival of our traditional knowledge will depend upon our ability to exploit the new information and communication technology."[7]
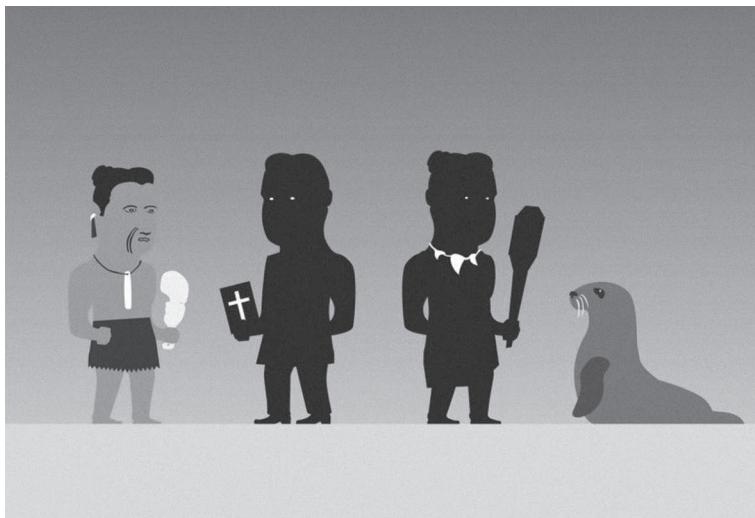
It is from this complex and contemporary dilemma that Thomsen seeks a new way of framing. Scholar and historian James Clifford's notion of "becoming indigenous" links decolonisation with globalisation, to which he states, "Neither process is linear or guaranteed. Neither can subsume the other. Both are contradictory and open-ended."[8] He employs the framework of "articulated, rooted, and cosmopolitan" to understand contemporary indigenous experience, to "register more complex, emergent possibilities".[9] As Australian academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson has outlined, the Critical Indigenous Studies discipline also considers indigeneity critically within complex structures of power, specifically within First World nations.[10]

It is in this context that Clifford frames indigenous cultural endurance as "becoming", which he further expands as reaching "back selectively to deeply rooted, adaptive traditions: creating new pathways in a complex postmodernity."[11] He identifies that "indigenous cultural politics often express the new, the way forward, in terms of the old."[12] This draws on Jamaican-born,

UK cultural theorist Stuart Hall's discursive linking of pasts and futures as being integral to the positioning of collective subjects, to which he wrote that identities function, "by taking up the discourse of the past and the present."[13] This conveys us to the Māori proverb introducing this text, "*Ka mua, ka muri*" or "walking backwards into the future". This is a shared philosophy across Oceania, with Hawai'ian historian Lilikalā K. Kame'eleihiwa noting in her book *Native Land and Foreign Desires* (1992), that the past in Olelo Hawai'ian is referred to as "*Ka wa mamua*" or "the time in front or before" and the future is referred to as "*Ka wa mahope*" or "the time which comes after or behind". These definitions highlight the importance of the present moment for Hawai'ian people with one's back faced to the future while facing the past. This marks the future as being unknown, "whereas the past is rich in glory and knowledge".[14] From this position of walking forward while looking back, or "*ka mua, ka muri*" it becomes apparent that indigenous futures mobilise past resources and historical practices while expressing them in contemporary forms, or "the past, materialised in land and ancestors, is always a source of the new."[15]

This rooted approach to future thinking is seen in the work of a number of indigenous artists whose artworks use different digital technologies to revisit and revise history. In particular, these include *Time Traveller™* (2008-13) by Skawennati, Lisa Reihana's *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (2015-17) and *Half-blood* (2016) by Johnson Witehira. Montreal-based Mohawk artist Skawennati is perhaps one of the most influential artists working with new media. Co-Director of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace,[16] she has been testing new media for over twenty years, including the notable projects *Time Traveller™* and *CyberPowPow. Time Traveller™* is a multiplatform project that includes the website www.TimeTravellerTM.com, a set of digital prints, a prototype action figure and most notably a nine episode machinima series. Machinima (the conjoining of "machine" and "cinema") is the terminology for art which uses a pre-rendered gaming engine to make film. Machinima artists are sometimes also referred to as machinimists, or machinimators, who largely subscribe to the look and feel of videogame culture. For Skawennati, this process is used through the program Second Life to tell the story of Hunter, a young Mohawk man living in the twenty-second century (in the year 2121) in a hyper-consumerist and technologised world. Hunter seeks to find clarity in indigenous histories by using his "edutainment" system TimeTraveller™ to travel back to significant historical events of resistance, including the Dakota Sioux Uprising (1862), the Oka Crisis (1990) and the occupation of Alcatraz Island (1969-71). Along the way he meets Karahkwenhawi, a young Mohwak woman from the present; they fall in love and explore these histories together.

Across the nine *Time Traveller™* episodes it becomes quickly apparent that these histories are remembered differently to the ways in which they have been recorded, noticeably from an indigenous perspective. The machinima approach imagines indigeneity in the future while remaining firmly rooted in its histories. It is perhaps from this perspective that revising histories is possible, and playful. In the artist's words, "I was thinking about native people and our presence [in cyberspace], and our lack of presence in the future and how people don't see us in the future. Even we native people don't seem to see ourselves in the future."[17] While the nine episodes of *TimeTraveller*™ have had many formal exhibition iterations, it is also freely available online. While this entails an obvious barrier of requiring the technology to access the Internet, this makes it far more accessible to global audiences, moving away from the formal, normative actions of artworks presentation, an obvious dictate given how significant the online environment is for indigenous communities.

Skawennati, like Māori artist Johnson Witerhira utilises digital technology rather than just reference it. *Half-blood* (2016), an exhibition by Witehira, included two video games, both of which were titled *Māoriland Adventure* (2017), alongside large scale cutouts of the games' characters. Read as two versions of the same game, in the exhibition space they were installed as two large abutting projections. They both followed the same simple storyline, with a playing time of between three to five minutes, where a figure controlled by a single player progresses across the screen. Both games are arrival stories, the first being that of Māori to Aotearoa New Zealand, where the character must kill animals by hitting them over the head in order to move forward, and the second, the arrival of Europeans. Here, 'progress' occurs with the character hitting Māori over the head with a Bible to the point of conversion.

With Witerhira's *Half-blood* the title presents an interesting wordplay on both subject matter and medium. It relates to the artist's mixed ancestry as well as being a form of arcade slang meaning "the act of handing over the controls of a game to a better player when half the game has been played or when half the life of the game character is all that is left."[18] This title also relies on humour, which Witehira uses to destabilise given histories. The game format is appropriate for another reason, for it's accessibility to Māori audiences. As I've written elsewhere, The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's Māori me te Ao Hangarau 2015: The Māori ICT Report 2015, tells us that the top reason for Māori using the Internet is social networking, quickly followed by entertainment. Māori are more likely than other cultural demographic in New Zealand to stream music and videos, and to play video games.[19]

Another new media work which revises history is *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* by Māori artist Lisa Reihana. Known widely as *iPOVi*, it restages the early nineteenth-century wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804-05), a two metre high by ten metre long, hand-blocked scenic wallpaper illustrated by Jean-Gabriel Charvet for French entrepreneur Joseph Dufour. Comprising twenty separate panels the wall paper features stories of encounter from the records and journals of Pacific voyages of exploration undertaken by the English naval Captain James Cook, and the French naval explorers Louis de Bougainville and Jean-François de Galaup La Pérouse. Just as those accounts were of European impressions of the indigenous people of the Pacific influenced by Enlightenment values, so too was the artwork. In *iPOVi* however, Reihana refashions and digitises *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* from her own perspective; as suggested in the title, with POV being an acronym for film's point-of-view doubling the meaning. In *iPOVi* Reihana creates her own significant histories for reconstruction, with some of the vignettes completely fictional, acting as propositions for the viewer. Throughout *iPOVi*, indigenous languages and singing can be heard. This inclusion is also a shared component of Witehira's *Half-blood*, in which the text in *Māoriland Adventure* is exclusively spoken in *te reo Māori*.[20] Indigenous language is appropriate as both works are set in periods of contact with Europeans, making it a historically accurate choice, their use making strong statements about from which perspective these works are positioned. While *iPOVi* does not use the gaming language and aesthetics of *Half-blood* or *TimeTraveller™*, its technology is equally enticing; the sixty-two minute multi-channel projection is an immersive cinema experience. Its Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki iteration in 2017 was the most popular solo exhibition for over twenty years by a New Zealand artist, with 49,000 visitors.[21]

Across these artworks, Skawennati, Witehira and Reihana use the accessible and attractive forms of new media to discuss more complicated and ominous histories. Historically, narratives around indigenous people 'dying out', the determing of blood quantum[22] as a measure of authenticity (specifically of First Nations people in North America) and attempts at assimilation of indigenous people as is the case with Aboriginal people in Australia, are examples of how indigenous people have been 'imagined to extinction, an idea propogated in Hollywood films, such as the *Last of the Mohicans* (1992). By this logic of extinction, the Western colonial imagination sees indigenous life not only separate from the present time but also out of place in the future. As historian and curator Jolene Rickard writes, "Ironically, the image of Natives is still firmly planted in the past. The idea that Indians would be on the frontier of a technology is inconsistent with the dominant image of 'traditional' Indians."[23]

Time Traveller™, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* and *Half-blood* are able to be contextualised within the concept of Indigenous Futurisms, which allows indigenous people to reclaim or reimagine futures through a technological space, offering contrasting narratives to the Western perspective of past, present and future. Indigenous Futurisms is a fairly new term, first coined by Anishinaabe Indigenous Studies Professor Grace Dillon in the science-fiction anthology *Walking the Clouds* published 2012, to describe a form of literature where indigenous people use science-fiction to imagine their futures and challenge Western histories.[24] Indigenous Futurism, which draws from Afrofuturism, a genre combining African and African diaspora culture with technology and science-fiction, is becoming more widely used and is the focus of groups such as the aforementioned Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, as well as Anishinaabe comedian and writer Ryan McMahon and Hawai'ian artist Solomon Enos.

From a Western perspective engaging the concept of multiple futures through an analysis of these three artworks which explicitly deal with the past may seem contradictory, but indigenous understanding of time is seldom linear; rather it is cyclical. The future imaginary affords indigenous artists a creative space to respond to a dystopian now, grounding their cultural resurgence in contextual and relational practices. Indigenous Futurism asks its audiences to re-imagine space, both outer and inner, from indigenous perspectives, as sovereign spaces where the artists have the creative freedom to determine their own worlds. The artworks by Skawennati, Witehira and Reihana achieve this by speaking back to Western colonialism which has affected their own homelands, and the prejudiced narratives that have been written into Western history books. Within this approach, the past is folded into new possibilities for the present, that is again folded into new possibilities for the future.

What Skawennati, Reihana and Witehira highlight is that indigenous people are no longer passive consumers of media; rather they are the media makers who are actively producing, disseminating and innovating.[25] Digital technologies are now inseparable from contemporary indigenous experience and a tool to repurpose established Western and colonial histories. Ultimately, these artists highlight how new media can be an integral component to the revitalisation and survival of indigenous culture, livelihoods and traditions. Skawennati, Witehira and Reihana embody "*Ka mua ka muri*", reminding us that time exists in the past, present and future all at once. Through this embodiment they assert a history in which there is no monopoly over the future but rather a free, spectacular, culturally relevant wondering.

Notes

[1] Patrick Thomsen, 'One Samoan Identity to Rule Them All?'; http://www.thecoconet.tv/coco-talanoa/guest-writer/one-samoan-identity-to-rule-them-all/; accessed 14 April 2018

[2] ibid.

[3] ibid.

[4] Suneeti Rekhari, 'Indigenous communities and new media: questions on the global Digital Age', *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, 7:2/3, pp. 175-181; https://doi.org/10.1108/14779960910955882; accessed 14 April 2018

[5] ibid.

[6] ibid.

[7] ibid.

[8] James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 5

[9] ibid., p. 65

[10] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations*, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016

[11] Clifford, op cit., p. 7

[12] ibid., p. 25

[13] Stuart Hall, 'Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities', *The House That Race Built*, Wahneema Lubiano (ed.), New York: Vintage Books, 1998

[14] Clifford, op cit., p. 24

[15] ibid., p. 25

[16] Skawennati is Co-Director of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, a research network of artists, academics and technologists investigating, creating and critiquing indigenous virtual environments

[17] Johnson Witehira as cited in Mike Alexander, 'State of the Arts'; https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/arts/85248461/state-of-the-arts; accessed 25 April 2018

[18] Skawennati, quoted in 'Still, Like Air, I'll Rise', https://stpaulst.aut.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/75205/Slair_Roomsheet_FINAL.pdf

[19] Lana Lopesi, 'State of Play: A Review of Johnson Witehira's "Half-blood"', 2016; http://pantograph-punch.com/post/review-half-blood

[20] *Te Reo Māori* is the Māori term used to describe the Māori language

[21] https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/arts/92510125/kiwi-artist-lisa-reihanas-emisaries-set-to-open-at-venice-biennale

[22] Blood quantam laws were first enacted in 1705 by European Americans to define qualification by ancestry as Native American

[23] Jolene Rickard, 'First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared: No Treaties Needed'; http://www.cyberpowwow.net/nation2nation/jolenework.html

[24] Grace Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2012, p. 2

[25] John Hartley & Alan McKee, *The Indigenous Public Sphere: The Reporting and Reception of Aboriginal Issues in the Australian Media*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000