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RE-CODING THE NA(rra)TIVE
Disrupting the colonial lens in search of my Maaori self

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ABSTRACT

The history of Maaori with the Western gaze is complex, and it is in complexity that my practice sits. I begin this exegesis introducing the influence of the colonial lens on Tangata Whenua identities and my lens-based practice, discussing the limiting essentialist paradigms of identity that have generated and maintained colonial stereotypes and notions of authenticity.

I then discuss through my moving image work *where do we come from | what are we | where are we going (after gauguin)* (2022) how simulation can be used as a means to critique and re-code signifiers, or 'signs', of authentic Indigenous identities. This is supported through an analysis of artists and creatives whose use of the lens has demonstrated how colonial tools and narratives can be reclaimed and reworked to suit Indigenous peoples. Within this whakapapa, I emphasize the assertion of cultural and political agency, and advocate for multiplicity as a departure from limiting essentialist notions of authenticity.

Reflecting on a notable shift toward ambiguity in my practice, I explore how my photographic body of work *the sitters* (2022) intersects with Trickster consciousness, blurring binaries of gender, culture, time, and space, stepping further into liminality as a mode for expression of a more diverse Maaori identity. I conclude by considering how Indigenous Futurisms can make available new ways for contemporary Indigenous identities to be imagined and expressed outside colonial impositions.

This exegesis is an extensive enquiry of the development of my lens-based practice over the years 2021-2022, suggesting further areas of development and exploration.

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INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF MY MAAORI SELF

A quick Google image search of 'Māori people' will yield faded photographs of dark-skinned people dressed in woven cloaks and grass skirts, faces tattooed with spiralling, dark lines, their image locked by black and white and sepia tones to a time long past. Amongst these images of antiquity are higher resolution, colour photographs. Similarly dressed, these people look fierce, eyes bulging and tongues blaring in performative song and dance. These are not the type of Maaori you will see in public spaces, though. This is merely a simple search engine result generated by popular, albeit misaligned, perceptions. The Maaori you are more likely to find are dressed in nylon and polyester, carried by American branded sneakers through shopping centres and driving Japanese cars to their suburban homes. Throughout my life, it was between these representations that I searched for my Maaori self. The 'authentic' Maaori and the rest of us 'Plastics'. Standardized by a specific, limited scope of Maaori experience, my criterion of cultural authenticity did not include myself, leading to continuous feelings of displacement. While the standard has shifted over my life, subconsciously reassessed through evolving situations and contexts, the feeling has remained constant. When one is repeatedly reviewing themselves against a criterion of cultural authenticity determined by essentialist ideas, they will find themselves, or others, as outsider (Sissons 39).

Making art has been a mode for exploring these questions and experiences of displacement. Through my art practice I have considered what constitutes contemporary Maaori art, and in turn, a contemporary Maaori identity. Looking to the representation of Maaori in dominant (Western) art history, I have found myself continuously displaced by imagery that is either generated from the distancing, objective colonial gaze, or a subjective experience that doesn't articulate my own. Where paradigms of identity are deliberated, notions of authenticity arise, operating on a set of inclusionary/exclusionary factors. Regardless of what the identity is, limited representations will always leave people sitting uncomfortably at the margins.

These are not a unique set of experiences, but the complexity of a contemporary Maaori

identity, one that is experienced within a history of political struggle and dynamic, and oft times radical, adjustment. Environmental, Indigenous, and human rights advocate Tina Ngata (Ngāti Porou) states that, “To be born Indigenous is to be born into a political reality” (Ngata 11). To be Maaori is to be political, to actively resist colonial narratives and forces. Operating within White heteronormative male-dominated spaces, which is the reality for many Maaori, demands satisfying a vast array of at times contradictory requirements. Without dwelling on the negatives, it can be, in short, draining. This is, however, what it means to be Indigenous, so for many it has also become second nature.

My art is a consideration of identity politics, primarily concerned with colonial notions of authenticity and cultural essentialism. The need to position myself and express my identity as Maaori and Queer is what compels me to make art of this nature. Through my artworks I question and disrupt colonial narratives, reworking representations of Maaori to assert my experience and identity as tangata whenua. Our representation through painting, photography, and film/moving image has been dominated by stereotypes coded with a set of signs that uphold colonial ideologies of the Other. Generated and maintained via a complex, incestuous history of European artworks, it is difficult, and I argue fruitless, to isolate the source. Colonial ideas are bred and inbred, their degenerate spawn copulating and producing further corrupted concepts manifest in the canon of Western art history. Their reach is widespread, from the North African ‘Orient’ to the ‘South Seas’ of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. Deeply entrenched and virulently prevailing, these signs create and maintain the notion that there is an authentic type of Maaori and whatever that looks like, this author is not one of them.

This exegesis details the development of my art practice with the lens, interrogating colonial notions of authentic cultural identity and recoding stereotypes generated and maintained by the colonising lens. It is an exploration of a contemporary tangata whenua identity. I locate myself within a continuity of artists, writers, historians, activists, philosophers etc. who persistently challenge these norms. Within this whakapapa I situate my practice, advocating for ambiguity and multiplicity as I consider how I can offer a newness in what can sometimes be a bankrupt vocabulary (Rea).

THROUGH COLOURED LENSES: COLONIAL CONSTRUCTS

The lens is often regarded as a medium of objectivity, presenting realities undistorted by the fancies of the author. It purports to show us that which is true, to show us the thing as it really is. This is what drew me to the lens. Not the ability it has to depict reality, but the idea that it can do so. Crafted by humans, this tool is as fallible as we. The lens is no more an objective, unbiased eye than our own. This bias is theorised by New Zealand historian James Belich through a set of colours that tint the lens and how tangata whenua are viewed through them (Belich 21).

My interest is in the stereotypes generated through a deceptively more altruistic and noble framing of tangata whenua, through Belich's green and grey lenses. The green lens is a fabrication to contrast the European perceived weakness of their own cultural divorce from the natural world, while the grey lens mourns the decline of tangata whenua to the irreversible corruption of modern society. These framings are productive of the stereotypes the 'native at one with nature' and the 'old-time Māori' or 'relic of a dying race'. Embedded in New Zealand's cultural history, these stereotypes have entrenched the idea of a distinct separation between tangata whenua pre-contact and those in contemporary times. Dismissive of the innovative spirit of tangata whenua - the spirit which drove our ancestors to navigate the vastness of Te Moana-Nui a Kiwa, adapting to new lands and climates and ways of being - these demarcations between a tangata whenua identity 'at one with nature', and the cultural decline of the 'dying Maaori' constrains tangata whenua within limiting parameters of authenticity, separated from a cultural identity unspoiled by colonization, unable to be returned to.

Identifying the consistent biases within European accounts of tangata whenua pre- and early-European contact allows more nuanced readings beyond the over-simplified stereotypical, as well as lending us understanding into how these perceptions are generated and maintained. As romanticised notions of tangata whenua, these representations are constructions, invented as a solution (Barzun 14) by the coloniser and colonised against the dissolution of humanity's relationship with the natural world (Park 118). They are a

romanticized fabrication of a people that no longer are, that which is mourned as sacrifice to the inevitable advancement of civilisation. Positioning tangata whenua as belonging to the past entrenches the idea that the tenets of Western civilization are the natural progression of humanity, validating the advance of colonization. Unpacking the coloured biases of the colonial lens, however, makes apparent this justification, exposing the artifice of European representations of Indigenous peoples. These representations are evidently constructs, and as such, are viable to dismantling and reconstructing. Thus is the need for Maaori to tell our own stories in our own ways, to not only resist colonial fictions but de-construct them and re-build in their place Indigenous realities.

GENERATING MY OWN LENS

Recognising the lens as merely a tool in framing one's perception of the world leads me to consider how I might frame my own lens. My interest is less in viewing myself through a Maaori lens as it is in viewing myself through my own lens as Maaori. My questions then are how do I assert my control over the lens as an Indigenous person? How do I rework the conventions of lens-based portraiture practice to sit comfortably with myself, and the way I see and express my Indigeneity? (Barclay 7). For me, the avenue is through my body, the body that has been excluded from the categories of being Indigenous and Maaori, positioning it within histories and narratives that have shaped the way I am viewed by others and view myself. Disruptive and transgressive, I infiltrate the canon of western art history, inserting my body as substitute for the romanticized subject of the European gaze. Provocatively, I goad this gaze, confronting its desires, exposing its fantasies, and destabilizing its power.

Where the colonizing lens is determinative, seeking to objectify and categorize its subjects, my lens is imaginative, offering multiple perspectives, resisting definition and limitation. Far from being concerned with absolutes, my prerogative is what can the image, the identity of tangata whenua be? My lens is searching and explorative. It refuses completeness and certainty, embracing instead obscurity and ambiguity. It remains open to continuous



Fig. 1. *where do we come from | what are we | where are we going (after gauguin)*, personal work by the author, 2022, digital video still, no sound.

evolution. My practice is thus a space in which my identity is explored and considered, in ongoing, iterative conversation with itself and the contexts that have informed it.

RE-CODING THE NATIVE: PARODY, SIGNS, AND SIMULACRA

Reclaiming the imagery of Western Romantic art history, where the non-European subject was exoticized as an object of the colonial gaze (Berger), I position myself as a disruption within this canon. Remaining the artist as well as subject, I am the one who controls the lens and the one who is framed by it. Through the three-channel video work *where do we come from | what are we | where are we going (after gauguin)* (2022) I collapse these roles, considering relationships of power and the privileging of who gets to tell whose stories. This artwork is an exploration of my body as a colonial subject, confronting the ways Indigenous bodies have been coded 'native' by the colonial gaze and reattributing signs of Indigeneity through asserting my body as native.

3 videos play on loop, each projected onto its own wall, a quiet vignette of different scenes playing out. Appropriating Paul Gauguin's work of the similar title I slip into the position of the native, subject to the colonizing gaze. Multiples of my body – fair-skinned, Maaori, hairy, male – move and interact with each other across the 3 screens. Hushed whispering, knowing glances, silent companionship. The subjects sit and move with a stylized feminine grace, reflective of Western patriarchal stereotypes. Assuming the position of the romanticized subjects of Gauguin's colonial gaze, the female nude, I objectify myself as a male body, challenging perceptions of gender and playing with identifiers – my hair is long and my body soft, my face is bearded. My Maaoritanga, alongside the backdrop, situates this image in line with a history of Romanticism in Aotearoa and Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa. Images of the dusky maiden stereotype come to mind, though my body is neither 'dusky' nor 'maiden'. This antithetical objectification of the 'white' male body abruptly confronts perceptions of cultural identity and colonial powers.

Assuming the positions of stereotyped Pacific women as a fair-skinned male situates my artwork in the realm of parody. The relationship between my appropriative artwork

and Gauguin's painting raises considerations on who and what is being parodied. I am substituting my own fair-skinned, male, tangata whenua body in the place of brown-skinned Tahitian women, though I am not speaking for or about womanhood or femininity, or Tahitian experiences with French colonization. My point of critique is the ways colonial artworks frame Indigenous peoples and justify colonial expansion. In an analysis of drag performance, Queer theorist Judith Butler argues that drag, along with cross-dressing and butch/femme identities, is more than simple gender parody. Butler suggests that gender is a construction, a fabricated fantasy expressed through acts and gestures on the body suggestive of an illusory interior. If gender identity is a fabrication, then drag performance, which parodies both the expression and notions of this identity, is a parody of an idea of an original (Butler 185). Likewise, the subject of my parody is not that of the original, the colonised subject, but the *ideas* of the original - it is a parody of colonial notions of Indigeneity. Construct of a construct. Fantasy of a fantasy. Imitation of an imitation without a point of origin.

Parodying the idea continuously displaces the original artwork, opening it to resignification and recontextualisation. This departure is clarified through Queer theorist Jack Halberstam's reflection on the logic of the cover song. Halberstam notes that the cover song is a means of repositioning identity in relation to another – “the cover is... a way of inhabiting another persona or body or voice, and it is a way of doing so while self-consciously registering the performance rather than merely blending into the original” (Halberstam 231). Registering my performance as a contemporary, Indigenous person against Gauguin's 'natives' raises considerations of what constitutes an Indigenous identity.

Gauguin's painting is dependent on colonial notions of Indigeneity and Otherness. This work, along with many others of his oeuvre, recall more the works of European art history than the Tahiti it presents to be (Staszak 354). Expressing stereotypes of 'native at one with nature' and 'dusky maiden', Gauguin's painting speaks from European ideologies of an idyllic Pacific paradise where, in contrast to the people of his native France who “toil unceasingly just to subsist, struggling... against cold and hunger”, the “happy inhabitants of Oceania's unknown paradises, lead a blissful existence” (qtd. in Spitz 121). Gauguin, not

long after his initial trip to Tahiti, was then noted to lament, as many of his other colonial settler contemporaries across the globe, the adulteration of Moana peoples by colonial imposition (Nicholson 18). Completed near the end of his life, this painting is clearly a fabrication, indicative of Gauguin's relentless search for the native's paradise.

Gauguin's upended expectations and subsequent artworks are in large part due to what Lisa Taouma discusses as a repetition of signs and motifs that lead to a normalization that supersedes the real. Discussing the prevalence of the 'dusky maiden' trope, Taouma argues that the remnants of a colonial agenda in the Pacific have been normalized to 'commonplace', quoting Roland Barthes observation of this as "signs which do not look like signs" (Taouma 36). The signs of a colonial ideology – the Pacific as naive, untouched, and inviting – had become substitute for reality itself.

As simulations of reality, these signs are what French philosopher and theorist Jean Baudrillard refers to as the 'hyperreal', that which through repeated simulation extends beyond the reality of the original. It is no longer about the object, subject, or the substance – "it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 166). Increasingly displaced, simulations transcend into the realm of ideas while maintaining the disposition of a real. They operate within the order of artifice, their signs of authenticity masking the colonial ideologies that distort and invalidate subjective realities in favour of their own assumed universal truth and objectivity.

Though harmful and deeply entrenched, these simulacra and their beholden signs are reliant on fickle assumptions of objective truth. Te Maire Tau expresses,

"There can be no objective knowledge when the object of our knowledge is a subject or a potential subject... the subject's views on the matter are of the same weight as the views of the observer. For this reason, there can be nothing but a multiplicity of subjective views" (Tau 46).

Centring my body in the artwork collapses the relationship between colonial observer/artist and colonized subject, positioning experienced realities in relation to the simulated realities



Fig. 2. Paul Gauguin. *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 1897-1898, oil on canvas. www.wikiart.org/en/paul-gauguin/where-do-we-come-from-what-are-we-where-are-we-going-1897.



Fig. 3. *where do we come from | what are we | where are we going (after gauguin)*, personal work by the author, 2022, 3-channel digital video projection, no sound, install shot at *MEANWHILE* gallery.

presented through the Western art history canon. Privileging my experienced realities as Indigenous over the signs of such, I re-code the native body, disrupting the ideas of Indigenous, Moana identities maintained by stereotypes such as the dusky maiden. Where the dusky maiden wears little to no clothing, I present myself in the clothes of my every day, protecting my body from the penetrating gaze of colonialism. My clothes situate this artwork within a contemporary period while also acknowledging the reality of contemporary tangata whenua experience. I am reminded of Lindauer's paintings of tangata whenua, which were often created as doubles with one presenting the sitter in customary Indigenous clothing, and another in the European dress of the period. Where the former presents a tangata whenua identity that aligns with European standards of the authentic, the latter reflects the experienced reality of a culture and world that is "complex, shifting and dynamic in nature" (Clarke 240). Likewise, rather than lean into the ethnographic styles prevalent in the works of colonial artists, I reflect through my clothing this sustained complexity in a contemporary Indigenous identity, maintaining the dynamism of tangata whenua. Where the contemporary body might be adorned in kaakahu to simulate the appearance of an 'authentic' native, I opt to engage with the complexities of contemporary tangata whenua experiences instead.

Decisions around clothing and avoiding outward signifiers of Indigeneity are distinctive plays within the expectations of the colonial lexicon. Reliant on outward features of Otherness, colonial representations of Indigenous peoples are hollow and one-dimensional, more concerned with the form of Indigeneity than the substance. Reducing tangata whenua to simple, easily digestible tropes disregards the complexity of a culture whose ingenuity is instantiated in our cultural narratives, from our arrival in Aotearoa to the uptake of contemporary tools and technologies. It is this spirit that allows us to comfortably sit on the marae, recite karakia and waiata, then play video games or scroll Instagram and TikTok. We have no issue embracing a cultural identity within an ongoing continuum - it is colonial notions of authenticity that struggle to grapple with our complexity.

Operating within the language of the colonial gaze and disrupting colonial notions of objectivity and authenticity is part of a history that includes artist Yuki Kihara (Sāmoan,

Japanese) who speaks back to colonial photographs and reframes them as artist using their own body as subject. The first image in Kihara's triptych *Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman*, frames her as the dusky maiden, coded with all her typical signs – languidly reclining amongst lush foliage, bare brown skin and pert breasts, face passive and demure.



Fig. 4. Yuki Kihara, *Fa'afafine: In the Manner of a Woman*, 2022, triptych, pigment print on paper. www.milfordgalleries.co.nz/queenstown/exhibitions/10745-Yuki-Kihara-Faafafine-In-the-Manner-of-a-Woman.

As she gradually undresses in the next two images, Kihara's fa'afafine (Sāmoan third gender) identity is unveiled, pulling viewers between the binaries of gender so deeply entrenched in Western societies. Initially presenting an image in line with expectations of colonial imagery, Kihara craftily undermines the language of the colonizing lens while reclaiming her image as a Sāmoan woman. She works into the vernacular of colonialism and reveals it shallow. Beneath the veneer of colonial preoccupations is a much more nuanced, complex subject who asserts their agency with subtle but powerful reinterpretation.

DECOLONIZING THE LENS: ASSERTIONS OF AGENCY

Kihara's assertion of cultural agency aligns with methodologies of decolonizing the lens as explored by Māori filmmakers Merata Mita (Ngātiō Pīkiao, Ngāi Te Rangi) and Barry Barclay (Ngāti Apa). In her essay *The Soul of an Image*, Mita reflects on a process of filmmaking that actively involves the people whose lives and worldview are being presented

as more than mere subjects on the screen. Having members of the community in front of and behind the camera, consulting during filming and in the editing process, collapses the divide between passive subject and objective observer, ensuring the image of those being shared remains consistent with how they wish to be viewed. Mita identifies early in her essay that photographic and film reproductions of ancestors hold mana, offering to viewers “a window to the soul” (Mita 36). How appropriate, then, that those whose souls are on offer dictate the construction of the frames they are viewed through.

While this example of collaboration, where the principal voice is of the people being represented, gives a greater credibility of authenticity, the significance is more in the upholding of cultural agency and the political right to self-determination. As argued by H.B. Levine, self-determination is not about preserving a distinctive culture but exercising the political right to determine the aspects of said culture that are maintained, modified, or even outright abandoned (Levine 115). That is to say, to think of the centring of tangata whenua voices as means of expressing an authentic representation is reductive and equally harmful, falling into essentialist debates that operate as mechanisms of exclusion and fail to recognize the differing identities, politics, and behaviours of individuals within cultural groups (George 443; Webber 5). Reclamation of our image as tangata whenua through decolonising and indigenising the lens is an assertion of our political rights to self-determination that extend beyond solely our representation. Ultimately, it is a struggle for cultural autonomy paralleled in our struggles against dominant colonial histories and discourses that have stood to justify colonial subjugation and maintain colonial dominance (Pihama 242).

Barclay submits that to assert our agency with the lens, we must re-work and determine the “well-established rules”, adopting and modifying as we see fit to create images that sit comfortably within our cultures (Barclay 7). If we are to frame ourselves in our own image, we must seek alternate techniques in storytelling. Barclay discusses in his opening chapter ways he and his crew have adjusted conventional methods of filming to allow people to talk freely amongst themselves. Positioning of the camera, audio recording, slating/end slating are all considered in a way that transforms the lens into a listener, aligning more with a tangata whenua worldview. Barclay notes that it can be taxing on the crew,

requiring workarounds that run contrary to the typical manner of filming. When it comes to knowledge, however, – especially maatauranga Maaori – there is an understanding that must be acknowledged. Barclay puts it thus:

“As a Maori, you are taught to be a listener; you sit at the feet and open your ears. You have no “right to know”. The knowledge is gifted to you at appropriate times and in appropriate places. Those who do not have the patience and the humility to undergo this way of learning are unlikely to ever gain much of real depth” (Barclay 18).

Demonstrating proactive, as opposed to reactive, methods of engaging the lens, Mita and Barclay have forged a path that has made way for many other Maaori to assert agency in their representation as tangata whenua.

MULTIPLICITY: A DEPARTURE FROM ESSENTIALISM

With this understanding, I recognise myself within a continuum, a singular body that exists within a whakapapa extending into the past and future. I additionally acknowledge the continuum of self, the multiplicity that exists within the single body and the changes that I have and will experience. In my intersectionality, I am a composite of many selves - my Maaori self, my gendered self, my Queer self - and I look to them to help me understand who I am. I am conflicted at times amidst the tumult that can be the interrogation of identity politics. I find myself settled, however, within the poetic words of Walt Whitman who asked and answered, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself; I am large – I contain multitudes” (Whitman 781). I too am large and contain multitudes. At times, this largeness seems too much for my single body to contain, so it leaks out filling the spaces I fabricate in my practice. These multiple selves engage each other, exploring the questions that frame my experience as a contemporary, urban tangata whenua. They allow me to sit comfortably with myself and the contradictions I embody.

Édouard Glissant, in conversation with Manthia Diawara, remarked: “For me every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity” (Diawara 2). This reflection arose while crossing the Atlantic, reflecting on the departure of African slaves, through forced diaspora, and their return as free entities. Glissant adds that in this passage they gained not only freedom, but multiplicity.

I reflect on my own passage. The point of departure and the place of return. For Glissant, departure is the moment of leaving a point of unity to one of multiplicity. This is not to discount the value of unity – it has its place, in moments of suffering. Aside from these instances, however, Glissant advocates against holding onto a singularity, instead pushing for a move toward multiplicity. For me, this is to embrace a move beyond reductive, essentialist narratives of Maaori and embrace a more ambiguous identity, one explored free from the constraints of the “unity of the all enslaving will” (Diawara 2).

A MORE AMBIGUOUS WAY OF SEEING

the sitters (2022) are a diptych and triptych depicting close cropped black and white portraits of indistinguishable subjects. The diptych, *sitters #2*, is a mirrored set of portraits of two people facing outward from each other, little more than just below the shoulder to knee visible. Within a tight, close-cropped framing, their hands are the focus of the image, resting on legs blanketed by a large skirt. Fronds of kawakawa and mauku are held respectively in their hands. The triptych, *sitters #1*, shows three subjects - one presumably male, flanked by 2 presumably female subjects who sit turned toward the centre figure. Clothed similarly in stiff, starched collared shirts under a sweater, it is little more than a skirt worn by the female subjects that differentiates them. They sit headless, the frame cropping in on their collars to just below their knees. Held in their hands are feathers, leather glove, and a walking stick held by the man.

Referencing studio photographic conventions of the late 19th/early 20th century, these images are embedded with signs that code them within a time long passed. Presented in black and white, the photographs simulate aesthetics of photographs of tuupuna, such as



Fig. 5. *sitters #1*, personal work by the author, 2022, triptych, digital photograph.



Fig. 6. *sitters #2*, personal work by the author, 2022, diptych, digital photograph.

those shot by European settler photographers the Foy Brothers and Elizabeth Pulman. Tightly cropping the images, I have been carefully selective in which elements I draw focus to to intensify these signs. Using an 85mm lens I am able to photograph my subjects at an incredibly shallow depth of field, narrowing the distance between viewer and subject while also bringing into sharp focus the qualities I want viewers to engage with most. Narrowing this distance brings viewers into a more intimate engagement with the subjects – their presence is unavoidable as well as unnerving. Their incompleteness leaves wanting for suggestions of personhood and familiarity. The signs they are coded with become landmarks in navigating their identity and therefore our relationship to them.

The signs, however, are but a trap, a device used to mislead viewers responses within expectations typical toward this type of imagery. Playful subterfuge and poking fun at audience expectations is a stratagem employed by many artists speaking to topics of colonial dominance and resulting paradigms that maintain cultural stagnancy. As explored previously, colonial stereotypes, while dominant and intrusive in their reach, are rife with contradiction. Through acts of trickery, these holes in the colonial narrative can be worked with and exposed, re-appropriated to fulfil a decolonizing agenda and confront colonized perceptions of Indigeneity and cultural authenticity.

Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda takes advantage of viewers expectations around cultural and national identity and notions of gender, confronting their biases and leaving them to resolve the accompanying discomfort. In his work *Poderosa de Bom Jesus* (2006), first glance appears to show a woman wearing traditional Angolan dress. Typical of documentary photography, viewers are shown a traditional Africa while specifically Angolan viewers can see themselves and their culture represented. Kia Henda expresses, however, that the work is made to be a trap for narrow-minded views of Africa (Tate). Further inspection reveals that the subject is male and that the traditional dress is not entirely so. Amongst the traditional beadwork and headdress, the subject wears high-heeled shoes. For Kia Henda, humour emerges through the subversion, the moment where viewers realize they have been tricked. Shifting and juxtaposing seemingly oppositional cultural elements, Kia Henda challenges rigid ideas of cultural identity opting for a broader, more inclusive view.



Fig. 7. Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Poderosa de Bom Jesus*, 2006, www.researchgate.net/figure/Kiluanji-Kia-Henda-Poderosa-de-Bom-Jesus-Digital-photograph-mounted-on-aluminium-2006_fig4_301742710

Similar traps lie within *the sitters*. The clothing and posing alludes to a historical period, the removed glove a sign of colonial dress, the feathers a sign of Indigeneity. Kawakawa and mauku, indigenous flora, respectively signal death and life from a Maaori worldview, conjuring memories of tangihanga and powhiri. Disruptive moments though, are held furtively within their resting hands. Sharp reflected glints of light catch the viewers eye revealing a mobile phone, sleek and plasticky, and earphones wound around fingers like a rosary. These anachronisms fracture the suspended disbelief of the images' place in time, bringing it jarringly into the present and contrasting colonial notions of an authentic culture against contemporary realities. This is merely the beginning of the disruptions, the tricks that challenge viewers expectations and notions of gender, culture, time, and memory. An extension of previous explorations with simulacrum and uncovering the real, the authentic, *the sitters* ventures further into realms of ambiguity, expanding my practice into a space between borders and boundaries where uncertainty presides.

TRICKSTER, FAKER, MISCHIEF MAKER

In this realm of ambiguity, Trickster reigns. That ancient archetype driven to roam and wander, defying convention and driving innovation. Manifestation of duality and subversive irony, the Trickster is the ambassador of liminality, resistant to being contained and bound, always on the move. This is the spirit of our Moana ancestor Māui, whose insatiable curiosity and oft-times mischievous exploits led to new lands and ways of living and being. Recipients of the Trickster spirit, *the sitters* is naturally disposed against definitive categorization. Lewis Hyde notes that Tricksters are boundary-crossers as well as boundary creators. Sometimes they are drawing the line, crossing it, and at other times moving or even completely erasing it. In any case, where there is a boundary, Trickster will be found (Hyde 7). It is at the intersection of boundaries that we meet the sitters. Within this liminal conjunction we find them sitting – thus their name. Though Tricksters are driven to wander and wonder, motivated by their curiosity to investigate that which doesn't add up, I'm sure with all their playful trickery they too must rest. Our encounter is mediated through a boundary, defined by the border of the frame through which we view them. A type of portal. This space, beyond the logic of our own realm, exists in ambiguity. Ensnared in the liminal space, at the intersection of boundaries, these ambassadors of Trickster spirit construct through manipulation of signs a shifting space that defies and resists categorization. Natalie Robertson notes that "Tricksters may undertake to provoke and stir to invent and test boundaries, despite a dogged determination to resist being fenced in" (Robertson 21). They knowingly code themselves with particular signifiers that assign them to easily identifiable categories. These signs are then disrupted by contradictions and anachronisms that recode and recontextualize. The subject of this recoding and recontextualizing, however, is not the sitters but the viewers. Seated formally, yet at ease with themselves, the sitters have no desire to reshape their world. they sit comfortably in liminality. Tricksters, Jessicoco Hansell states, are "the epitome of 'both/and', meaning they can easily (even festively) encompass two truths or extremes within the one ambiguous ambassador" (Hansell 3). Trickster happily embodies duality. Intersecting with this consciousness, *the sitters* blurs boundaries, shifting

between binaries with casual proficiency. The challenge is laid before viewers to embrace this ambiguity.

Working within that spirit, *the sitters* is a bringing together of elements I have gathered in my own wandering and wondering, presented for viewers to be confronted by and reconcile. Printed on metallic paper, the images have a slight reflective surface. Facing the artwork means facing a little of yourself. My practice is often facilitated as a mirror for myself, to explore the intersections of my identity, how they meet and interact and fashion who I am. These works operate similarly, though as a mirror for others. The artwork is reflecting the image of the viewer back at them to remind them that they are part of this conversation, a collaborative agent in the work. All the contradictions the artwork holds are prevalent in our societies, our histories, our own selves. *the sitters* and I only bring these together for viewers to resolve. As Hansell additionally states of the Trickster,

“They themselves do not care for the splintering theatre they cause, or the baggage of being ‘paradoxical’. This is for those outside of themselves to reconcile with. The trickster archetype is merely the unassuming goader or curator” (Hansell 7).

While those of the Trickster archetype stir up trouble, often positioning themselves right amongst it, they exist comfortably within it. The sitters sit at ease in their paradoxical ambiguity. The onus is on viewers to resolve their expectations and the conflicts that they are met with.

SHAPESHIFTER, MULTIPLIER: GENDER AND MULTIPLICITY

Many of the tricks and disruptions are withheld directly from the audience’s knowledge. despite this, there is a sense that things are not as they seem. When first presenting this artwork at *play_station* gallery as part of the group exhibition *Takitini* (2022), I observed audience responses which ranged from indifference to some seeming settled in whatever conclusions they had arrived at. Others responded with confusion and surprise, to even

discomfort at the work's incongruous nature. Many expressed interest in who the subjects are. It was suspected that the two subjects of the diptych and the outer two of the triptych were the same person in their respective artworks, the mirroring leading to that conclusion. The feminine coding, through the skirt and posing, of the subjects in the diptych and flanking subjects of the triptych led many to believe another of my tricks, the illusion of gender and multiple subjects. Where it was believed that *the sitters* presents four women and a male subject, it is, in actuality, a series of self-portraits. Presenting myself performing within the binaries of gender norms, I once again play on viewers expectations.

It is hard to say what gendered poses and gestures I specifically performed, beyond the simple and obvious 'man-spreading' and placement of hands. When exploring and performing identity before the lens, I adopt the persona of the subjects I am simulating. This simulation comes from a point of multiplicity, drawing on an intersection of identities. Viewing the images after cropping out their faces, my face, an anonymity arose. I found even myself, the artist, convinced that these people were not me, not even the same person. The energies they expressed had enough variance to be individualized.

Shapeshifting between different genders and personas as the sitters, I return to ideas of the singular and multiple self. Tracey McIntosh (iwi) states that a Maaori identity is inextricably caught up with other identifications, forming an intersection of identities that speak to multiple realities. "To be Maori is to be part of a collective but heterogenous identity, one that is enduring but ever in a state of flux" (qtd in McIntosh 39). McIntosh considers (as opposed to describes) a few different expressions of Maaori identity – a 'fixed', 'traditional' identity, a 'fluid', fusion/hybrid identity, and a 'forced' identity distorted by conditions of depravity. Just a few expressions of an identity in flux, these identifications reflect some of the ways that identity and representation is determined by both outside and inside forces. The 'fixed' identity is reactive, maintaining an identity of a 'traditional' Maaori in resistance to colonial imposition. 'Fluid' identities are more of a self-expression outside external influences, considering cultural fusions/hybridity as a forming of a culturally de-centred identity. In no way outside the parameters of colonial influence, this does consider more the expression of a singular self in relation to the collective. The final identity McIntosh

explores is one primarily determined by outside forces, and is the realm where stereotype prevails. Though overly simplified and too easily categorized to be wholly reflective of experienced realities, these explorations do raise considerations of politics of agency and resistance.

the sitters is a marker of this complex reality for Maaori, having to negotiate between multiple identities, some which may not sit so comfortably next to each other but are nevertheless an experienced reality for many. Inhabiting different forms speaks to the ways that many Maaori often shift between various identities as a form of survival. Alongside my Maaori self there is my gendered self, my queer self, and the many other selves sitting at the intersect of various identifications – class, age, religious affiliation, political alignments, familial ties, occupation, personal interests. Depending on where I am and who I am with, these various identities shift and expand to varying degrees, the infinite combination of identities expressing an infinite number of selves. Multiplicity is a theme that I have explored and worked with for the last few years, though the way it is expressed in *the sitters* marks a definitive shift. Heightening the ambiguity of the subjects though cropping their heads, the believability of their identities between singular and collective is extended and blurred. They visibly shift between multiple subjects while being multiple expressions of one.

This employed method is dependent on conventional expectations to suspend viewers disbelief. Playing on dominant notions of what constitutes authentic representations, I toe the boundary between ‘real’ and ‘false’ copies, bringing together what has enough of the components or signs to constitute a semblance of the real, while leaving trace of its construction to reveal its illusion. Maintaining an avenue into this realization is what distinguishes my practice. It is paramount that this path to distinction always be prevalent to ensure the critique is evident and thoughtless repetition of aesthetic values is avoided. Allowing viewers those moments of realization are the springing of the trap, the moment where viewers are apparent to their being tricked. The trick is not cruel, however. There is no intentional malice. In fact, it is maintaining the avenue to accessing the trick, the farce of the image, that betrays the kindness of the work. Like a harmless prank, it is a way to



Fig. 8. *sitters #1*, personal work by the author, 2022, triptych, digital photograph on metallic paper mounted on foam board, install shot at *play_station* gallery.

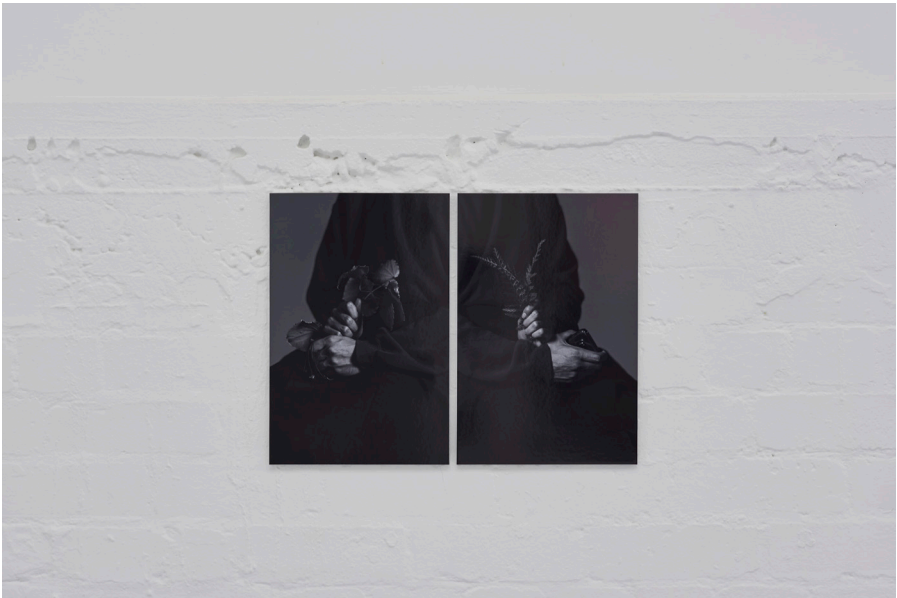


Fig. 9. *sitters #2*, personal work by the author, 2022, triptych, digital photograph on metallic paper mounted on foam board, install shot at *play_station* gallery.

poke fun at someone, laugh with them at our foolishness (for Trickster too is susceptible to being duped), then return with a more serious engagement. Humour is used as a gentler, kinder way to face heavy, uncomfortable truths and consider ways forward that humble without humiliating. As Suzanne Lundquist notes, “because of the comic rather than tragic intention of Trickster discourse, survival in an often hostile world is made possible” (qtd. in Robertson 15).

These playful subversions are my way of engaging viewers in conversation, exposing dominant perceptions formed by Eurocentric conventions as displaced falsehoods, too removed from a source of origin to be true. While this can be confronting, it is through a humorous flipping of ‘reality’ that the sitters invite. Disrupting the conventions that viewers are familiar with brings them into the liminal space that the sitters are occupying, asking them to reflect on how colonial histories inform our image.

MEASURES OF TIME: DISRUPTING COLONIAL LOGICS AND STEPPING INTO THE CURRENTS OF MAAORI TIME

Working with colonial imagery of late 19th/early 20th century studio portrait photography, references to histories and the archive is apparent. Presented in black and white, the photographs sit within a period located in the past, reinforced by ambiguously historical clothing.

Held within this colonial visual language are the notions of a fixed Maaori identity. A widespread practice of European studio portrait photographers was to depict Maaori sitters in customary clothing, kaakahu, and adorned and posed with taonga Maaori. Despite the fact that many Maaori had adopted European styles of dress, it was common for artists such as Lindauer to present sitters in an ethnographic style prevalent of the time. Amongst Lindauer’s oeuvre, however, are a number of paintings depicting Maaori sitters in European dress. Chanel Clarke refers to the painting of Karawhira Kapu whose dress is an example of complex, interracial relationships between tangata whenua and Paakehaa (Kapu was married to William Moon, a settler of Cambridge). With little in her clothing or adornment

to suggest a tangata whenua heritage besides her gold-capped greenstone earrings and lines of taa moko around her lips, Kapu's representation reflects the early years of transformative change within Maaori society, even before a more formalized colonization set in (Clarke 239). This perspective shifts the narrative of Maaori radically adapting to a diffusion of colonial influence as a means of survival to one that considers the agency of Maaori and their complex exchange and relationship with Paakehaa. Likewise, I choose to reflect a narrative that acknowledges the complex, dynamic, shifting nature of being Maaori, particularly within the multiplicity of a contemporary experience.

Amidst the colonial language of *the sitters* is a series of subtleties that begin to unravel viewers expectations around the image. The skirt suddenly seems less historical, and even less skirt, its material too synthetic, the texture reminiscent of a contemporary rain jacket. Pulled from my own wardrobe, the clothing of my every day is able to appear as period costuming. Another trick to tug viewers between binaries, holding them in liminality. Within the artworks, as an encounter between the historical and contemporary takes place, time collapses in on itself. Carl Mika (Tuhourangi, Ngāti Whanaunga) presents the Maaori philosophy of time as non-linear, as being “interlocked or co-present with all other time” (Mika 103). Outside Western assumptions of linear time, Maaori philosophies hold that something can be both the source of origin as well as part of a continuity. One thing can form another thing, as well as be formed by that thing. Existing within an expansive whakapapa, all things reverberate in relation to each other. Hana Burgess (Ngāpuhi, Te Roroa, Te Ātihaunui a Pāpārangi, Ngāti Tūwharetoa) and Te Kahuratai Painting (Ngāti Manu, Ngāpuhi) expand on this idea, locating the present as merely a fleeting point of interaction between the past and future (Burgess and Painting 218). This meeting of time fosters an intergenerational relationship that decentres Western notions of time, the present, the importance of self, and the idea of a centre entirely. One is immersed in whakapapa. At this conjunction of times, we share our vision with tuupuna and mokopuna. Looking to mokopuna with tuupuna, we act in ways that will shape their future, while with mokopuna we look to and maintain our relationship with generations that have passed before. How this looks can only be visualized through cultural self-determination, letting this collapse of

linear time extend into a collapse of essentialist models of cultural identity. Looking with tuupuna and mokopuna into the past and future, what Burgess and Paintings identify as onamata/anamata, puts us in a better position to assert cultural agency in determining how we allow for a continuation of an innovative and progressive culture whilst maintaining the ground of our unique set of cultural knowledges and values. As Burgess and Painting figuratively put it,

“Each generation coexists like droplets immersed in the ocean of time. Knowledge of whakapapa allows us to navigate the intergenerational currents that constitute this ocean of never ending beginnings. Through onamata, anamata each generation can traverse these waters, put down an anchor, and take in the view. This is a Māori futurism” (Burgess and Painting 219).

Within the individual bodies of *the sitters* is a meeting between past and future that engages a non-linear perspective of time, reviewing the notions of time, change, and continuity that locate and preserve essentialist ideas of tangata whenua identity. Placed in a time outside of our own, one that is very Eurocentric, they exist outside the parameters set by the influence of ours. Rangī Mātāmua (Tūhoe) discusses how time is not apolitical and the single system of time enforced by colonisation acts to unite its colonies under a cohesion of industry, religion, and politics (Mātāmua 66). to be outside of our systems of time, or to sit in an ambiguous space that confuses and disrupts these systems, is to be outside of or disrupt the industry, religious, and political systems upheld by this standardisation. *the sitters* disrupts not only Western perceptions of time, but also the systems that shape and maintain them. Working outside assumed philosophies of linear time is a refusal of causal logics.

Where a linear model sees the future as influenced by causation of the past, a Maaori philosophy, which holds that the past is concurrently formed by the future, may be out of reach, seemingly illogical. This assumption aligns with the Western belief that the future is not fully available to us, a circumstance beyond our reach. I suggest, however, that the past holds to the same, remaining solely in our memory, whether documented or not, and is therefore similarly intangible and unavailable. Tau states that the past does not exist outside our imaginations. History is not a true translation of reality, rather a

composite documentation of what others thought happened (Tau 52). Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa) expresses similarly that “the relationship one may hold to preceding generations remains largely imagined - or even learned and then imagined” (Te Ao 41). Therefore, recognising the Western model of linear time as being built on imaginings displaces causal logics and their ties to reality. That is, the past is equally as distant, equally as imagined, equally as removed from reality as the future. In that sense, it would not be so unreasonable to build an identity from imaginings of the future. One need not be restricted to the past when determining a cultural expression of identity. Time existing within the imaginary makes available new realms from which the self can be explored and expressed.

TRANSCENDENTAL REALMS: NEW SPACE AND TIME THROUGH INDIGENOUS FUTURISM

the sitters marks a definitive shift in my practice, one that moves away from direct simulation of colonial artworks to a more ambiguous play with signifiers of identity. This expansion leaves me to consider how I might continue to explore contemporary Māori identity, reassessing my relationship to the historical art canon I have so closely worked with for the last few years. This is not to suggest a complete refusal of these precedents, for there is a part of me that enjoys the romanticism, the absurdity of colonial fancies masquerading as real. Perhaps we need some distance, though, my colonizers and I.

Looking to queer Tangata Moana arts collective FAFSWAG, I consider how Indigenous identities might be envisioned outside colonial distortions whilst remaining relevant to contemporary experiences. Frequently traversing the realms of *atua* and the otherworldly, the collective transcend Western linear logics of time and space, engaging ideas of Indigenous Futurisms to imagine Tangata Moana realities outside colonial influence. Through Indigenous aesthetics and ideologies tied into science fiction, Indigenous Futurism makes available new ways of reading our ancient nature (Fricke 109). Transcending colonial strictures, Indigenous Futurisms express the “continuation of a spiritual and cultural path that remains unbroken by genocide and war” (Dillon 2).



Fig. 10. Tanu Gago and Jermaine Dean, *ATUA*, 2022, AR installation, twitter.com/FAFSWAG/status/1481495202192068608/photo/1.

Manifesting queer Tangata Moana identities within a continuum of technological development, Tanu Gago (Sāmoa) and Jermaine Dean (Māori) voyage deeper into digital realms through experimentation with developing AR technologies. Their digital sculpture *ATUA* connects physical, digital, and spiritual worlds to restore queer and non-binary identities within a Moana heritage. *ATUA* presents a cosmological being, their body adorned with Indigenous markings. Te Kore, the primordial being, The Great Nothingness, The Empty Void. Returning to the origin of all things, *ATUA* collapses contemporary realities with a time and space beyond the colonial realities Indigenous peoples confront on the regular.

Te Kore is identified by Moana Nepia (Ngāti Porou) as a space of potentiality. Te Kore is the realm precursive to the multi-layered realm of night, Te Pō, through which evolves Te Ao Mārama, the realm of light (Nepia 32). This context of Te Kore is expanded through the thoughts of tohunga Mohi Ruatapu (Ngāti Porou) who situates Te Kore within a whakapapa, as opposed to an established point or source of origin. Nepia argues that Te Kore is thus not only part of our whakapapa, but a continuing link between past and present (Nepia 45). Existing outside Western limitations of time, Te Kore as a source of creative potential is accessible within a continuity.

the sitters manifests a space for me to engage this potential. Sitting in a space of collapsed time, I position myself within a continuity where historical, contemporary, and future identities are constructed and reconstructed in iterative generation. The artwork is not definitive, my image is not restrained to categorisation. It is allowed ongoing evolution, shifting through various contexts.

In reflection on the *SaVAge K'lub* (est. 2010), an ongoing installation and performance work in response to the gentleman's clubs that exoticized Moana cultures, Rosanna Raymond (Sāmoa, Tuvalu, French, Irish) states,

“We are not looking at it through the past, we are looking at it through the now. We use [the K'lub] as a space of exploration and investigation but also a learning of new skills where a group of people come together to share” (Stephens).

It is through this lens that Indigenous identities are asserted and affirmed in opposition to colonial dominance. When our lens is directed and constrained within the past, we fix ourselves outside the continuum of cultural development, limiting ourselves to historical identities. Looking exclusively to the future similarly displaces us from the relevance and relativity of the now. Through Indigenous Futurisms, Indigenous models of time and space are privileged, affording greater agency in expressing cultural identity that maintains contemporary relevance, whilst acknowledging being part of a continuum.



Fig. 11. Sione Monu, *Only Yesterday*, 2020, digital video, sound. artspace-aotearoa.nz/exhibitions/sovereign-pacific-pacific-sovereigns-with-rangituhia-hollis-ana-iti-alex-monteith-sione-monu-and-gary-ross-pastrana.

In the moving image artwork of Sione Monū (Tonga), *Only Yesterday*, an alternate modern Tonga is presented where queer Indigenous sovereignty is expressed through the mundane lives of two leifī. Situated in a parallel world to our own, distinctions between realities are distinguished by the bright beaded headpieces the leifī wear. Glistening and shimmering, they refract imaginings of an uninhibited queer Tangata Moana identity. Monū’s film is more than merely expressive of their hopes and desires for the future of queer Tangata Moana – its significance lies in its expression of queer Tangata Moana sovereignty in the *now*. The alternate reality of *Only Yesterday* is positioned close to our own. The technology is the same, the landscapes and everyday activities of the leifī identical. Monū aligns the Indigenous Futurism of their world with our own, grounding fantasies within experienced realities.

Viewed through Indigenous frameworks, the past and future are not restricted to times that have gone and are to come. They are experienced simultaneously in an ocean of flowing tides and currents. Andrea Carlson (Minnesota Chippewa) notes that, more than a section of a timeline, “the future, or the idea of the future, is an unoccupied space, or a space in theory only” (Carlson). This is a space to be explored with the innovative spirit of my ancestors, the spirit that drove them across the vast ocean, Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa, to new lands and ways of being.

The ambiguous realm of *the sitters* leaves me wondering where my wanderings take me next. Perhaps it is deeper into the currents of whakapapa that lap against this queer, fair-skinned, male body, allowing space for my ancient and contemporary self to embrace. Cassandra Barnett (Raukawa, Pākehā), discussing the intersect of customary-taonga-objects and contemporary-art-objects, argues that when brought into proximity they beget “new questions, new understandings and new dynamics to form” (Barnett 25). I accept the same for myself within an expansive and evolving whakapapa. The meeting of my multiple selves mediates for new expressions of Maaori identity, constantly shifting and evolving in line with the dynamic legacy of our cultural heritage. Within the realm that is Indigenous Futurisms all time and new space is made available, immersing my multiple selves within a continuity. It is here that my Maaori self is affirmed and empowered.

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