Ontology, data and dissonance

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Installation of Te Ara Wairuia showing Dr Te Huirangi Eruera Waikerepuru ,CNZM, Mereiwa Broughton , Te Urutahi Waikerepuru, and Tengaruru Wineera on screen in the Octagon Gallery at UCL, 17 June, 2014.

My comment here emerges from a research project, *Te Ara Wairua*: *pathways of the intangible*, a collaboration between myself, Stuart Foster and Kura Puke of Massey University and Te Matahiapo Research Organization in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our project has explored the tensions between utopian discourses of connection, digital mediation, and the ways in which we define and use digital objects. We have tracked relations (or in Maori, the web of interconnectivity, *whakapapa*) as they exist within digital objects, are mediated through screens, through software platforms and the realities of cellular and broadband connections. Here I want to draw a parallel between some anthropological discourses of ontology and the worlds constructed through, within, and by digital technologies. I am interested in ethnographic questions of how digital mediation works and what kind of world it produces. These questions interconnect with contemporary discussions of multiple worlds, or ontologies (for instance in Salmond's argument that relational databases can mirror Maori relations in ontological terms (Salmond 2014). However, I hope to provide here a fresh perspective on some of these debates from the vantage points of a cross-cultural engagement with a digital media that works imperfectly and suggests its own limitations.

Debates around mediation – the impact of form on content - question whether digital technologies are either tools to assist in the reproduction of existing

cultural structures, or are cultural structure themselves that influence the reproduction of social worlds. These debates complicate discussions of multiple ontologies in that they fracture the representational hegemonies that the concept of ontology seems to hinge upon, whether we posit one or many reality. In an early review (Geismar 2011) I challenged the reliance of theories of being within some proponents of the so-called ontological turn (in this case Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007) on the interpretive framework of language in order to paradoxically critique the very concept of (linguistic) representation. Code is a particular kind of operative or performative language that might be seen as a meta-object within these discussions. I propose it as a palliative to master categories, such as ontology itself, which emerge fundamentally from the representational repertoire of speech or text. Like language, code is always subsumed within a recursive representational field. Unlike language, code defines not only what there is, it also always establishes its own outside – the system that it works within. Unlike the theorizations of ontology, the fundamental question asked by and of software code is not does it exist, but does it work? The issue of whether software or technologies will work, presupposes the possibility that they may *not* work according to our expectations, that they might break, or break down. What does it mean for conversations about being and interpretation to take place within a representational field that itself is both pre-determined and which at the last minute, might in fact fail?

Te Ara Wairua is a Maori term meaning "pathways of spiritual or intangible energy". Our Project focuses on a Maori *Kakahu*, a cloak of finely woven flax, wool, and dog hair, in UCL's Ethnography Collection. Originally collected by the Wellcome Institute, the cloak came to UCL sometime in the mid-twentieth century. Marked only as "Maori", the cloak has no known provenance. We do know that it must have been a special taonga, a Maori treasure, and possibly because of its small size woven for a child.

With a background in designing virtual environments and a long standing practice of connecting through light and sound to Maori taonga, Kura and Stuart's intention was to "bring the UCL cloak into the light" and to bathe it with energy from Aotearoa New Zealand. Working closely with the Taranaki based Te Matiahiapo Research Organization they wanted to connect the cloak to a living Maori community. Throughout our project, in conjunction with Te Matahiapo, the term *wairua*, meaning spiritual energy, has been used as both a synonym and an encompassing term for the digital. Just as digital communication media largely exists as wireless waves of information, transmitted all around us, so too do Taonga create networks of connectivity across both space and time. The connection of this cloak, through broadband and cellular activity, to people both in London and New Zealand was therefore not framed as something new, but as a continuation of the kind of work that taonga are supposed to do – to link people, activate and maintain connections and networks of knowledge and sociality.

Having worked remotely, through skype, for over a year, Kura and Stuart came

to England in June 2014. On June 17, we created a ceremonial environment in UCL's Octagon gallery. The gallery was transformed into a marae and we were welcomed by Dr Te Huirangi Eruera Waikerepuru, Mereiwa Broughton, Te Urutahi Waikerepuru, Tengaruru Wineera, who were at the Matahiapo Research Centre, in the Wharenui Te Ururongo, Pouakai, at the foot of Mount Taranaki on the North Island of New Zealand. As guests, representatives of UCL Anthropology, Museums and Collections and Ngati Ranana, the London Maori club, were ushered in by a karanaga or call, into the space, to stand before the cloak, and before the elders who then spoke with chants (karakia) and song (waiata) to us. Instead of the traditional hongi, the sharing of breath, we breathed onto a gift (Koha), a woven basket of from my fieldwork in Vanuatu, which was later returned to Taranaki.

The event contained the usual tensions that activate any ritual and make it crackle with social energy. Yet for much of the *powhiri*, whilst we could be heard perfectly in New Zealand, in London we were unable to hear all of the words of the chanting and invocations due to bad cellular connectivity. As an interaction designer, Stuart started from the assumption that the technology in this project should be invisible, allowing us the perception of an unmediated perfect connection between London and Taranaki. He talked about how the medium (facetime, ipads and iphones) disappear, facilitating a pure connectivity that might be able to overwrite the history of this cloak which had placed it thousands of miles away from its communities of origin. In later conversations we wondered if there was however even more significance to the lack of sound, or the stilting quality of the connection as we experienced it from our end. Perhaps the "failings" of technology at the powhiri, and the ways that it kept reminding us of its presence evoked exactly the situation we were in – a brave attempt to recreate a connection that can never be fully salvaged, to work across a distance that is still present, that still remains, to work across interpretive gaps in language, cosmology, within the interstices of colonial history.

At the end of the several weeks of exhibiting the cloak in UCL's North Lodge, Te Urutahi in another Facetime session, equally as impoverished by a bad cellular connection, gave the cloak a name. We shifted from the North Lodge of UCL, to the nearby Geography department so that we could better hear her tell us that the cloak will now be called **Tuktuku Roimata** evoking**:** "The tears of the ancestors from the spiritual realm interwoven and connecting us with the physical realm through the Korowai". These tears recognize the absence of the cloak from a known *whakapapa* (genealogy) as much as they celebrate the emergence of new webs of connection. This name captures both the celebratory qualities of connection brought forth by the communicative possibilities of digital technologies and is also a lament for that which cannot be recovered or reconnected.

I do not have the space here to go into all the questions raised by even just this part of the project but I ask here about how we may talk about ontology within a representational field that seems whole but is only partial or which presents

itself as both representational and a priori? How do we understand knowledge systems that are rendered illegible to us, partly through the technologies of our own knowledge systems?

Manovich considers software to be "a layer that permeates all areas of contemporary societies" (2013: 15) and which is increasingly constitutive of all cultural production. Looking, ethnographically perhaps, at how these technologies work in practice, and often, how they don't work so perfectly, exposes the gap between the paradoxical theorization of ontology and a more dissonant theory of being. I propose we unmoor ontology from its representational fields, and that a focus on the dissonance of data, and the way it acts as, or is brought into unique being as only a partial representational field might provide a charter through the murky waters of ontological indecision, enabling us to apprehend and appreciate difference as constituent part of what there is.

References:

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