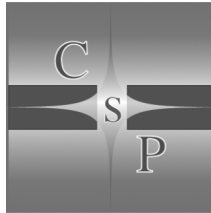


Place

Place:
Local Knowledge and New Media Practice

Edited by

Danny Butt, Jon Bywater and Nova Paul



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Place: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice, Edited by Danny Butt, Jon Bywater
and Nova Paul

This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2008 by Danny Butt, Jon Bywater and Nova Paul and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-484-7, ISBN (13): 9781847184849

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	
Danny Butt, Jon Bywater, Nova Paul	vii
<i>Chapter One: Local Knowledge and New Media</i>	
Danny Butt	1
<i>Chapter Two: Pacific Parables</i>	
Raqs Media Collective	9
<i>Chapter Three: Indigenous Virtualities</i>	
Allen Meek	20
<i>Chapter Four: Compasses, Meetings, and Maps: Three media works</i>	
Rachel O'Reilly	35
<i>Chapter Five: Bicultural Temporalities</i>	
Jo Smith	44
<i>Chapter Six: Virtual and Material Topographies</i>	
Ayesha Hameed	60
<i>Chapter Seven: Outage, Seepage, Blockage: art and cultural praxis in the network</i>	
Anna Munster	78
<i>Chapter Eight: Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic In Digital Storytelling</i>	
Candice Hopkins	93

Chapter Nine: *...the fluid line...*

Jason De Santolo 103

Chapter Ten: *Strangers on the Land: Place and Indigenous
Multimedia Knowledge Systems*

Mike Leggett and Laurel Evelyn Dyson 121

Chapter Eleven: *The Graffiti Archive and the Digital City*

Lachlan MacDowall 134

Chapter Twelve: *Play_Space: Interactive media practices for
community participation and cultural transformation*

Juan Francisco Salazar and Sarah Janet Waterson 147

Chapter Thirteen: *Diwà—a Filipino aesthetic of knowledge,
language, body*

Fatima Lasay 165

Chapter Fourteen: *Commons Conflict*

Soenke Zehle 181

List of Contributors 199

Index 205

Introduction

This book emerges from the symposium *Cultural Futures: Place Ground and Practice in Asia Pacific New Media Arts* held in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand in December 2005. *Cultural Futures* was designed to foster international dialogue on the role of place and location in the new media arts environment, and brought new media artists from India, the Philippines, and Indonesia together with indigenous practitioners from New Zealand, Australia and Canada. The event was primarily held at Hoani Waititi marae in West Auckland. The marae in a Maori community is a meeting place where the traditions and aspirations of the people are taught and practiced. As an inter-tribal marae, with a strong educational and artistic kaupapa and purpose and the site of the first Kura Kaupapa (Maori language primary school) launched in 1985, Hoani Waititi has played a significant role in New Zealand's cultural development, and an influential role in indigenous politics internationally.

The decision to hold the event on a marae, which mandates a specific set of protocols and mechanisms for discussion and interaction, was a

self-conscious one. A previous conference co-organised by one of the editors, *Cultural Provocation: Art, Activism and Social Change* (2003), was held in two separate locations - a marae situated in a polytechnic in South Auckland, and a university lecture theatre in Auckland City. Even with the same participants, the differences in the style of interaction supported by the two spaces was marked. Experiencing these differences has further sensitised us to the importance of context and to how academic and cultural frameworks can include or exclude certain kinds of discussion. The context of the marae is an inclusive one. The differing structure and hierarchies of the marae provided a valuable counterpoint to the implicitly European space of the lecture theatre. The powhiri's formal process of introduction and welcome enables more intimate exchange to unfold at the marae. You are in the architectural embrace of an ancestor; you're sleeping side by side in the same room that you are talking in; you have met the people responsible for maintaining the environment you're in, from kitchen hands to senior guardians - the physical and spiritual aspects of the place sit alongside protocol and customs that make up everyday life and practice. Such experiences reiterate the value of local and indigenous knowledge systems offering alternatives to the dominant languages of globalisation and new media technologies.

As we developed the context for the symposium, it became clear that there was a gap in the critical literature on these issues. More anthropological texts on particular cultural traditions; monographs on particular artists; and books written by indigenous practitioners already exist. But the discussion on place and belonging in new media is less a disciplinary space than an opportunity to bring various traditions into conversation, incorporating currents from geography, art history, cultural studies. This book reflects our desire to bring together writers from a wide range of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds to give a broad overview of critical approaches to the topic. For us the located experience of the *Cultural Futures* symposium has shaped the dialogue that has been captured in this text. Some of the common threads in the book are drawn out in our brief introductions to each chapter.

Acknowledgments

Compiling a book like this is a collective effort that has involved the generous support of many individuals and organisations. For the *Cultural Futures* symposium, we are especially grateful to the participants and especially to the presenting artists: Raqs Media Collective, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Fatima Lasay, Jenny Fraser, Amanda McDonald Crowley, Creative Combat Collective, Charles Koroneho, Rachael Rakena, Albert Refiti and Lemi Ponifasio, and Lisa Reihana. Our advisory board of Sean Cubitt, Albert Refiti, Natalie Robertson, Jo Smith, and Stephen Turner provided guidance and advice. Thanks to Creative New Zealand, the Asia New Zealand Foundation, Hoani Waititi Marae, Auckland University of Technology's School of Art and Design, and the Moving Image Centre for their support.

The symposium was an initiative of the Place and Practice Working Group for the Pacific Rim New Media Summit, held in San José 2006 as part of the International Symposium on Electronic Arts and the Zero One festival. Thanks to the working group, Jason De Santolo, Jenny Fraser, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Ashok Mathur, Rachel O'Reilly, and Lisa Reihana who participated in the group along with the editors. We also appreciated the support of Joel Slayton and Steve Dietz from ISEA/ZeroOne. The chapters by Butt, Hopkins and O'Reilly previously appeared in the special issue of the journal *Leonardo* devoted to the Summit, our thanks to Roger Malina, Pamela Grant-Ryan, and the Leonardo team.

We are also grateful to our publishers Andy Necessian, Amanda Millar and Carol Koulikourdi at Cambridge Scholars Publishing; and our designer Warren Olds from Studio Ahoy has consistently gone above and beyond the call of duty.

Most of all, our thanks to the writers and artists who have allowed their work to be included here.

Mauri ora.

Danny Butt, Jon Bywater, Nova Paul

In this introductory chapter, Danny Butt outlines some of the key issues and affective dimensions of the new media environment that underpin this publication. The article begins elliptically, suggesting that while the role of new media in bringing a shift from place-bound knowledge to more interest-based and cosmopolitan forms of knowledge has been considered, the communities of the settler and the colonized have always had very different means of spatialising the landscape they inhabit, even when this is the same physical space. More accurately, the colonial has been the imposition of one spatialisation over another, and our understanding of “new media” reflects this colonial viewpoint, through its instrumental approach to land and bias toward quantification. Drawing on Spivak, indigenous authors and the science studies literature, Butt suggests that it is difficult to know how deeply our “vision for information technologies is limited by epistemological biases that we have developed experientially within colonial capitalism,” but that through a conversation between indigenous and settler knowledge systems there is the possibility to clarify and transform these constraints.

Local Knowledge: Place and New Media Practice

Danny Butt

I grew up selling Local Knowledge, although I didn't think much about it at the time. Local Knowledge was the brand name for the surfboards made by my stepfather's surf shop on Australia's Gold Coast.

Compared to most other white settlers outside the agricultural sector, surfers have detailed relationships with physical places and locations. “Local knowledge” is a term used to describe insider information such as the conditions under which a particular surf break might be good, or how to surf a particular wave most effectively. While some local knowledge can be shared, a certain amount is tacit and experiential and cannot be codified—remaining obstinately located around a particular environment and the people in it. Local knowledge is reified in the doctrine of “localism”, which claims special rights to the best waves for those who surf particular breaks regularly.

There is a class dimension at work in surfing's localism: cosmopolitans who travel regularly see localism as small minded and against the spirit of surfing, while those who grow up around the best breaks (which tend not to be in major cities) rail against the magazines, surf reports and webcams that provide increasing information about particular surf locations, making them destinations for the "blow-ins" from somewhere else. It is true that even among the surfing community's "locals" there are occasional, romantic nods to the "connection with the land" of Aboriginal peoples, but more commonly settler culture views indigenous culture as something existing in the past, which has "been lost." To recognize indigenous culture as contemporary and viable would call one's own localness into question. Ironically, then, it is the urban cosmopolitans—unencumbered by non-negotiable attachments to a place—who are more open to the reality of ongoing indigenous relationships to and guardianship of the land.

‡

Abie and Wok Wright were born and raised in Newcastle, Australia, which is my hometown. They also promote Local Knowledge—that's the name of the hip-hop group they formed with Joel Wenitong in 2002. However, the "localness" of their knowledge is somewhat different. Newcastle was named after the English coal town by a British lieutenant who discovered coal there while searching for escaped convicts in the early 19th century. The Wright brothers, however, describe themselves in interviews as being from Awabakal country, a broader group of nations/peoples centered for thousands of years around Awaba, also known as Lake Macquarie. While the rise of hip-hop is often characterized as a function of U.S. consumerism and inauthenticity, for Local Knowledge hip-hop values articulate their anti-colonial cultural politics: keeping it real, name-checking your roots, and representing for your community all come naturally in both hip-hop and indigenous struggles for self-determination.

My experience of these competing versions of Local Knowledge leads me to reflect on the incommensurability of indigenous and settler versions of knowledge of the land, and how these echo in the activities of indigenous new media practitioners. There are at least three axes where

this incommensurability is visible. These axes may also be described as *aporia* in the deconstructive sense—contradictory impulses that are not necessarily resolvable, because they are constituted by the disjuncture between colonial and colonised cultures (Spivak 1999).

The first is the role of cartography and the map. The turning of land into data through surveying, mapping and renaming is the most basic function of the colonial process. In many colonial projects, the surveyor was hated and feared more than the soldier. The removal of surveying pegs, the refusal to be mapped, is an important thread in anti-colonial activity from Ireland to New Zealand. This places the role of new media and its data-centricity in question. As Solomon Benjamin's fascinating studies of land tenure in Bangalore have shown (2000; also presentations in Delhi and Amsterdam 2005), the systematisation of land information routinely results in a centralisation of control and a loss of local self-determination. Land becomes appropriable at a distance. A common occurrence in settler encounters with indigenous culture is the discovery that the land is more full of story than we knew. The formation of objective, story-less data via, for example, GPS—even for the purposes of developing narrative media practices through “locative” works—is difficult to reconcile with the non-transferable yet profoundly social relationship with land that is characteristic of indigenous epistemology.

The second *aporia* is that of time. To claim affiliation to a space of land via a property right, or to activate the concept of sovereignty itself, is an act of history-making. As David Ellerman (2004,) notes, however, this historical dimension is usually suppressed in Western economic and political theory: “Economics has focused on the transfers in the market and almost completely neglected the question of the initiation and termination of property in normal production and consumption”.

Part of the silence around the initiation of property is due to the fact that the actual, often grisly stories of property initiation raise questions about the legitimacy of that property. The reality of indigenous relationships to land, if connected to the history of property in specific locations, always brings up an uncomfortable anteriority for a culture that views property as transferable, as James Clifford (2001, 482) observes:

[The] historical, tangled sense of changing places doesn't capture the identity of ancestors with a mountain, for as long as anyone remembers and plausibly far beyond that. Old myths and genealogies change, connect, and reach out, but always in relation to this enduring spatial nexus... Thus indigenous identities must always transcend colonial interruptions... claiming: we were here before all that, we are still here, we will make a future here.

Homi Bhabha has referred to the colonial moment as generating a "time-lag" that destabilizes the ground from which a singular history or theory of place is possible. The perspective of the colonized puts both our contemporary theorization of property and our understanding of property in times past. As Gregor McLennan (2003, 74) puts it, "We cannot readily reperiodise and re-name the object of enquiry to fit our revised inclinations" or suppositions in the new media environment. The "new" remains unhelpfully bound to different, competing histories of the past.

The third axis relates to the concept and function of knowledge itself. Historical knowledge is constantly reinterpreted and re-located to become useful for the work of the present. In settler culture, knowledge is instrumental—it is useful because it can do things, here and now. In indigenous epistemologies, knowledge is commonly viewed as what the Maori call *taonga tuku iho*, a gift from one's ancestors to the present. The ultimate social good is not the transfer of knowledge, as it is under modernist theories of information diffusion, nor is it the maximum extraction of capital value, as under capitalism. More important is who the knowledge is transferred to and whether their use of that knowledge will help maintain the entire knowledge system.

Poet and librarian Robert Sullivan (2002) notes that, when considering the digitisation of cultural material, important questions for indigenous maintainers of knowledge are:

How do we send a message that strengthens the holistic context of each cultural item and collection? How do we ensure that both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples receive the message? How do we digitize material taking into account its metaphysical as well as its digital life?

Resolving these three conflicts would require “new media” in which the technologically augmented experience of location is inseparable from a philosophy of land and belonging. These are distinctive and important questions for new media practice. I do not seek to romanticise the distinctions between indigenous and nonindigenous approaches to land and knowledge, or to suggest that indigenous knowledge systems can or should be adopted by nonindigenous cultures. For indigenous peoples, the recovery and maintenance of their cultural systems is quite simply a lot of extra work that they do as part of their survival. It is empirically the case, however, that the cultural meaning of place and location is more sophisticated in indigenous culture than in nonindigenous culture—indigenous practitioners are far more likely to be able to deploy a range of strategies for “reading the country” that emerge from a variety of worldviews, and to be able to critically reflect on the effects of these understandings (Benterrak et. al, 1984). Such systems make us aware that our vision for information technologies is limited by epistemological biases that we have developed experientially within colonial capitalism.

To understand some of these limitations it is instructive to look at the way new media theory is invested in settler culture and its relationships with land. In these relationships I mean more that the homologies Virginia Eubanks (1999) identified between the “mythographies” of new media development and the frontier values of “Conquest, Flexibility, Democracy, and Individuality” in the white settlers of the Western United States, although those are important. Instead I suggest that our very ways of thinking about new media are inevitably invested in colonial epistemology.

For example, Lev Manovich (2001), in his classic book *The Language of New Media*, identifies four distinctive properties of digital media products:

- *Discrete representation on different scales.* Manovich imagines a fractal structure, where individual objects can be recombined at will into different contexts while retaining their individuality.
- *Numeric representation.* Media can be described formally (mathematically or numerically) and subject to algorithmic manipulations.

- *Automation.* Many media manipulations can occur automatically, and human intentionality can be removed from the creative process.
- *Variability.* New media objects (such as Web sites) are not something fixed once and for all but can exist in different (potentially infinite) versions.

Of course, these properties are clearly associated with the values of European modernism, but it is also interesting to consider the first two in relation to the development of “freehold title”—in which divisibility and aggregation are important components of property under the industrial system. However, these first three characteristics—valorised in Manovich’s conception—are unhelpful under value systems where no person or media object is imaginable outside of specific social relationships, as these characteristics suppress the particularity of the subjective social context that produces them. As David Turnbull (2000) puts it, in a culture that prefers the abstract to the concrete (because the abstract is without annoying limitations to circulation), knowledge has to be presented as unbiased and undistorted, without a place or knower. In a discussion of high-energy physics, Sharon Traweek (1988, 162) describes this ideal as “an extreme culture of objectivity; a culture of no culture, which longs passionately for a world without loose ends, without temperament, gender, nationalism, or other sources of disorder—for a world outside human space and time.”

By contrast, the new media artists and commentators who are producing the work I find most fascinating create new media projects that are organised around experience-centered claims to aesthetic value—they are not telling the story of an abstract “global” but are reflexively embedded in their own location and understanding. Works created by indigenous artists often assert a different frame of reference for the role of the digital within their practice, highlighting the “alternative modernities” that have simultaneously existed outside European thinking, while forging political sensibilities in relation to colonisation and racial prejudice.

Cheryl L’Hirondelle (2004) notes that “the current lack of attention being paid by programmers to Indigenous communities around the world represents a missed opportunity, because our languages are eloquent, concept and process-based, and fully capable of describing

various complicated technological dynamics.” Our aim with this book is to bring these worldviews—often relegated to the “cultural” as opposed to fully “contemporary”—into the mainstream of new-media practice. For me, these “cultural futures,” as Eric Michaels (1994) termed them, open new directions for critical practice among indigenous and non-indigenous new-media practitioners alike. These directions are not founded on the basis of shared values (though these are always being sought), but on what is different and distinctive. They are about encountering stories on our travels that emerge from and remain tied to specific locations, stories that—although they travel far and wide—have a home.

References

- Benjamin, Solomon. 2000. Governance, Economic Settings and poverty in Bangalore. *Environment and Urbanization* (12): 35-56.
- Benterrak, Krim., Stephen Muecke, and Paddy Roe. 1984. *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*. Fremantle: W.A: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- Clifford, James. 2001. Indigenous Articulations. *The Contemporary Pacific* 13 (2): 468-492.
- Ellerman, David. 2004. Introduction to Property Theory. *Social Science Research Network*, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=548142>. (accessed November 20, 2004).
- Eubanks, Virginia. 1999. The Mythography of the “New” Frontier. http://web.mit.edu/mit/articles/index_eubanks.html. (accessed May 2, 2002).
- L’Hirondelle, Cheryl. 2004. Sub-rosa. *Horizon Zero* 17 (Tell—Aboriginal Story in Digital Media) <http://www.horizonzero.ca/textsite/tell.php?is=17&file=0&tlang=0>. (accessed September 20, 2005).
- Manovich, Lev. 2000. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- McLennan, Gregor. 2003. Sociology, Eurocentrism and Postcolonial Theory. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6 (1): 69-86.
- Michaels, Eric. 1994. *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Sullivan, Robert. 2002. Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights--A Digital Library Context. *D-Lib Magazine*, 8 (May). <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may02/sullivan/05sullivan.html>. (accessed April 15, 2005).
- Traweek, Sharon. 1988. *Beamtimes and Lifetimes: The World of High Energy Physicists*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Turnbull, David. 2000. *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology of Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge*. Australia: Harwood Academic.

This book has its origins in the editors' hypothesis that the Asia Pacific region offers a useful vantage point on the question of place, where, for example, issues of sovereignty are often tied to material struggles to reclaim traditional territories, and many distinctive cultural values stem from human relationships with the land. The region, though, is arbitrarily constructed, and it is from this starting point that the Raqs Media Collective weave together some myths — factual and symbolic — of the Pacific into a series of images with which to frame and to think urgent ethical questions about the fate of cultural values in new media practice. For example, remembering the knowledge system that preceded the currently dominant Western conception of navigation, they explain how older Pacific sailors calculated their progress in an inversion of Dead Reckoning, “on the basis of a metaphorical assumption of the still navigator interfacing with a world that courses towards or away from him or her”, concluding that Dead Reckoning won out as a way of thinking because the ships that used it were equipped with more deadly munitions. In relation to a detail like this, the essay traces cultural values deep into human practices, and in making them visible, asks how we might avoid the violence that homogenises culture in the way information is handled and different ethoi are brought into communication: How can we think of culture without thinking in terms of property, for example? How can we avoid the hegemony embedded in “end-user agreements”? In posing these challenges to their own practice, Raqs demonstrate the learning that may occur in openly and curiously engaging with different histories.

Pacific Parables

Raqs Media Collective

The Pacific Rim as a Fiction of Place

The Pacific Rim is a fiction about place, a filter through which you can look at the world if you choose to and confer more or less arbitrary meanings on to a set of latitudes and longitudes. There have been previous fictions about place straddling this water, one was called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, and unleashed havoc in the name of the solidarity of oppressed peoples of Asia, another thought of the Pacific as a Californian frontier, a kind of Wild Blue West. A third spoke French, drew naked women in Tahiti, and detonated hydrogen

bombs in the water. A fourth, the South Pacific Bubble, was one of the first episodes of global financial speculation that shaped the turbulence of the economy of our modern era.

Meanwhile, Sikh peasants from the Punjab, Chinese railroad workers from Canton, agricultural workers and sugarcane cultivators from the hinterland of North India traversed the ocean, Mexicans swam or walked along the coastline, Australian sailors, New Zealanders on whaling ships, Japanese factory workers, Filipina nurses and itinerant Pacific Islander communities traversed the Pacific, and the wider world, buffeted by the rough winds of recent history. They grew fruit trees in Napa valley, felled timber in British Columbia, mined tin in Peru, pressed grapes in Chile and made what some choose to call the Pacific Rim what it is today. In time, agricultural labourers were joined by software programmers. And roads from Napa Valley began to lead in and out of Silicon Valley.

Ringed by fire, held together by fragile surfaces that slide on to each other, girded through with pipelines, beset by storms. You could say that the Pacific Ocean, apparently endless and bottomless, sounds almost like the Internet. Which is not altogether inappropriate considering that the Pacific Rim, between California, East Asia and Australasia, probably contains within it the highest density of Internet traffic.

The first question we want to ask is: how can this fiction of location, this imaginary map, the one that we are all currently engaged in drawing, not reproduce the boundaries that beset all mapmaking exercises? How can we as mapmakers avoid the predicament of an expression of mastery over the landscape we intend to survey?

Dead and Living Reckoning

We forget that cartography is as variable a practice as any. There are maps and then there are maps, and there are different kinds of mapmaking. Modern maritime navigational charts, based on latitude and longitude, determine a principle of navigation known as “Dead Reckoning”. Dead Reckoning, in our limited understanding, is the method by which the position of a moving body is deduced in advance by taking fixes from previously known positions and then reading them against calculations with variables such as speed, direction, wind speed, tide patterns and currents. Prior to GPS, most navigators had to rely on dead reckoning, with a little help from a compass, an astrolabe, star charts, chronometers

and longitude tables. Dead Reckoning models itself on the dynamics of the relationship between a moving object and a notionally inert surface.

We say most, but should qualify it immediately, because for most of human history, the largest water body in the world was navigated using a different system of reckoning. The Pacific Island cultures, which were probably the most prolific seafarers that the history of humanity has known, actually used the opposite navigational principle. Reckoning was taken on the basis of a metaphorical assumption of the still navigator interfacing with a world which courses towards or away from him or her. Thus, it is not the sailor that approaches an island, but the island that advances towards, and then past the sailor. Meanwhile, the stars remain constant, thus marking general orientation. The course is set by the stars, and the world—a living, dynamic entity—flows past under the navigator's gaze. For terminological convenience alone, one could call this method "Live Reckoning". The relationship between dead and live reckoning is a study in the encounter of two knowledge systems, two practices and ethoi of information. The difference between them ultimately lay in how much gunpowder they had backing them. One had lots, the other, none. The ships that used "dead reckoning" carried cannons and muskets; the canoes of the live reckoners were armed with arrows and spears. The knowledge system with guns won the day. Pacific Island navigation systems remain as relics, occasionally resuscitated by an anthropologist or a sailing enthusiast.

Today, we who are practitioners of information, artisans of knowledge, often forget that our practices are also guaranteed by sophisticated weapons, and not only of the lethal kind. Modernity's edge is ultimately a matter of ammunition. What safeguards should we institute to ensure that our encounters with the few remaining knowledge, information and communication systems different from our own do not result in their extinction? How can the business of reckoning continue to remain alive?

Cargo Cults

We head now in the direction of the island of the long wait. We refer here to a quintessentially modern practice of faith, the Cargo Cults that arose in the Pacific Islands, as a poignant marker of the power that

technology (even if it does not work) can wield over the human spirit. In a typical Cargo Cult, contact with the accoutrements of modern Industrial civilization at war time (in the form of airdrops of food and other essential items from large transport or cargo planes for soldiers stationed in the islands) allegedly convinced the islanders that all that they needed for utopia to arrive was the ability to attract the right kind of airplane to land and disgorge its cornucopia of wealth (tinned food, white goods, durables, clothes etc.) on the island. It had been observed that airplanes tended to land on airstrips that were complete with runways, observation towers, a few standing airplanes and radar. So replicant infrastructure and replica airplanes were built with locally available materials in the hope that such engineering efforts would attract the bountiful flying machines from the sky. Needless to say, the planes would never land. The islanders waited, and perhaps still wait.

Cargo Cults are a useful metaphor for thinking about many diverse phenomena in contemporary culture, ranging from shopping malls spreading across space to imitative work routines. When the success of shopping malls in a region spawns mall clones in adjoining areas that wait for customers that do not arrive, we can see a cargo cult like phenomenon at work. Gigantic hulks of retail, arrayed for miles, stand girded by empty parking lots in many parts of Europe, North America and Asia.

Why do we wait for things to come to us? What guarantee is there that if we create replicas of the structures that house cultural expressions in other spaces, we will automatically create the conditions of a new culture? Why be in such a hurry to acquire the latest technology, and why wait so long for the perfect machine, the perfect piece of code, the killer application? What is it about our situation that makes us so afraid of being left behind? Why do we fear obsolescence?

Easter Island

What more remarkable reminders of obsolescence can there be than the stone giants of Easter Island. They too stand, as if waiting, scanning the horizon of the Pacific for a perpetually deferred future. We know almost nothing about the people and the culture that created them, and we do not know what they were trying to communicate to the big ocean by placing these standing figures. What we do have a sense of is the fact

that this activity of intensive stone quarrying devastated the ecology and social structures of the island, and that ultimately, the culture could not bear the burden of its own communicative practices. Perhaps a useful object lesson. Sometimes it becomes useful to audit the social and ecological footprints of our communicative practices.

The making of computer hardware and software also involves toxic materials, depressed wages and prison labour, and a great deal of this occurs on either side of the Pacific seaboard, in East Asia and in California. How can we reconcile the utopian promises that are made on behalf of information and communication technologies with the dystopic realities of their production in our societies?

The Imaginary Island on the Dateline

The utopian impulse is castigated elsewhere, but remains uncritically celebrated when it comes to communication technologies. Sober, even conservative, men in suits turn instantly into radicals when it comes to a new gadget. As if what were questionable in politics were automatically acceptable when translated into culture. Every product, every device, every new piece of code or procedure announces itself as a revolution. As artists working with these devices we are often the most effective bearers of this revolutionary zeal. This takes us to our fifth Pacific destination, to an imaginary island that straddles the dateline, encompassing within its circumference the diurnal revolution such that sunrise and sunset are locked into some kind of recursive embrace. And so you have sunrise media that almost immediately becomes sunset media. Where the pressure of getting a headstart into your tomorrow or the fear of being left behind in your yesterday leaves no room for today. What remains of the day is an insomniac anxiety about being adrift, lost in the ocean. How best can we jettison the burden of being the new, so that we can stop worrying about becoming dated?

El Niño

Sailing in the Pacific is a hazardous job. Depending on the direction in which you are going you could run across strong contrary winds. A combination of atmospheric phenomena and pressure conditions creates weather systems that may be specific to, or originate in the Pacific, but have global consequences. One of them is the El Niño, which

together with its companion La Niña, arises in the waters off the coast of Peru, and creates weather conditions that lead to depletion in fish stocks in some waters, overabundance in others, hurricanes in some places, and droughts in others. It was noticed sometime in the late nineteenth century that drought and famine struck India and Australia with remarkable concordance, and it was deduced that this had something to do with the way in which the phenomenon known as the El Niño Southern Oscillation affects the weather system of the Indian Ocean and its littoral region.

This is well known; what is less well known is the matter of a speculative economy, particularly in the fixing of global food and primary commodity prices that capitalises on the eccentric but not irregular periodicity of the El Niño and La Niña systems. Here you have real time based weather report, statistical observation of meteorological systems going back at least a century, commodity price fluctuation indices and a globally integrated market working together to reap enormous profits from the tamed uncertainties of the weather. The futures market in primary commodities, in food and other natural products, works on this basis, creating enormous wealth, based on speculation, for some and misery for billions of others. Here, data and disaster often go together. How can those of us who work with information in a creative manner begin to get a handle on the enormously significant ethical questions that arise from the handling of information in today's world, especially in the region that we describe as the Pacific Rim?

Nauru: Birdshit and Gold

The consequences of the generation of disproportionate assets through operations on information, knowledge and culture, require special and extended treatment, and this is probably not the best occasion to do that. But there is a Pacific Parable that can be drawn from the dots in the ocean that are composed of skeletons and shit. We refer to islands like Nauru in the Pacific, where one of us actually visited over a few years as a teenager, whose entire economy consisted of phosphate mining operations that processed fossil birdshit into gold. Nauru is a parable for the toxicity that accompanies a gold rush. The wealth that was produced within the span of few generations—the first ship with guano left in 1907—was consumed within a generation, leading to a population that

is unwell, intoxicated, and poor. Growing up in Nauru was not the most exhilarating experience, and the teenage utopia of a Pacific Paradise never matched up to the reality of dependence and decay. Today, Nauru is reduced to being a place where the Australian state out-sources the detention of people it considers to be potential illegal immigrants.

When the accumulated deposits of millennia are mined within a generation, people are left with little or no resources for the future. If the ruthless commodification of nature always produces a toxic culture, what would the relentless mining of a commons of culture produce? An unquestioning faith in the mechanisms of intellectual property takes for granted that the accumulated creative, imaginative and mental labour of our ancestors, which informs all our thought and creativity today, is a resource available for plunder. This engenders an acquisitive, proprietary attitude towards cultural production that inhibits growth, learning and future creativity.

The epics, stories, songs and sagas that represent in some ways the collective heritage of humanity have survived only because their custodians took care not to lock them into a system of “end usage”, and embellished them, adding to their health and vitality, before passing them on to others.

The parallels that we are drawing between guano and intellectual property rest on a variety of resonances. It could be argued that some of the unilateral features of TRIPS agreements that definitively shaped the destiny of Intellectual Property (IP) legislation across the world had a historical precedent, or at least shares a resonance with the piece of US Federal Law known as the Guano Islands Act (currently embodied in federal statutes as U.S. Code, Title 48, Chapter 8, Sections 1411-1419). The Guano Islands Act, which became law in August 1856 (exactly 150 years ago), enabled any and all U.S. citizens to take possession (for the United States of America) of any island, rock or key, containing Guano deposits, anywhere in the world, provided they were not occupied or within the jurisdiction of any other government.

The intellectual property regime legislated by the TRIPS agreement allows citizens of several states to patent, trademark, copyright or otherwise assert their intellectual property claims on several forms of life, aspects of knowledge systems, cultural material and practices (wherever previous private intellectual property claims are absent).

This renders much of human culture akin to islands of Guano, primed for possession and mining. They create enclosures where none existed before.

When codes or languages closed in on themselves, allowing no “interpolations” or trespasses after a point, they rapidly haemorrhaged. How can we in our generation, immersed as we are in the language of property, ensure that there is space left for the cultivation of the commons? We ask this also because even initiatives like free and open source software, and the Creative Commons initiative, ultimately take recourse to the language of ownership and property, albeit an annotated notion of ownership, to make their case. Is there a language for culture, especially for the reproduction of culture that can elide the question of property?

The Kula Ring

Unlike commodities, gifts can accrue value to themselves as they pass from one person to another in a network of gift exchange. The ethnography of the gift exchange in the Trobriand Islands, made famous by the Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski as the Kula Ring in his remarkable book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, is an instance of this phenomenon; as is, in a less exotic sense the ways in which heirlooms add value to themselves as they pass down generations. In a digital environment it is not necessarily the patina of age or prestige that will lend value to a digital object as it passes between persons; rather, it is the possibility that it will be improved, refined, and have things added to it through usage (without doing any damage to an always available earlier iteration of the object itself, which can be recovered through the layers that gather to a work in a palimpsest).

It is this fact that gives to electronic piracy, and to any act that frees information from the prison of artificial or illusory “originality”, its true cutting edge. It does so not out of any radical intent to subvert the laws of property and the commodity, but because it makes eminent common sense for people to share information in any community through networks of informal sociality, especially if the act of sharing brings with it no depreciation in the value of that which is shared. Rather, the person who shares more gathers prestige to herself, and by now we are all accustomed to extraordinary feats of electronic

generosity (which sometimes carry with them an aura of “bravado”) as means of earning reputations within tightly knit online communities. The new pirates are just as desirous of chronicles of their adventurous heroism as their ancestors! The Pacific has distinguished histories of gift giving, complex circulation and custodianship principles for cultural material, pirate economies and mutinous sailors. How can this history of an adventurously redistributive generosity inform our practices with information and culture today? What can Pacific traditions of abundant reproduction and replication teach the contemporary global moment? How may we rediscover a robust ethic of transaction that does not lock culture into the dungeon of “end user agreements” that inhibit circulation?

Depth, Shipwrecks and Dark Fibre

It is well known that the Pacific holds within itself the world’s deepest spots. Many fathoms below the surface of the sea, the Mariana trench is the world’s deepest place. Deep spots such as these are places where residues and remains accumulate. The depths of cyberspace, and what is beginning to be called “information society”, like the depths of the ocean, are places where all sorts of residual pieces of information accumulate. Here, amongst forgotten and shipwrecked media, one encounters strange, mutant electrical life forms. Beings made of what Geert Lovink (2003) has called “dark fibre”.

So much of the discourse about information technology and communication is about light, about transparency and knowledge, that we forget that information is crucial for the manufacture of disinformation. We are thinking right now of the enormous energy that is being put into the media, electronic, online and print, all over the world, but also especially in the United States, in justifying the naked aggression that the State of Israel is inflicting on the people of Lebanon. How can we begin to talk about the dark matter of information, or disinformation, and the political management of information, with at least as much attention and energy as we do about information enlightenment? How can we render the deep and the dark in our work with light?

Lemuria: Lost Continent

We come now to our final destination. This time, we are sailing in a submarine. After all, we were plumbing the depths of the Mariana Trench a moment ago, so it makes sense to keep going under water, crawling along the sea floor in search of a lost, submerged continent. At the fag end of the age of geographical discovery in the late nineteenth century, the public imagination in many parts of the world, in its thirst for new worlds, hit upon the idea of lost and submerged continents. Mariners tales, philosophical speculations and utopian strains of thought were dredged from all across history to yield lost continents like Atlantis, and its variant in our neighbourhood, Lemuria. Lemuria first came into view as an attempt at explaining a zoological puzzle, the pattern of distribution of the lemur family of primates, which hugged the shorelines of islands and continental landmasses of the Asia Pacific region, from Indonesia to Africa. Lemuria was invoked in explanations of everything from the missing link in the chain of human evolution, to the origin of diverse language families, the origin of the human species and the routes taken for the first human migrations.

What interests us here is not the project of recovering a fascinating imaginary history so much as a speculation about the distribution of a life form yielding an image of a space and a continent. This can lead to a prospective, and not retrospective insight. Like lemurs, many of us who occupy spaces within the media arts, hug the shorelines of landmasses of cultures, especially in the Asia Pacific region. We recognize that something, a family likeness perhaps, an eccentric sense of the kinship of our practices, the broad features of common questions and concerns, hint at some kind of extended lineage that we can draw from. These would include the histories of communication that we have inherited and the questions that our social, cultural and political milieus confront us with. If we are to create cultural futures for ourselves, we will have to place and ground our practices on the terrain of a recovered continent. How can we begin mapping this continent that awaits our recovery of its submerged landscape. What do we need to do now to explore the shorelines of all our practices?

This chapter is adapted from a keynote address given at the Pacific Rim New Media Summit, ISEA2006/zero one, August 2006, San Jose, USA.

References

- Davis, M. 2001. *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*. London: Verso.
- Diamond, J. 2004. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Viking.
- Economist. 2001. "Nauru: Paradise well and truly lost." *The Economist*, 20 December 2001. http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=884045
- Fitzgerald, J. "Contemporary Cargo Cults." <http://www.actualanalysis.com/cargo.htm>
- Harris, M. 1974. *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*. New York: Random House.
- Howe, K.R. 2003. *The Quest for Origins*. Auckland: Penguin Books.
- Lovink, G. 2003. *Dark Fiber*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Malinowski, B. 1984 [1922]. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Reprint ed. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press.
- Raqs Media Collective. 2003. "Value and its Other in Electronic Culture—Slave Ships and Private Galleons" in *DIVE*, edited by Armin Medosch. Liverpool: FACT. <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/texts6.html>
- Ramaswamy, S. 2005. *Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories: The Lost Land of Lemuria*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Teaiwa, T. K. 2006. "On Analogies: Rethinking the Pacific in a Global Context." *The Contemporary Pacific* 18, no. 1. 71-87.
- Turnbull, D. 2000. *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology of Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Wikipedia contributors, "Guano Islands Act," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guano_Islands_Act

Allen Meek identifies a conceptual problem facing indigenous new media practitioners: how to think past the dominant view that virtual culture is defined by its freedom from physical location? With reference to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's classic work on decolonising methodologies, he responds to contemporary Maori film and video, theorising the ways in which artists like Lisa Reihana can be seen to "indigenise" virtual culture. Meek discusses how Reihana understands her digitally manipulated photography and video as inhabited by a spiritual presence, thus extending the domain of indigenous values and protocols, rather than leaving them behind in a transcended physical space. He acknowledges that the discussion of the politics of the production, possession and control of images in a colonial context has a long history, and he traces it forward to the question of virtuality, comparing theorisations of the virtual and of Aotearoa's colonial history with writings and works by Maori scholars, artists and film makers, distinguishing "Antipodean" virtualities from indigenous virtualities.

Indigenous Virtualities

Allen Meek

Contemporary discourses about virtual culture are dominated by metaphors of displacement, mobility and multiplicity. Discussions of new media such as the Internet and digital imaging technologies have tended to align the notion of virtuality with the transcendence of physical location and the arrival of an immaterial and potentially infinite cyberspace. New media also supports its own social and geographic imaginary—the “virtual community” and “electronic frontier”—with its visions of unlimited opportunity, spatial expansion, and freedom of communication. This rhetoric of a new information order often appears at odds with the struggle of indigenous peoples to reassert their rights to traditional lands and to celebrate the continuing vitality of their cultures. Indigenous media producers therefore face the challenge not only of developing technological capabilities in their communities but of imagining and articulating new media *differently* around their distinctive needs and political struggles.

Following the lead of Australian media theorist McKenzie Wark, several cultural critics in Aotearoa New Zealand have developed a