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A Dissonant Digital Ontology

by Haidy Geismar

This post is part of the series Digital Ontology (/fieldsights/820-digital-ontology)

I propose we think about a digital ontology from the perspective of how things *work*, rather than how things *are*. What does it mean for conversations about what *there is* to take place within a representational field that might break down or fail at the last minute, diminishing our potential to access the world? How can software and code as both representational forms and performative media intervene in the tensions between epistemology and ontology that underpin anthropological discussions about multiple ontologies?
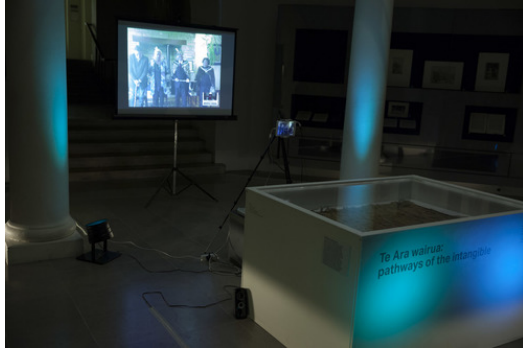
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production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/image_attachment/image_attachment/2569/Geismar_fg01.jpg)
Installation of Te Ara Wairua, showing Dr. Te Huirangi Eruera Waikerepuru, CNZM, Mereiwa Broughton, Te Urutahi Waikerepuru, and Tengaruru
Wineera on screen in the Octagon Gallery at University College London, June 17, 2014. Photo by Charlie Mackay.

My comment here emerges from a project, *Te Ara Wairua: Pathways of the Intangible*, which was a collaboration between myself, Stuart Foster, Kura
Puke—both of Massey University— and Te Matahiapo Research Organization in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our research has explored the tensions between
utopian discourses of connection and digital mediation, and how we create, define, and use digital objects in practice. We have tracked social relations
(or *whakapapa* in Māori; "the web of interconnectivity") across digital objects, screens, software platforms, and within cellular and broadband
networks.

Te Ara Wairua, in Māori, means "pathways of spiritual or intangible energy." Our project focuses on a *Kakahu*, a cloak of finely woven flax, wool, and
dog hair, now held in University College London's (UCL) Ethnography Collection. With backgrounds in designing virtual environments and a
longstanding practice of connecting to Māori cultural treasures (*taonga*) through light and sound, Kura and Stuart's intention was to "bring the UCL
cloak into the light" and to bathe it with energy from Aotearoa, New Zealand. Working closely with the Taranaki-based Te Matahiapo Research
Organization, they wanted to connect the cloak to a living Māori community. Throughout our project the term *wairua*, meaning "spiritual energy," has
been used as both an analogous and an encompassing term to describe the digital. Just as digital communication media largely exists as wireless waves
of information, transmitted all around us, so too are *taonga* understood to create energetic networks of connectivity across space and time. The
connection of this cloak, through broadband and cellular activity, to people both in London and New Zealand was therefore not framed as something
new, but as a continuation of the kind of work that *taonga* are supposed to do: to connect people, activate networks of knowledge and sociality, and
maintain those links.

I collaborated with Kura and Stuart for nearly a year before they came to England in June 2014. On June 17, we created a ceremonial environment
(*powhiri*) in UCL's Octagon gallery. Representatives of UCL Anthropology; Museums and Collections; and Ngati Ranana, the London Māori club, were
ushered into a space in the gallery by Te Matahiapo with a *karanga* (call), to stand before the cloak and before the elders who then spoke with chants
(*karakia*) and song (*waiata*) to us. Instead of the traditional *hongi* (sharing of breath), we breathed onto a gift (*koha*), a woven basket from Vanuatu,
which was later returned to Taranaki. The event contained the usual tensions that activate any ritual and make it crackle with social energy. We were
unable to hear all of the words of the invocations in London due to bad cellular connectivity, even though we could be heard perfectly in New Zealand.

As an interaction designer, Stuart started from the assumption that the technology in this project should be invisible, allowing us the impression of an
unmediated connection between London and Taranaki. He talked about how the medium (FaceTime, iPads and iPhones) should disappear, facilitating a
pure connectivity that might be able to overwrite the history of the cloak that had placed it thousands of miles away from its communities of origin. In
later conversations we wondered about the significance of the lack of sound, or, as we experienced it from our end, the stilted quality of the connection.
Perhaps this failing perfectly encapsulated exactly the situation we were in: a brave attempt to recreate a connection that can never be fully
salvaged; to work across a distance that is still present, that still remains; to work across interpretive gaps in language and cosmology, within the
interstices of colonial history. We are still struggling to reconcile the holism of Māori understandings of *taonga* as spiritual connectors with the more
dissonant experience of colonial collecting.

At the end of several weeks of exhibiting the cloak in UCL's North Lodge, Te Urutahi—in another FaceTime session, also with a bad cellular connection—
gave the cloak a name: Tuktuku Roimata. The name evokes the tears of the ancestors from the spiritual realm interwoven and connecting us with the
physical realm through the Korowai. These tears recognize the absence of the cloak from a known *whakapapa* (genealogy) and also celebrate the
emergence of new webs of connection. This name captures the celebratory qualities of connection brought forth by the communicative possibilities of
digital technologies, even as it performs a lament for what cannot be reconnected.

Lev Manovich (2013, 15) considers software to be "a layer that permeates all areas of contemporary societies" that is increasingly constitutive of all
cultural production. Looking ethnographically at how these technologies work (or do not work) in practice exposes the gap between many
anthropological theorizations of ontology that extrapolate holistic theories of being from within the representational constraints of language. We can
productively explore the analytic confusion between *what there is* and *what we think about what there is* within the frame of digital technologies that
challenge us to understand the simultaneity and interdependence of worldmaking and representing the world.

Reference

Manovich, Lev. 2013. *Software Takes Command: Extending the Language of New Media*. London: Bloomsbury.

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