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**TRANSMEDIA ARTS ACTIVISM AND LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION:
CRITICAL DESIGN, ETHICS AND PARTICIPATION
IN THIRD DIGITAL DOCUMENTARY**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

FILM AND DIGITAL MEDIA

by

Anita Wen-Shin Chang

June 2016

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures iv

Abstract vi

Dedication viii

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1

CHAPTER

1 A Discourse of “Image Sovereignty”: Variations on an Ideal/Image of Native Self-representation	15
2 Digital Documentary Praxis: <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	45
3 An Essay on Editing <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	93
4 Networked Audio-Visual Culture and New Digital Publics	123
5 Documentary and Online Transmediality: <i>Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue</i>	166

Conclusion 228

Supplemental File 235

Bibliography 236

Filmography 254

LIST OF FIGURES

1.	228 Hand-in-Hand Rally, Northern Taiwan (Central News Agency)	2
1.1.	Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack during the production of <i>Grass</i>	18
1.2.	Animated map of disputed territory in <i>You Are On Indian Land</i>	24
1.3.	Mike Mitchell speaks to Canadian government representatives in <i>You Are On Indian Land</i> .	27
1.4.	Mike Mitchell and protestors speak with Cornwall police.	29
1.5.	Cornwall police force protestors into cars heading to jail.	29
1.6.	Still from <i>You Are On Indian Land</i>	31
1.7.	Still from <i>You Are On Indian Land</i>	32
2.1.	Co-directors meet in Honolulu: Kainoa Kaupu, An-Chi Chen, Apay Ai-Yu (translator) Tang, Shin-Lan Yu, and Hau'oli Waiau	64
2.2.	The film crew visits the Ke Kula 'o Nāwa-hiōkalani 'ōpu'u (Living Hawaiian Life-Force School), a K-12 immersion school in Hilo on the Big Island.	65
2.3.	Aboriginal Culture Village in <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	88
2.4.	Shin-Lan Yu at the Taroko National Park Museum in <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	89
2.5.	Shin-Lan Yu interviews her mother at their family tribal shop in <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	89
3.1.	Aboriginal Culture Village in <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	116
3.2.	Aboriginal Culture Village in <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	116

3.3.	Aboriginal Culture Village in <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	116
3.4.	Aboriginal Culture Village in <i>Tongues of Heaven</i>	119
4.1.	<i>Planet Tonga</i> Website	147
4.2.	Visitors create and upload onto <i>The Wall</i> at the Te Papa Museum.	149
4.3.	<i>Marokot 88news.org</i> Website	152
4.4.	<i>IsumaTV</i> Website	161
5.1.	<i>Root Tongue</i> Web Application	168
5.2.	<i>StoryCorps</i> Website	183
5.3.	Classical Logo	209
5.4.	Raw Logo	209
5.5.	Modern Logo	210
5.6.	Plant Logo	210
5.7.	System Logo	210
5.8.	Video Clip Topics	212
5.9.	<i>Learning to Love You More</i> Web Archive	214
5.10.	<i>Root Tongue</i> Video Clip	216
5.11.	<i>Root Tongue</i> Prompt	216
5.12.	<i>Root Tongue</i> Upload Interface	217
5.13.	<i>Root Tongue</i> Community Gallery Page	217
5.14.	<i>Root Tongue</i> Community Gallery	217

ABSTRACT

TRANSMEDIA ARTS ACTIVISM AND LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION: CRITICAL DESIGN, ETHICS AND PARTICIPATION IN THIRD DIGITAL DOCUMENTARY

Anita Wen-Shin Chang

“Transmedia Arts Activism and Language Revitalization: Critical Design, Ethics and Participation in Third Digital Documentary” is a practice- and theory-based dissertation focused on indigenous and minority language endangerment and revival through explorations of case studies and personal stories from Taiwan and Hawai’i. It consists of the feature-length documentary *Tongues of Heaven*, the companion web application *Root Tongue: Sharing Stories of Language Identity and Revival*, and a written component describing the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the critical arts practice engaged in these works. This dissertation examines a major thematic in the documentary, which is its engagement with the term “native”—as topic, object and subject—and its attending discourse and practices of authenticity, ethnography, salvage ethnography, and autoethnography. It details the materialization of the documentary *Tongues of Heaven* through an analysis of the (post)colonial historical circumstances that led to its production; its collaborative cross-boundary and transnational mode of production; and the Third Cinema, experimental and feminist approaches that inspired its media praxis. I then discuss the under-acknowledged process of film/video editing by analyzing the limits of poststructuralist endeavors in representation, and theorizing the concept of interval, as it exists

between and within shots, as a productive spectatorial intervention. In the effort to extend public engagement with documentary issues via digital and online technologies, I initially survey the discursive and technological interventions into the notions of “public” and “participation,” and how offline and online spheres of publics, counterpublics and community operate, intersect and interact to create multiple ways of being together in community, as a public and with oneself. I conclude with an analysis of the critical arts practice in the design and production of the *Root Tongue* transmedia activist art platform to pilot new collaborations in documentary and new digital media for a third digital documentary practice that provides space for new projects on race and online culture, indigeneity and virtuality, and on ethics and digital publics. Overall, this dissertation contributes to and expands the field of autoethnographic media production while critically considering and harnessing digital and Internet technologies as viable creative, cultural and social tools with unique discursive potentials.

DEDICATION

An-Chi Chen, Shin-Lan Yu, Leivallyn Kainoa Kaupu, Hau‘oli Waiiau
and their families

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Introduction

*You already know the importance of saving a language. The main point is that you must start doing it. You know the reason, but not the motivation to save it. This is where I'm confused. I don't have the motivation to do it. I'm wondering what would be the motivation. You can also say I'm waiting for that something. –An-Chi Chen aka Vievali aka Thalaelethe, Co-director, *Tongues of Heaven**

The nativist project of (post)colonial Taiwan has been one of repairing the material and psychic damage of several centuries of colonial violence. I experienced it in Diaspora, growing up in the U.S. with pro-independence Taiwanese parents, who escaped the threat of intellectual persecution. Part of this nativist project has been, and continues to be, one of searching, reinvigorating, and reinventing aimed at the restoration of dignity and self-determination, even amidst continued humiliation. It continues to be a powerful force that brings people together in cooperation to work towards these efforts. For example, prior to embarking on what would become (and unbeknownst to me) six years of living and working in Taiwan, Taiwanese citizens held the now historical “228 Hand-in-Hand Rally” of 2004 (figure 1). For this event, an estimated two million Taiwanese citizens, at 2:28 pm, joined hands to encircle the entire island as a political gesture protesting China’s military threat toward Taiwan. “228” refers to a violent incident that occurred on February 28, 1947, when the new Kuomintang government began its violent suppression of island-wide protests, which resulted in nearly forty years of martial law and the death of as many as 30,000 civilians. The massacre has become a national day of remembrance in Taiwan. Almost every Taiwanese person alive then has a memory of the incident. My own

grandfather was persecuted for providing shelter to a crowd of injured civilians during the incident. He disappeared for several weeks during which he was tortured. My grandmother bribed her way with red envelopes to bring him back.



Figure 1. 228 Hand-in-Hand Rally, Northern Taiwan (Central News Agency)

An aspect of the nativist movement is raising awareness of the epistemological violence enacted on the Taiwanese people through colonial education which brainwashed generations of Taiwanese, whether through Qing cultural assimilation, Japan's *kōminka* practice of forced servitude, or Kuomintang sinicization policies. This movement also includes a re-discovery of ethnic and cultural identities that were suppressed during these colonial periods.¹ For example, my father rediscovered his Hakka background; his father was Hakka but suppressed it

¹ For a personal and historical account of Pingpu indigenous peoples' revival and recognition movement in Taiwan see Jolan Hsieh, *Collective Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Identity-based Movement of Plain Indigenous in Taiwan* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

due to fear of discrimination. Likewise, my mother rediscovered her Pingpu indigenous ancestry as she learned about the history of intermarriage and her family's matriarchal practices in southwestern Taiwan. Currently, with China's insistence that Taiwan is a part of its territory and that any effort to declare independence will be met with military attack, most Taiwanese have found ways to articulate their difference from China promoting a kind of culturalism as defined by sociocultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai—"the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics."² This culturalism includes using DNA testing for indigenous ancestry as a last resort. As cultural anthropologist Jennifer Liu writes, "In this sense, the new discourse of Taiwanese identity based in genetic uniqueness may be viewed as an insurrectionary recuperation of a subjugated identity."³ Naming practices, especially around and as a result of DNA testing, certainly generate robust dialogue and conversations around social positioning, political aspirations and personal ancestral histories. These naming practices further impact notions of indigeneity as materially lived, culturally performed and creatively imagined. However, for the Taiwanese testers' seemingly desperate attempt to disarticulate themselves from Chinese identity, do the stakes outweigh the risks? As Liu states, "The creation of categories of people who qualify, in a biological sense, as authentically Taiwanese necessitates the concomitant creation of those who do not so

² Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 9th ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 15.

³ Jennifer A. Liu, "Making Taiwanese (stem cells): Identity, Genetics, and Hybridity" in *Asian Biotech: Ethics and Communities of Fate*, eds. Aihwa Ong and Nancy N. Chen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 255.

qualify, providing yet another way to figure difference in an already deeply factionalized Taiwan.”⁴ Would increasing claims and proof of indigeneity further unify or alienate the Taiwanese?

Amidst such a force field, like any other (such as the Internet that is relevant to this dissertation project), I must make an effort to step back and think about this phenomenon as an issue of who is benefiting and who is not. Who is being harmed and who is not? I must consider my own susceptibility of being pressured or moved by this force. What are my personal obligations in pursuing the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project and how are this and other forces shaping these obligations? For example, how did I suddenly become a San Francisco Bay Area artist educator and a Taiwanese American filmmaker teaching in Taiwan in an academic department focused on indigenous languages and communications? In looking back, I believe these interests and experiences are largely due to a transethnic minoritarian solidarity at play. That is, this solidarity is based upon our experiences of struggle and treatment as ethnic minorities in the land of our citizenship. Yet, this does not mean that no social and cultural negotiations are required. In fact, these negotiations figured prominently at the everyday level, and certainly on the level of my pedagogical and creative practices.

Anthropologist Faye Ginsburg cites a well-known exchange in the 1960s between the anthropologist filming team Sol Worth and John Adair, and the Navajo

⁴ Ibid., 256.

elder and medicine man Sam Yazzie.⁵ As the filmmakers tell Yazzie that they are interested in teaching the Navajo how to make movies, Yazzie asked: “Will making movies do the sheep any harm?” Worth responded that “as far as he knew, there was no chance that making movies would harm the sheep.” Yazzie then asked: “Will making movies do the sheep good?” To this, Worth eventually responded that “as far as he knew making movies wouldn’t do the sheep any good.” Yazzie asked: “Then why make movies?” Besides an exchange that foregrounds social and cultural differences around image-making, this is an exchange about ethics. This leads me to ask whether there exists a kind of image-making or filmmaking that would be good for the sheep?

People who experience a sense of injustice and want to see a better world take action in ways they can, based on their capacities. Some actions are riskier than others, including causing possible harm to oneself and others. One of the common impulses in documentary filmmaking is to show how the world is now and how it might be better. Some of these impulses are more activist in pursuit than others, but most have pedagogical goals in mind. Filmmakers hope that a viewer comes away more knowledgeable than before having watched their documentary, and even better if the viewer decides to take action towards the issues addressed in the work.

No one, neither artists nor filmmakers, however careful and ethical they try to be, really knows the future ramifications of one’s works in terms of harm and benefit.

⁵ Faye Ginsburg, “Mediating Culture: Indigenous Media, Ethnographic Film and the Production of Identity,” in *Fields of Vision*, eds. Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 262.

Therefore, one concern as a media practitioner is to consider the identifiable immediate and future stakes involved, and in the case of collaborative work, the imperative to identify those who have a stake in the project. The question of whose realities are most at stake is critical. When the medicine man, Yazzi asks, “Will making movies do the sheep good?” he, perhaps as healer, guardian, and certainly as co-inhabitant and co-species, also has something at stake. Attending to these stakes is one of the key foundations of a critical practice. It is true that one of the mysteries particular to moving images as a signifying device is its slipperiness. Attending to films as more than just a communicative medium from one person to another, ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall writes: “Film both signifies and yet refuses signification. It asserts itself as *figuration*, but to the extent that it implicates filmmaker and viewer, it transcends it.”⁶ Yet, later in the essay he writes: “Perhaps never again can anthropologists use the external self-reflexive mode as they once did, for this self-reflexive ‘voice’ was always implicitly directed toward their anthropological colleagues, invoking a set of very private interests. The world has now changed, and one’s first audience is as likely as not to be the subjects themselves.”⁷ Although MacDougall is attending to the field of anthropology, I find his reflections useful for media productions involving engagements across different cultural and geopolitical landscapes.

⁶ David MacDougall and Lucien Taylor, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1998), 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

The transethnic minoritarian solidarity that I am currently working within calls for attending to differences that arise through image-making, story-telling, collaboration and together identifying those with a stake in and because of the project. While indexicality of the image to reality is something that the *Tongues of Heaven* documentary relies on to tell its stories, finding ways to disrupt the “positivist yearning” lurking below the surface, has also been an aesthetic technique I pursue.⁸ Working at the level of figuration can be useful, but even figuration is not completely immune from referentiality. Through editing, I attempt to showcase spectatorship on a meta-discursive level, to work with the potentialities of multiple addresses in personal camerawork, and to make aware within viewers their compulsion toward referentiality.

Tongues of Heaven also puts into practice a decolonizing filmmaking methodology within the context of transcultural exchange across territorial boundaries. As a result, it participates in presenting the contemporary (post)colonial conditions of Hawai‘i and Taiwan, exposing differences and similarities and proposing affinities and potential solidarities. In the essay “The Imperialist Eye: The Cultural Imaginary of a Subempire and a Nation-State,” cultural studies scholar Chen Kuan-Hsing advocates for a “cross-boundary praxis” that would be a postnational cultural imaginary from the margin. He writes:

⁸ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man,” in *American Feminist Thought at Century’s End: A Reader*, ed. Linda S. Kauffman (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 123.

Here, *post* means (1) breaking the rigid lines of nationalist imagination, and (2) exploding the myth of the necessity of the nation-state, and (3) imagining something beyond the nation—that is, the space of the nation is full of “broken” nations constructed by suppressed social subjects after they have succeeded in subverting supposedly impregnable nation-states.⁹

Certainly the indigenous peoples of Taiwan and Hawai‘i continue in a vexed and at times ambivalent relationship with modern settler populations and governance, despite gaining more recognition and influence in state-level matters, including education. Thus in our case, a “postnational cultural imaginary from the margins” would be shaped by our presence together as women, socially-defined as minorities in the land of our citizenship, with interest in bringing attention to our neglected histories and experiences. My role as producer, mentor, co-director, mediator and translator also foregrounds and re-positions our geo-political relations given current imperial formations, producing, as Chen would term, “shifting points of reference” and self-reflection in our engagement with each other. How might such cross-boundary practice operate in the medium of digital documentary? Other than the actual collaboration among women of different indigenous affiliation, and the film production in various locations, what are some of the ways in which cross-boundary praxis can be constructed, proposed, or materialized through the moving image medium, to allow us to visualize, hear and imagine past, current and future affinities? And likewise, how is boundary-crossing produced by the image itself? These are experiments, and therefore not without their own sets of tensions.

⁹ Kuan-Hsing Chen, “The Imperialist Eye: The Cultural Imaginary of a Subempire and a Nation-State,” *Positions* 8, no. 1 (2000): 66.

Despite the on-going clamor for visibility, recognition, rights, dignity, and self-determination around the world for the historically marginalized, and in my context, Taiwan's indigenous peoples, I am tasked with asking: What are the nature and stakes of my participation, along with my collaborating co-directors, in the *Tongues of Heaven* documentary and *Root Tongue* web project? How are we shaped by this clamor? How can we productively contribute to it? And most importantly, how can we create something that encourages and attends to the nuances amidst the clamor?

I do consider the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project an activist pursuit. It is not an outright advocacy for saving languages; rather, it brings to the public realm a private matter on how one contends with the role of language in one's life. Thus, it offers a platform for sharing and dialogue. The transmedia project is not soliciting donations for the cause, nor is it eliciting empathy per se. Rather *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* aims to be an "alternative social project," a term defined by anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli as capacitating "an alternative set of human and posthuman worlds...dependent on a host of interlocking concepts, materials, and forces that include human and nonhuman agencies and organisms."¹⁰ The *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* project's existence in the virtual realm provides a space that showcases the processes of real world "enfleshments."¹¹ While the

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

¹¹ I summarize Povinelli's concept of "enfleshment" as a state of mutually constituted bodily relations among people formed through discourse, as well as the

question of what you lose when you lose your native language initiates the creative gestures, the documentary production, and its presentation online, the answers seem to lead in fact to a search for the very “ethical substance” that is causing continued language loss. Povinelli, via Michel Foucault, defines ethical substance as “the prime material...of moral reflection, conduct, and evaluation...”¹² First, is there an ethics to consider at all, and if so, what is this ethical substance, and where is it located? Can naming and knowing the world, which is the role of language, be considered an ethical substance? Can other intangible notions like “soul” or “time” be considered ethical substances?

The dissertation, “Transmedia Arts Activism and Language Revitalization: Critical Design, Ethics and Participation in Third Digital Documentary” is a practice- and theory-based project focused on indigenous and minority language endangerment and revival, through explorations of case studies and personal stories from Taiwan and Hawai‘i. The dissertation consists of the feature-length documentary *Tongues of Heaven* (2013, 60 minutes, Taiwan/US), the companion interactive documentary web application *Root Tongue: Sharing Stories of Language Identity and Revival*, and the following chapters that describe the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the critical arts practice engaged in these works, and analyze the research outcomes. These chapters document and demonstrate the dynamic interplay between creative production and critical analysis in an effort to contribute a theory and practice of

material flesh that produce and maintain unevenly distributed life-worlds. See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Empire of Love* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹² Ibid., 10.

networked digital video, one that serves and produces new forms of sociality that bolsters deterritorialized interventions and cultural work.

In Chapter 1, “A Discourse on ‘Image Sovereignty’: Variations on an Ideal/Image of Native Self-representation,” I examine a major theme of the documentary: the term “native”—as topic, object and subject—and its attending discourse and practices of authenticity, ethnography, salvage ethnography, and autoethnography. This chapter charts the lively career of the moving “native” image through key documentary works and writings. It then discusses the growing discourse of “image sovereignty” and its relevance to native self-representation and a radical documentary praxis.

Chapter 2, “Digital Documentary Praxis: *Tongues of Heaven*” discusses the materialization of the one-hour documentary *Tongues of Heaven* (2013) set in Taiwan and Hawai‘i. In this collaborative documentary, four young indigenous women use digital video as their primary medium of expression to share the challenges in learning the languages of their forebears before they go extinct. I analyze the documentary’s cross-boundary and transnational modes of production, including the (post)colonial historical circumstances that lead to its creation. I discuss the collaborative methodologies employed in the making of the work; the Third Cinema, experimental and feminist approaches to media practices; and the challenge of pushing further the reflexive potentials of documentary while remaining grounded with the social issues at hand. Given the myriad forms of visuality that the indigenous peoples of Taiwan are engaged in, including the documentary *Tongues of Heaven*, the

chapter describes how I became interested not only in making visible their visuality, but making palpable the entire enterprise of looking/viewing/gazing as a mode of participation by attending to the affective and intellectual operations occurring within the spectatorial act.

Chapter 3, “An Essay on Editing *Tongues of Heaven*” focuses on editing as a potent aspect of filmmaking that is often under-acknowledged. While I discuss the writings of Gilles Deleuze, and film practitioner-theorist-writers, my primary engagement is with cultural critic Rey Chow’s essay “The Interruption of Referentiality; or, Poststructuralism’s Outside” as a way to ruminate on my own editing practices, taking heed of her call “to let the problematic of referentiality interrupt.”¹³ How could cinema or digital video bring its tools to bear on this challenge, tools that exceed that of language alone? In thinking and working through documentary temporality as form and content, I also consider the concept of interval, as it exists between and within shots, as a productive spectatorial intervention. Conceived in essayistic form, this chapter also juxtaposes the written reflections of a group of students enrolled in the Multilingualism and Ethnic Groups course at National Dong Hwa University in Taiwan as “watchers” with mine as “maker” that aims to produce not so much a comparison of intention and reception, but a survey of “directions” and “orientations” that film theorist Christian Metz refers to as the “figures of enunciation” in a film.

¹³ Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 69.

In Chapter 4, “Networked Audio-Visual Culture and New Digital Publics” I analyze how documentary production and viewing has expanded as a result of developments in digital and online technologies, and how they are influencing documentary discourses on reality and ethics, and affecting viewing habits. It surveys the discursive and technological interventions into the notions of “public” and “participation” with particular attention paid to how ideas of offline and online spheres of publics, counterpublics and community operate, intersect, and interact to create multiple ways of being together in community, as a public and with oneself. The chapter further focuses on new forms of visibility and expressions for minority and indigenous cultural producers arising from popular platforms such as *YouTube* and *Facebook*.

Chapter 5, “Documentary and Online Transmediality: *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue*” studies and analyzes the critical arts practice in the design and production of the online interactive documentary platform aimed to pilot new forms of engagement with documentary and new digital media for a third digital documentary practice—one that provides space for new projects on race and online culture, indigeneity and virtuality, digital publics and ethics. Theories on third cinema methodology, critical design, digital networks, information infrastructure, dialogical aesthetics, community, publics, online cultural representations and digital ontology serve as critical frameworks for the *Root Tongue* transmedia project. These critical frameworks inform how *Root Tongue* mediates across space, time, localities and languages to extend engagement on socio-cultural and political issues around

language endangerment and revitalization via acts of spectatorship, commentary, discussion, creative production and activism.

In addition to film and digital media, my research draws from multiple disciplines (i.e., anthropology, geography, linguistics, political science, sociology, visual arts) and the interdisciplinary fields of critical race, feminist, cultural and postcolonial studies. Working across these fields and disciplines is essential in forming complex connections and relations to phenomena and ideas informing my critical creative media practice within a highly technologized world. Each of these fields and disciplines offer critical insight to the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project that aims to problem-solve, innovate and contribute to new expressive and epistemological possibilities that would in turn energize these very fields and disciplines. Overall, this dissertation work contributes to and expands the field of autoethnographic media production while critically considering and harnessing digital and Internet technologies as viable creative, cultural and social tools with unique discursive potentials.

A Discourse of “Image Sovereignty”:

Variations on an Ideal/Image of Native Self-representation

Modernity’s Primitive Other

Tongues of Heaven responds to and intervenes in the praxis of “native” self-representation, particularly in its engagement with the term “native”—as topic, object and subject—and its attending discourse and practices of authenticity, ethnography, salvage ethnography, and autoethnography.¹ One of *Tongues of Heaven*’s critical projects is to consider alternative means of representation that acknowledges the history, traditions and tendencies of “native” representations by “non-natives” and “natives” themselves, in order to move towards creative expression as a biopolitical act. How and what one perceives through audio-visual technologies are key premises of visual sovereignty or “image sovereignty,” a concept that is mobilized and in the *Tongues of Heaven* production process. This chapter charts the lively career of the moving “native” image through some key documentary works and writings. It then discusses the growing discourse of “image sovereignty” (first coined by Māori

¹ Salvage ethnography is a turn of the twentieth century practice associated with the anthropologist Franz Boas and his documentation of indigenous peoples’ cultures that were facing extinction. In doing so, he often reconstructed and imagined a picturesque primitive past that has since been critiqued for displacing indigenous peoples in a temporal realm outside modernity. See Craig Calhoun, *Dictionary of Social Sciences*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 424; and Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 78.

filmmaker Barry Barclay in 2006) and its subsequent relevance to native self-representation and a radical documentary praxis.²

When considering the use of the term “native” in the context of ethnographic or auto-ethnographic documentary, the issue of authenticity is central. While scholars in various disciplines have attempted to define what constitutes ethnographic moving image works, the term “native” brings to the fore the field of anthropology from which ethnographic documentation originated. Anthropology emerged as a discipline in the nineteenth century alongside colonialism, and as such it is “predicated on the fact of otherness and difference, on the lively, informative thrust supplied to it by what is strange or foreign.”³ This authenticating difference of the “native” is what gives those who choose to document the native’s way of life purchase, legitimacy and justification for their enterprise. Whether through the writings, drawings, lithography, photography, sound recordings or moving images of explorers, prospectors, missionaries and anthropologists, the authenticity of the “native” must produce enough of a difference to justify the actions of non-natives, hence the politics of identifying authentic natives, which continues to this day.

In her writings, postcolonial critic Rey Chow has consistently and persistently pointed out the subtle and not so subtle ways in which the “native” is figured in modernist discourses of difference. Whether configured as communist, woman, subaltern or simply marginalized, the native is modernity’s primitive other. Why does

² Keyan G. Tomaselli, *Cultural Tourism and Identity: Rethinking Indigeneity* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2012), 50.

³ Edward Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors” in *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 213.

the desire and drive to identify and “know” the authentic native continue to persist? According to Chow, modernity “is ambivalent in its very origin. In trying to become ‘new’ and ‘novel’—a kind of primary moment—it must incessantly deal with its connection with what *precedes* it—what was primary to it—in the form of a destruction.”⁴ This destruction inevitably produces sadness as we realize the “irreversibility of modernity.”⁵ She concludes, “Our fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage, and all such figures is therefore a desire to hold on to an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own ‘fake’ experience.”⁶

While Chow focuses on the native or “endangered authenticities” as different in terms of time and place, filmmaker-scholar Fatimah Tobing Rony considers the pervasive racialization of the native, particularly in popular and scientific ethnographic cinema. In her study on representations of indigenous peoples in early twentieth ethnographic spectacles, Rony defines ethnographic cinema as “the broad and variegated field of cinema which situates indigenous people in a displaced temporal realm,” that includes “works now elevated to the status of ‘art,’ scientific research films, educational films used in schools, colonial propaganda films, and commercial entertainment films.”⁷ Rony demonstrates how race, a defining problem in anthropology, is a key marker of difference that produces perverse, fantastical and troubling images of the native. In her analysis of Robert Flaherty’s 1922 celebrated

⁴ Rey Chow, “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” in *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷ Rony, *The Third Eye*, 8.

film *Nanook of the North*, she exposes the narrative of human evolution, with Nanook representing the native in its once primitive state and Flaherty as the white male ethnographer hero. Such is their symbolic pairing: the Primitive as the “‘pathological’ counterpoint to the European.”⁸ However, what further knowledge is produced in the story starring natives on native land? Juxtaposing the 1925 film *Grass*, made by three Americans around the same time as *Nanook of the North*, may bring further insight to this question.



Figure 1.1. Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack during the production of *Grass*

Early Depictions of “Natives”

Grass is a 70-minute film about the semiannual migration of the Baba Ahmadi tribe in Iran, produced by three Americans with backgrounds in exploration, anti-

⁸ Ibid., 27.

Soviet U.S. military activities, journalism and filmmaking (figure 1.1). Like Flaherty's work in *Nanook*, the film serves as evidence that these Western filmmakers were there to witness and capture the harsh living conditions and nobility of the natives. More so, the film shows how the Western filmmakers "discovered" the "Forgotten People" and completed an extraordinary feat of migration with the Baba Ahmadi people over the 12,000 feet high Zardeh Kuh pass. If the film itself was not proof enough of the Americans' "pioneering" efforts, *Grass* ends with an image of a document certifying that the filmmakers, Merian Cooper, Ernest Schoedsack and Marguerite Harrison were "the first foreigners to have crossed the Zardeh Kuh pass and make the 48-day migration," signed by Haidar Khan, Chief of Baba Achmadi, Tribe of Baktyari; Amir Jang, Prince of Baktyari; and Robert Imbrie, Vice-Consul of the United States. As Hamid Naficy explains, the tribespeople in *Grass* were not forgotten or unknown to Iranians; rather, the "fiction of loss and amnesia" was necessary to the fiction of discovery by the filmmakers.⁹ Like many artifacts of colonial and imperial contact, how the native subjects reacted, resisted, assisted, and/or collaborated with outsiders was usually documented in one-sided accounts by the filmmakers themselves. This one-sided documentarion compounds the objectifying status and silence of the depicted native whereby, as Chow describes, the "native" is "turned into an absolute entity in the form of an image... whose silence becomes the occasion for *our* speech."¹⁰ On the rare occasion that the discourse

⁹ Hamid Naficy, "Lure of the East," in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 131.

¹⁰ Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?," 34.

includes those individuals who remember the production, or, more commonly, whose ancestors or people were depicted in these films, can the knowledge value of these films be further expanded? In the case of *Grass*, Naficy demonstrates that depending on how the images are framed, whether by text, storyline, music and/or narration, and the historico-political context in which the film is shown, the images give something different to spectators. This could entail themes such as Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism, racialist nostalgia for origins, Orientalist entertainment; or later, Iranian national pride, “auto-identification,” and for Naficy himself, the techno-aesthetic acumen of the cinematographer. Naficy’s analysis finally frames *Grass* within the larger context of nations collapsing and rebuilding, and how the images within the film circulate to bolster national projects. Nevertheless, the revisiting and recirculation of the images in *Grass* in the mid-1970s, as well as *Nanook* in early 1980s, produced affective and prideful relationships among the descendants of those depicted in these early ethnographic documentaries, leading to their own pursuits in documentary and fiction filmmaking.

The use of film technology in anthropology as a viable scientific tool continued through the 1930s and 1940s via Franz Boas and his students, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. Hurston later wrote more complexly about the nature of her simultaneous insider and outsider status as an ethnographer within the communities she studied, while Mead continued to develop methodologies of producing filmic supplements to written ethnography. Deeply indebted to Mead and Bateson, anthropologist Karl Heider’s 1976 classic guide to

visual anthropology, *Ethnographic Film* was reprinted in 2006. In the new edition Heider is initially reluctant to define ethnographic film but uses “ethnographicness” to indicate that “‘ethnographic’ has very specific meaning” and that one can “look for various attributes, dimensions that effect ethnographicness in films.”¹¹ But then he finally gives in to a definition: “‘Ethnographic film is film that reflects ethnographic understanding.’”¹² Emphasis is placed here on discipline, accuracy and truth.

Despite rules and codes that have developed within various disciplines for ethical engagement in researching human subjects, earlier rules in ethnographic documentation were mainly about how to manipulate and gain the cooperation of “natives.” Anthropologist filmmakers often used “native assistants,” “native police,” and “native informants” to conduct their work. This is still the case today, emphasizing the continually vexed conditions under which audio-visual recordings are made, and often in situations of unequal power dynamics. One particular mode of collaboration that addressed some of these ethical issues was practiced by Jean Rouch, which he called “shared anthropology.” In 1957, Rouch writes: “‘Knowledge is not a stolen secret later to be consumed in Western temples of learning, but rather is to be arrived at through an unending quest in which ethnographic subjects and the ethnographer engage with one another on a path that some of us are now calling ‘shared anthropology.’”¹³ The practice of shared anthropology involved the feedback

¹¹ Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 316.

screenings of films that would lead to further suggestions from audiences for new joint creative projects. In a 1954 feedback screening, Rouch's native subjects Illo Gaudel and Damoure Zika (who would become Rouch's filmmaking assistant and companion for 62 years) made suggestions for a film about labor migration to the Gold Coast, which would become Rouch's first "ethnofiction," *Jaguar* (1970). This method of sharing would become his way of working for most of his films made in Africa and what he considered an "audiovisual counter-gift" for his native subjects' trust and cooperation. Filmmaker scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha would later critique this method as partial sharing of power since it is "on the condition that the share is *given*, not taken."¹⁴ Although Rouch's ways of working and depictions of Africa have been criticized by his critics and some of his film subjects as paternalistic, racist, salvage ethnography, and apolitical, he was a pioneer in maintaining long-term, ongoing, and overall mutually beneficial relationships with his native subjects, many of whom became filmmakers themselves.¹⁵ In such a situation, the stakes for all involved in the production process become more tangible to each other and more negotiable than before.

¹⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 67.

¹⁵ Henley, *The Adventure of the Real*, 331, 332.

Taking the Technology

What happens, however, to the term “native” when “natives” take up audio-visual technology for their own use and creative expression? Or rather, what happens when they *take* the technology into their own hands, as in the case of Mike Mitchell, a Mohawk of the Akwesasne Reserve in 1968, which culminated in the 36-minute film *You Are On Indian Land (YAOIL)*? Mitchell’s initiative to film a pending international bridge blockade to protest the government’s lack of resolving land rights guaranteed in the 1794 Jay Treaty, was aided by George Stoney, then the Executive Producer of the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle (CFC/SN) program. CFC/SN was a program of the Canadian National Film Board (NFB) started in 1967 by media activists who believed that media communications use by disenfranchised groups could lead to social empowerment. Although CFC/SN required government approval of media proposals, applicants found ways of presenting a proposal that would be amenable to the government sponsors, and later diverging somewhat from its proposed intent. For example, proposals dealing with “Native rights” were rejected, but if couched in terms of ethnography would be accepted.¹⁶ That Stoney bypassed CFC/SN protocols and gathered a film crew for filming the next day, spoke to the “gap within a gap that made a truly confrontational representation and documented

¹⁶ Ezra Winton, and Jason Garrison, “‘If a Revolution Is Screened and No One Is There to See It, Does It Make a Sound?’ The Politics of Distribution and Counterpublics,” in *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, eds. Thomas Waugh, Ezra Winton and Michael B. Baker (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 414.

moment of oppression possible despite government funding.”¹⁷ Three hours of footage was shot on the day of the blockade of which two hours were edited into a rough cut that were immediately shown to community groups. The purpose of the screenings were to mainly quell disputes among protesters, instigate dialogue within and between different tribal communities, re-evaluate strategies with government officials, and hear editing suggestions. Later, video transfer of the footage was shown to municipal and Indian Affairs officials, police and the courthouse. According to Mitchell, the main advantage of these small screenings was to bridge a communications gap between antagonistic groups. Mitchell also went on tour with the film throughout North America at a time in which he felt First Nations issues were barely made public, and this also lead to international interest in their issues.

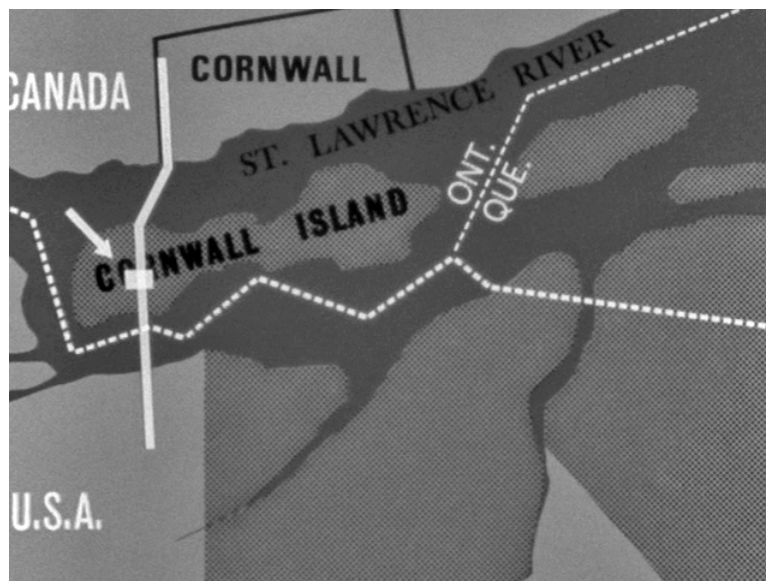


Figure 1.2. Animated map of disputed territory in *You Are On Indian Land*

¹⁷ Ibid., 416.

The existence of CFC/SN and a film like *YAOIL* was made possible in part due to the political turmoil happening across the globe around decolonization efforts, such as the anti-war and civil rights movements. The sense of being part of a larger decolonial frame is evident in the efforts to train Native peoples in film production, resulting in CFC/SN's Indian Film Crew of which Mitchell was a part. Along with the rise of the New Left involving the "emerging social movements (of people of Color, women, students, and first nations)," was the need to develop alternative means of media representation and distribution.¹⁸ Debates on how to depict the "Indian problem" with "a real Indian point of view"¹⁹ ensued at the NFB and eventually resulted in the establishment of the National Indian Training Program in cooperation with the Company of Young Canadians in 1968.²⁰ As Noel Starblanket, one of the camerapersons for *YAOIL* explains, despite being the first government program that showed any interest for the "knowledge, opinions, and feelings of Indians," the program lasted just three years due to lack of funding.²¹ More importantly, in recounting the struggle for human resource development in the Lesser and Great Slave Lakes area at that time, he notes the limits of participatory democracy. "Social protest marches and demonstrations are the only alternatives left

¹⁸ Dorothy Kidd, "Shards of Remembrance: One Woman's Archaeology of Community Video," in *Women in Grassroots Communication: Furthering Social Change*, ed. Pilar Riaño (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 179.

¹⁹ Noel Starblanket, "A Voice for Canadian Indians: An Indian Film Crew (1968)," in *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, eds. Thomas Waugh, Ezra Winton, and Michael B. Baker (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 38.

²⁰ Winton and Garrison, "If a Revolution Is Screened," 414.

²¹ Starblanket, "A Voice for Canadian Indians," 39.

to these people. The Indian Film Crew feels it would be valuable if we could become involved in this struggle. Our purpose? To facilitate communication between the people and the government—to help this Indian community.”²² While Starblanket critiques the limits of participatory democracy, he believes in fostering dialogue, particularly with the aide of video as a communications medium and fully aware that “we are dealing with a powerful outlet for emotion and a power that even administrations recognize.”²³ So powerful indeed that a former CFC/SN filmmaker Dorothy Kidd, in her 1994 essay, reflected back on how CFC/SN’s “technicist idea of electronic democracy” limited discussion “posed by the irresolvable conflicts of competing perspectives and power positions.” As a result, such limitations exposed the contradictions and the narrow possibilities of state-funded communications programs.²⁴ The radical alternative was taking the means of communications into one’s own hands. Of the 140 films and videos produced by CFC/SN, *YAOIL* was the only film that was mostly initiated, produced and distributed by Natives themselves, and this is clearly reflected in its interventionist aesthetics.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 40.

²⁴ Dorothy Kidd, “Shards of Remembrance,” 184.



Figure 1.3. Mike Mitchell speaks to Canadian government representatives in *You Are On Indian Land*.

Shot in one day on December 18, 1968, *YAOIL* opens with Mike Mitchell (figure 1.3), standing as he addresses the politics of self-identification, hence authenticity:

We don't want to be Canadian citizens. We don't want to be American citizens. They told us a long time ago we were North American Indians, and today we feel this way too. Why I feel this way is because we think this reservation is ours. And it does not belong to the white man. It's the only part we still have left.

A table with a few federal Canadian representatives and a room crowded with community members listen on. This scene bookends the protest, which is the centerpiece of the film. Throughout the protest, voices from the crowd remind the police that the world will see this—your police brutality. The camera serves as the witness for the world. At least five times the same policeman tells the protesters that they have made their point, and to move their blockade. *YAOIL* uses a mixture of

documentary modes of representation resulting in a work that is part agit prop, educational and lyrical, but mostly observational, in both the direct cinema and cinéma vérité styles. The camerawork both records the action and at times instigates the dynamics of those being filmed, which was most evident when the Chief, who is aligned with government interests, threatens to destroy the camera. In *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bill Nichols writes: “What works at a given moment and what counts as a realistic representation of the historical world is not a simple matter of progress toward a final form of truth but of struggles for power and authority within the historical arena itself.”²⁵ Within each compositional frame of *YAOIL*, one can see and feel the lines of tension. Though this may be due in part to the graphical contrasts produced by black and white film stock, it is in fact the historical arena of struggle that produces the very aesthetics of the work. How did we get to this point, and how do we show you where we want to go? Considering the structure of the documentary—a meeting between the concerned community and authorities, voice-over narration addressed in the third person, an animated map of the contested territory (figure 1.2), flashback chronology of a protest event with occasional English subtitling of Native speech (in the Kanienkeha language), shorter scene of another protest, and back to the meeting—this is a work made to be heard loud and clear.

²⁵ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 33.



Figure 1.4. Mike Mitchell and protestors speak with Cornwall police.



Figure 1.5. Cornwall police force protestors into cars heading to jail.

In film scholar Jonathan Kahana’s study of the intelligence work that documentaries perform, he notes the aesthetic challenges for filmmakers in “finding an appropriately particular language for the representation” of political struggles

marginalized by national media.²⁶ One of these aesthetic devices is the sound or “noise” of radical documentary. While his study analyzes examples of the sophisticated uses of soundtrack of certain films, *YAOIL* is mostly synch sound. Nevertheless, what makes it radical filmmaking is its commitment to recording the protest in its ebb and flow of tension, discussion and violence, since most news media only cover moments of heightened violence (figures 1.4 and 1.5). As Stoney remarks: “You begin to see how the violence happens; you begin to see the nature of the violence, and you see the violence tapering off and some more palaver following.”²⁷ Rather than always seeing protestors as victims of police brutality, *YAOIL* exposes the forces underlying the actions of all parties and stakeholders involved with the main question: How are we to resolve this problem together? When the police tell the circle of gatherers, “The Indians have made their point, I see no reason why you should block this road any longer...or we will have to use force to do so” one of the main interlocutors, Ernie responds, “Officer, tell us just to what extent have we made our point?” The police officer says as he walks away, “The news media, you got recognition.” A woman off camera retorts, “We want more than that.” The scene cuts to a young woman held up by her fellow protestors singing: “We shall overcome....” Drawing from the symbolic African American civil rights protest song, *YAOIL* itself becomes a symbolic discourse for a politics based on a “we” and not “them”

²⁶ Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 144.

²⁷ Alan Rosenthal, “*You Are on Indian Land: Interview with George Stoney (1980)*,” in *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, eds. Thomas Waugh, Ezra Winton, and Michael B. Baker (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 174.

perspective. Many disparate Native voices on and off camera are heard within a span of only 36-minutes in the fine cut version, and many with full awareness of the camera. Of course, *YAOIL*'s most reflexive charge is its last image, which consists of the contested bridge superimposed with the credits: You Are On Indian Land was produced by the National Film Board of Canada for the Challenge for Change Program in co-operation with Departments and Agencies of the Government of Canada. Its reflexivity lies in the fact that the very filmic materialization of such tensions between the indigenous peoples and the Canadian government policies was made possible by the Canadian government itself. If anything, it offers a stark reminder that the "Indian problem" is not going to go away so easily (figures 1.6 and 1.7).



Figure 1.6. Still from *You Are On Indian Land*



Figure 1.7. Still from *You Are On Indian Land*

In his written assessment of the disbanding of the Indian Film Crew due to funding cuts, Starblanket poses his final question. Addressing the state sponsors, the National Film Board and the Company of Young Canadians, he asks: “Is a strong independent voice for the Indians worth supporting?”²⁸ This begs the question as to how far Western capitalist democratic systems can be challenged and transformed to resolve the often-conflicting interests of capitalist democracies and indigenous lifeways? Through gaps within the CFC/SN bureaucratic system, *YAOIL* brought attention to and facilitated dialogue on land issues for both the Natives in Canada and the U.S., and to the Canadian government authorities. Eventually, the Canadian government lifted the customs duties levied on the Mohawk people, one of the main demands of the protestors.²⁹ In reflecting on CFC/SN and state-sponsored film arts

²⁸ Ibid., 40.

²⁹ Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), 102.

production in general, activist author Naomi Klein admits the difficulty of measuring the “advancement in those debates” for these projects, such as “how did this enrich us? How did this improve us?”³⁰ While no objective barometer exists in measuring how spectators are moved or moved to action by a film, or a documentary in this case, *YAOIL* exemplified the potential of documentary to transform when a radical practice can emerge to open up the possibility for new forms of communication. And in this case, *YAOIL* opened up what indigenous education scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls, “symbolic appeals” to authenticity as an oppositional term in the struggle for decolonization.³¹ She writes:

[Authenticity] does appeal to an idealized past when there was no colonizer, to our strengths in surviving thus far, to our language as an uninterrupted link to our histories, to the ownership of our lands, to our abilities to create and control our own life and death, to a sense of balance among ourselves and with the environment, to our authentic selves as a people. Although this may seem overly idealized, these symbolic appeals remain strategically important in political struggles.³²

YAOIL also exemplifies the Third Cinema practice espoused by its proponents in Argentina around the same time. For example, not only through its form, aesthetics and timeliness, *YAOIL*, together with Native activists performed numerous “film acts”

³⁰ Erza Winton, “Putting Ideas into the World: A Conversation with Naomi Klein about starting Conversations with Film” in *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, eds. Thomas Waugh, Ezra Winton, and Michael B. Baker (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), xix.

³¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 10th edition (London: Zed Books, 2007), 73.

³² Ibid.

in a variety of contexts to garner dialogue, support and most importantly change—change that would then inspire others in their own decolonial struggles.

Image Sovereignty

Along with decolonization movements across the globe and increased accessibility of audio-visual technologies, the 1970s and 1980s saw the continued rise of indigenous media activism. In the field of ethnographic film, one such key moment occurred in 1978 during the International Ethnographic Film Conference held in Canberra, Australia. Film critic James Roy MacBean, in recounting the debates of observational cinema as the ultimate solution in representing others, brings to light the power struggle over methodology in the field. He observes, “Sympathetic with Aboriginal peoples’ increasingly vociferous demands to be provided access to the media and to the means of film and television *production*, the MacDougalls had scheduled a session in the conference agenda to explore these issues.”³³ He then notes that the time allocated was not sufficient and scheduled for the last day of the conference.

MacBean’s article makes a case for the necessary critical shifts in the field from ethnographic filmmaking focused on the professional concerns of the outsider ethnographer to the politicized concerns of the indigenous subjects of their works. At the conference, the Aboriginal attendees sought to recruit white filmmakers to work

³³ James Roy MacBean, “Two Laws from Australia, One White, One Black,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 32.

with them “in making films that would *express* rather than merely *observe* Aboriginal culture.”³⁴ This request eventually resulted in the film *Two Laws* (1981), collectively produced by Australian filmmakers Caroline Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini with members of the Borroloola Aboriginal community in the Northern territories of Australia. MacBean highlights the collective working methodology as proof of the divergent interests, style and use for audio-visual technologies of communication by ethnographic filmmakers and by the Aboriginal peoples. Divided into four parts—Police Times, Welfare Times, Struggle for Our Land, Living with Two Laws—the main goal of the film was to provide historical information in order to prove that the Aboriginal system of law was an equally valid form of regulating their relations with one another, to the land and to their property.³⁵ In analyzing the style, MacBean writes, “And even within the film we see the way the film-making process offers material for further work and reflection, as we later see several Aboriginal women activists listening, with ear phones, to the sound tape of that particular conversation—which stirs them to compose a letter offering *their* response to the white laborer.”³⁶ Undoubtedly, the function of the film as a dialogical device influences its aesthetics, further expanding the creative and political possibilities of indigenous filmmaking. *YAOIL* and *Two Laws* are exemplary of what Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay has

³⁴ Ibid., 39.

³⁵ Ibid., 40.

³⁶ Ibid., 43

called the practice of Fourth Cinema or “image sovereignty.”³⁷ The importance of knowledge, property and trust are key foundations of “image sovereignty.” Film scholar Stephen Turner further explains:

“Image sovereignty” thus questions the protocols and practice that govern the making, distribution, reception, and storage of Indigenous media (for instance in libraries and information systems). Ultimately, it questions whether human community is enhanced or diminished by its imaging and archiving, or whether the imperative of imaging and archiving makes an inert object or human community for others (scholars and strangers).³⁸

Understanding this and taking the technology into one’s own hands is the radical praxis of image sovereignty upon which native and indigenous producers are increasingly embarking.

Postmodern Experiments

Such radical praxis can take various media forms. For example, the “radical” in radical documentary produces a different way of viewing and thinking that sometimes jolts audiences out of their often complacent and consumptive positions, allowing for internal moves and shifts. These moves and shifts can be radical without producing immediate material effects, such as shifting popular notions of what constitutes a “Native,” as with the work of Kidlat Tahimik. In a similar spirit of decolonization, a few years later, Tahimik (formerly Eric de Guia), a recent MBA

³⁷ Stephen Turner, “Reflections on Barry Barclay and Fourth Cinema,” in *The Fourth Eye: Maori Media in Aotearoa New Zealand*, eds. Brendan Hokowhitu and Vijay Devadas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 170.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 171, 172.

graduate of the Wharton School of Business at University of Pennsylvania returned to his home in the Philippines to produce *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), which garnered the Critics Award at the Berlin Film Festival. The film is now considered an art house cult classic, mostly due to the fact that he makes his films for Western film festivals, his association with Werner Herzog, and the interests shown for his works from art film critics and educators.³⁹ Mostly independently financed, this semi-autobiographical film stars Kidlat Tahimik himself as the protagonist, who at first idolizes American culture (i.e., the Voice of America broadcasts, the Statue of Liberty and the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant), but who then gradually becomes disillusioned with Western technological superiority and capitalism. Tahimik does so with playful ruminations about postcolonial modernity in the Philippines and its U.S. imperial legacies. By blurring the conventional borders of documentary and fiction, his unique storytelling technique becomes a tactic for eschewing the incessant need for the authentic native informant.

In *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Catherine Russell focuses her analysis on films and videos by producers who are perceived as “others,” and advocates for a critical method of film/video production called experimental ethnography as a way to dismantle realist aesthetics and rethink cultural expression as anything but stable. On Tahimik, she writes: “He produces a subjectivity that is consistently double, inappropriate, and hybrid, signified by the

³⁹ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 295. See Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 311.

body of the Other, a body that is unauthentic, textual, ironic, transnational.”⁴⁰ From Eric de Guia, to Kidlat Tahimik, to “Indigenous,” Tahimik is the quintessential “Inappropriate Other,” both a “deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider,” that Trinh T. Minh-ha seeks to uncover in her own works, the one who “refuses to naturalize the ‘I.’”⁴¹

In her first film, *Reassemblage* (1983), Trinh takes on the underlying assumptions of the ethnographic enterprise to create a polemical work using a metadiscursive framework. In doing so, she unravels notions of objectivity and subjectivity, including her own positionality. Trinh experiments with a personal voice-over narration that refuses to give in to explanation, clarity, or point of view. It wavers between objective sounding facts, poetic fragments, personal anecdotes, and theoretical ruminations. Not quite halfway through the film, we hear her say: “A film about what? my friends ask. A film about Senegal, but what in Senegal? I feel less and less the need to express myself. Is that something else I’ve lost? Something else I’ve lost?” By this point, viewers may begin to wonder whether this “I” speaking is the real Trinh, the confessional Trinh, or the sincere Trinh. Yet, there is a tinge of distrust of the film’s narrator, which further calls on the viewer to question the anthropological drive to capture and know the “woman/native/other.” In 1986, when she proposed the figure of the “Inappropriate Other,” she emphasized that self-reflexivity was just a small fraction of uncovering the work of ideology.⁴² She

⁴⁰ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 300.

⁴¹ Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 74, 76.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 71.

continues: “What is at stake is a practice of subjectivity that is still unaware of its own constituted nature...unaware of its continuous role in the production of meaning...unaware of representation as representation...and, finally, unaware of the Inappropriate Other within every ‘I.’”⁴³

As notions of subjectivity and performativity began to gain theoretical ground, particularly for those who were underrepresented as film/video practitioners, Marcia Langton in 1993 wrote the ground-breaking essay “*Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television*”: *An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things*.⁴⁴ At that time, little anti-colonial critique was written of the thousands of films and videos about Aboriginal people in Australia. Therefore, the essay is written as a prescription, but also to stimulate debate on the theoretical and critical approaches that could guide and inform the Australian Film Commission and those involved with the development of policies and programs to encourage Aboriginal production and distribution. Her essay includes issues on the politics of representation, defining Aboriginality, aesthetics and production. Langton also identifies experimental film and videomaking as vital for expanding notions of self-representation and cultural meaning.

⁴³ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁴ Marcia Langton, “*Well, I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television*”: *An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and About Aboriginal People and Things* (North Sydney, NSW: Australian Film Commission, 1993).

Intracultural Mediations

During this similar time period, an Australian doctorate student in anthropology, Jennifer Deger, began a collaboration with a Yolngu man Bangana Wunungmurra under the Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme. Their collaboration led to the production of the video *Gularri: That Brings Unity* (1997) and her dissertation which became the book *Shimmering Screens* (2006). Produced by Deger and directed by Wunungmurra, *Gularri* tells the story of Gularri, the waters that flow through the Yirritja clan countries and are a source of ancestral significance and identity for the Yolngu people. Keeping in mind broadcast technology, Wunungmurra's aim with *Gularri* was to re-connect and strengthen the identity of the Yolngu diaspora within Australia, "so that the new generation might be drawn back to country, back to *rom*,⁴⁵ and thence, as he said, 'back to where they belong.'"⁴⁶ She explains that Wunungmurra was not necessarily interested in preserving culture, but rather in producing it. That is, *Gularri*, is not a video about ritual. It is a video that produces the *effects* of ritual. The 82-minute video consists of images of the ancestral waterway through aerial shots that follow its path to the sea, and close-up shots of shimmering water, intercut with medium shots of the ritual specialist Charlie Ngalambirra's narrating the story of Gularri, in different locations along the waterway. In certain scenes, he is accompanied by those who are guardians

⁴⁵ Law/culture/proper way.

⁴⁶ Jennifer Deger, *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community*, Visible Evidence, v. 19 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 139.

of the waterway. The soundtrack consists of occasional rhythmic clacking of the clapsticks, singing and water sounds. Wunungmurra's aim is not to represent the Yonglu *ngarra* ceremony that is held annually, but to produce the mindful and sensuous engagement leading to Ancestral revelation and connection experienced in *ngarra*. In seeing the shimmering patterns created above and below the water's surface, he explains:

'Even though they are not there, they are really. Yonglu know those patterns are there, and when they watch they can see their *dhulang*,⁴⁷ their *gamununggu*,⁴⁸ and it will make them feel closer to their country, and all the other clans with similar paintings. Bring them all together... Yolngu, *dharpa* [trees] *gapu* [water], *wanga* [country], *maddayin* [sacra] everything....'⁴⁹

First and foremost, *Gularri* is a video made by a Yonglu man for Yonglu people. Its intended effects are described by Deger via Heideggerian phenomenology, a field that began to inform film theory, through the work of ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall and film scholar Laura U. Marks. Regarding Marks's concept of culture in her book *Skin of the Film* (2000), Deger points to the limits of Marks's analysis in relation to indigenous productions in that Marks does not account for the differences in "histories and lifeworlds" of the intercultural makers she features.

Deger asserts:

Ultimately the problem with this film-based theory is that by focusing on filmic language as the means by which cultural difference is asserted and contested (even if resignified or sensually evoked through

⁴⁷ Design relating to the ancestral.

⁴⁸ Sacred clan designs.

⁴⁹ Deger, *Shimmering Screens*, 205.

a ‘native’ filmmaker’s lens), it potentially ignores other levels at which culture might be represented, reproduced, or even revised.⁵⁰

The implication here is that media anthropology, rather than film studies, might be better suited to tackle the complexities of culture in our increasingly mediated lives. After all, culture is anthropology’s object of study *par excellence*. Further, Deger is concerned with Marks’s use of difference in her study as marked against “the West” in that it “gains its strengths from and against the dominant discourses of the West (male, colonial, white), one that doesn’t consider adequately the cultural contexts and meanings from which those works derive.”⁵¹

Despite Deger’s position, Marks’s and Deger’s culture projects are not wholly incompatible or irreconcilable, and have the potential to offer dynamic working processes—one that I explored with the *Tongues of Heaven* documentary. Marks’s study is an attempt to foreground the works of cultural minorities by emphasizing the dynamic relationship between dominant “host” cultures and minority cultures. She writes: “Intercultural indicates a context that cannot be confined to a single culture. It also suggests movement between one culture and another, thus implying diachrony and the possibility of transformation.”⁵² Thus, filmmakers of intercultural cinema are located at the intersections of at least two cultural regimes of knowledge, and therefore must deal with the issues of where “meaningful knowledge is located, in the awareness that it is between cultures and so can never be fully verified in the terms of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 6.

one regime over the other.”⁵³ According to Marks, these works are best conceived when the screen is seen as a “membrane” that engages viewers with the material forms of memory contained in these works. In the case of *Gularri*, Deger details the cultural conditions that lead Wunungmurra to produce the video in the first place. In Marks’s framework, what cultural regimes of knowledge is Wunungmurra contending with? Deger’s in-depth study seems to imply one cultural regime: the Yonglu culture. However, what I see Wunungmurra contending with is the fragmentation and possible loss of a Yonglu sense of identity, due in part to out migration primarily *within* the settler nation territory of Australia. Therefore I would argue that the two cultural regimes of knowledge he must confront through his work are the cultural spaces of one’s native land, and the cultural spaces that are lived outside and away from the land. Hence purpose, process and production of *Gularri* serve as the inter-activities from which *Gularri* becomes the mediating device among different cultural spaces that Wunungmurra desires to connect. By focusing more on the nature of the “inter-” activities (which includes acts of intervention) of intercultural nonfiction media productions, whether marginal or dominant, a middle-ground can be attained between an anthropological trend of “native” culture as sacred and an other of film studies’ audio-visual aspect as exotic sensorium.

However, these inter-activities produce not only intercultural film and video works but also ones that are *intracultural*. Intracultural media productions, which I define as media produced primarily for those with similar cultural backgrounds,

⁵³ Ibid., 24.

nuance both of Deger's and Mark's discursive frameworks on media and culture. They offer pathways to tackle problems tied to the land that often impact the livelihoods of indigenous peoples. As with *YAOIL* and *Gularri*, such intracultural non-fiction productions and distribution tactics can mediate, communicate, and bring people together on issues affecting them—some of these relate to fragmentation and disintegration of community, culture, identity, and in our case, language. As an interventionist mode of production aimed at those who are most materially affected by the issues at stake, intracultural documentary production can then be situated within the discourse of image sovereignty, and as a critical strand of radical documentary praxis —what *Tongues of Heaven* aims to be.

Digital Documentary Praxis: *Tongues of Heaven*

A Place

The documentary *Tongues of Heaven* arose from colonialism's wreckage caused by successive colonial regimes in Taiwan, most notably from the early twentieth century to today. Several centuries of colonial violence included forced assimilation, more recently during the Japanese (1896-1945) and Kuomintang (1949-1987) regimes, which included the compulsory adoption of their languages, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese, respectively. Starting with the lifting of martial law in 1987, marking Taiwan's entrance into a participatory democracy for the first time in the island's history, Taiwan's indigenous peoples have steadily gained more recognition and influence in state-level matters, including education. While the early days of *bentuhua* (best translated as "Taiwanization") were Han Chinese-centric, the main opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), saw the need to downplay the prevalent dichotomy between Hoklo Taiwanese and the Chinese Mainlanders (settler autocratic rulers from 1949-1987).¹ Hence, they created the concept of *si da zu quan*, "big four ethnic groups," which included the Hoklo, Chinese Mainlanders,

¹ J. Bruce Jacobs, "'Taiwanization' in Taiwan's Politics," in *Cultural, Ethnic and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan*, eds. John Makeham and A-chin Hsiau (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 18. Other English translations of *bentuhua*, literally "on-going process of this earth," are "nativization," "localization," "indigenization." However, as Jacobs notes, these terms are vague and misleading, whereas *bentu*, "this earth" refers directly to the island of Taiwan.

Hakka, and “aborigines of Malay-Polynesian origin.”² This ethnic framework of “strategic essentialisms” has since been used to build coalitions and to handle ethnic and nationalist issues. For example, while China continues to claim Taiwan as its territory, and to aim for official reunification, Taiwan independence advocates stake sovereignty claims on the grounds of Taiwan’s distinct histories, ethnicities, cultures and languages. The push toward self-determination entailed a culturalism that also served the purpose of differentiating itself from China. As museum studies scholar Marzia Varutti details in her study of museums in Taiwan, this period was one in which “cultural institutions such as museums were also charged with the task of *making visible* the multicultural and local character of Taiwanese culture.”³ Of course, the question of how that visibility should look depends on who is funding this endeavor. For example, indigenous peoples often get swept up into nationalist politics, “valued” for their “distinct” ethnicity, culture and language, all of which they must prove and showcase. However, symbolic recognition is easier to come by than accepting indigenous peoples’ claim to land use rights, and sovereignty, or appropriate educational support in areas such as effective native language instruction. Nonetheless, indigenous activism rose and indigenous peoples found greater representation and recognition within governmental entities. One of the results was

² A-chin Hsiau, “The Indigenization of Taiwanese Literature,” in *Cultural, Ethnic and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan*, eds. John Makeham, and A-chin Hsiau (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 144.

³ Marzia Varutti, “Towards Social Inclusion in Taiwan: Museums, Equality and Indigenous Groups” in *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice*, eds. Richard Sandell, and Eithne Nightingale (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 246.

the establishment of the College of Indigenous Studies in 2001 at National Dong Hwa University (NDHU), a public university located in eastern Taiwan's Hualien county, which is home to one-quarter of Taiwan's indigenous population. The College of Indigenous Studies is also the only one of its kind on the island.

A Filmmaker

My own creative practice developed out of a desire to tell stories centered on the experiences of minorities, immigrants, exiles, Asian American women, and disenfranchised communities. These interests arose partly due to my own experiences of existing in a country where its media landscape was—and arguably still is—bereft of images that reflect my experiences as an Asian American woman, and partly due to my family's experiences as exiles, and my own background doing social justice work in the civil rights field. I was inspired to pursue documentary filmmaking in the service of social justice when I first saw *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* in 1987 and listened to filmmaker Christine Choy talk about her experiences making the film. Choy's work is significant in that it gave visibility to both a grave social injustice inflicted upon Asian Americans and to their lives and concerns. While Asian Americans have been subject to their fair share of stereotypes and typecasting, what remains persistent throughout the history of U.S. mainstream media is their near media invisibility. Media scholar Glen Mimura goes as far as to spectralize Asian American experiences in U.S. history, and Asian American media within Asian

American Studies and Third Cinema discourses. He explains: “[P]erhaps the most salient characteristic of Asian Americans’ symbolic racialization is that we ceaselessly ‘disappear,’ ghostlike, in public cultural and national political discourses, only to persistently reappear as ‘stranger’ or perpetual foreigners—that is, symbolically out of place and outside of history.”⁴ In the meantime, images of “Asia,” “Asian,” and Asian-ness continue to permeate and persist in the U.S. media landscape, and often times in not so pleasant terms. Despite Mimura’s lucid and ‘ghostly’ predictions, media activists and artists like myself, along with predecessors like Choy, continue to labor over the expression and presentation of Asian American stories and sensibilities to anyone who might be interested, but most notably, to Asian American viewers.

However, beyond mere representation of those who are mis- or under-represented are my interests in how documentary filmmaking can expose the conditions that produce existences lived in marginality. Third Cinema theory offers a useful conceptual framework for exploring these issues in my previous works, as well as in the current work, *Tongues of Heaven*. Third Cinema is the only film theory to have originated outside a Euro-American context, and since its articulation by Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in 1969, Third Cinema theory has been reexamined, debated, neglected, marginalized, pronounced dead and

⁴ Glen M. Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 64.

recuperated primarily by those in the media studies field.⁵ This is an indication that Third Cinema theory was open and flexible enough to adapt to various contexts of shifting political and economic conditions that continue to repress and exploit. A main tenet of Third Cinema theory is one of “practice, search and experimentation.”⁶ Solanas and Getino write: “The attempt to overcome neocolonial oppression calls for the invention of forms of communication; *it opens up the possibility.*”⁷ Subsequently, with each showing, this cinema provokes a “liberated space, a decolonized territory.”⁸ As a practitioner then, Third Cinema’s decolonizing framework is simultaneously arriving at a new consciousness and carving out spaces of freedom, whether physical or psychic—spaces needed to imagine, invent and construct new realities, identities and futures.

With regard to experimental filmmaking practices, Maya Deren, an early practitioner and theorist of experimental avant-garde cinema became my first inspiration, particularly in her search for a film language that could communicate the

⁵ See Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1982); Jim Pines, *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: BFI, 1991); Robert Stam, “Third Cinema Revisited” in *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); Anthony R. Guneratne, Wimal Dissanayake and Sumita S. Chakravarty, *Rethinking Third Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003); Frieda Ekotto and Adeline Koh, *Rethinking Third Cinema: The Role of Anti-Colonial Media and Aesthetics in Postmodernity* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009); and Sourav Roychowdhury, “Cinema 4.5? Legacies of Third Cinema at the Age of Informational Capitalism” (PhD Diss., University of Southern California, 2010).

⁶ Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema” in *Movies and Methods, Vol. 1*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 61. See also Robert Stam, “Third World Film and Theory,” *Film Theory*, 92-102.

⁸ *Ibid.*

psychic wounds of wartime atrocities.⁹ Deren and other filmmakers' attempts to represent the unrepresentable, along with Third Cinema's decolonizing framework, and my involvement in San Francisco's vibrant independent film scene intersected to make cinematic experimentation a viable critical practice in my own documentary works. I experiment with creative techniques and methodologies that offer openings and attend to slippages in film/video language in order to acknowledge both what Trinh T. Minh-ha argues is the constructedness of all documentaries, and what Bill Nichols believes is the social representational function of documentary regarding the world we live in.¹⁰ Equally important is how I name my work, which then creates certain expectations for viewers. For example, in calling my work "an experimental documentary," the word "documentary" indicates a mode of audience reception in which the stakes of reality imaged and presented before audiences are different than those in a fiction film. Even fiction films that present themselves as "based on a true story" shift the mode of reception, and perhaps perceived stakes, for viewers with the idea that what they are about to see happened in our world. However, a "documentary" means that the contents are real and happening in the world as delineated for you by the director(s). These are the reasons to be aware of what is happening in this particular world I choose to show viewers. And if the documentary

⁹ See Ann E. Kaplan's insightful essay "The Ethics of Witnessing: Maya Deren and Tracy Moffatt" in *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," *October* 52 (1990): 88; Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 15.

addresses social issues, these are the reasons why we should care, and perhaps get involved in alleviating the issues.

As someone who works within a Third Cinema framework, showing the processes of the problem is a key aspect of my practice for which experimentation is often required. At times, political cinema production experimentation means working toward what is oppositional or counter to mainstream dominant media. Rather, searching for and experimenting toward what is alternative or new avoids “prescriptive aesthetics.”¹¹ Third Cinema Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea is one example of a practitioner and theorist whose works I find to have particular resonance. This is due primarily to his commitment to finding a (post)colonial film language or strategy that addresses hegemonic cinematic codes and invents forms, associations and methods to create a new aesthetic in the audio-visual landscape. These efforts acknowledge the stubborn structures of economic domination and exploitation that continue to this day across the globe, and propose an alternative cinema that aims to confront these issues. In his essay, “The Viewer's Dialectic,” Alea writes: “Cinema can draw viewers closer to reality without giving up its condition of unreality, fiction, and other-reality. This happens when and if it lays down a bridge to reality so that viewers can return laden with experiences and stimulation.”¹² Keeping in mind “this bridge to reality” is important when engaging

¹¹ Paul Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections” in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines (London: BFI, 1991), 7.

¹² Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, “The Viewer’s Dialectic” in *New Latin American Cinema: Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Articulations*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 123.

with discursive or aesthetic experimentation such as through hand-processing footage, using filters, altering temporal and spatial movements, using found footage, etc. The experimentation I refer to here is a form of practice whereby—along with the cinematic pleasures of other worldly imagery and soundscapes—concepts, theories, intentions, methodologies and on-the-ground activities are tested and “experimented with.” Risks must be taken, and mistakes are inevitable. This is critical to the viewing experience I aim for, one that encourages dialogue instigated by the dialectics arising from within the text, image and audio themselves, as well as the relationship between the work’s form and content. A new cinematic language can mean a new social imaginary—one that offers a projection of solidarities that acknowledge planetary effects, connections, interdependence, and a utopian guide for change grounded in depictions of daily struggles.

Therefore, when I come upon an idea for a documentary, I ask myself: How do I find a form that works dialectically with the content and vice versa? This involves several considerations, such as the themes, concepts, relationships that make up the content, along with the formal aspects of the medium, which includes its display and the potential spaces surrounding it. Finding this form is particularly challenging when working collaboratively across borders, nationalities, multiple languages, cultures, class, generations, sensibilities and personalities, which have characterized my collaborative efforts in Taiwan with the films *62 Years and 6,500 Miles Between* (2005), *Joyful Life* (2007), and my latest work *Tongues of Heaven* (2013). As a filmmaker and teacher of documentary and Third Cinema, I was hired to

teach digital film in the NDHU's Department of Indigenous Languages and Communication (DILC). The DILC is comprised of linguists, communication scholars and media practitioners. This gave me the opportunity to put into productive relations my own independent filmmaking practices with Taiwan's struggling localized cinema landscape that still exists alongside mainstream media but is often eclipsed by imported foreign films. What is the nature of working among such differences that seem at once distancing, yet intimate? How can the positionality of being Taiwanese American facilitate or thwart collaboration abroad in Taiwan? What does it mean as a Taiwanese American to feel connected, get involved and engage in communitarian, solidarity-building activities? How can a collaborative filmmaking praxis in Asia contribute to a collaborative praxis in the U.S.?

An Idea

While teaching in the DILC from 2006 to 2010, I was made keenly aware of a certain lament by my students for their limited if not entire lack of ability to speak their mother tongue. They knew that they and their peers did not speak their heritage languages and if their generation did not learn and pass down those languages, the languages would most likely be gone. My students' linguistic heritage comes from one or more of the at least sixteen distinct indigenous languages, Minnan and Hakka. In addition to the sixteen indigenous languages that currently correspond to the sixteen current officially recognized indigenous groups, ten other indigenous groups

have yet to be recognized. Many students come from mixed heritages and are sometimes exposed to multiple languages. Their lament foregrounded my own. Though my parents are ethnically mixed (Hoklo, Hakka, Pinpu), they spoke Minnan at home, and this became my first language. I lost my ability to speak it at age six when I began learning English in the United States, although I can still understand it. However, the conversations with my students were not only about a sense of loss but the conditions that make it difficult for them to learn or re-gain fluency in their heritage languages. Mandarin is the official language in Taiwan and some schools, depending on teacher availability, will offer minority language classes, but rarely enough to achieve fluency. As such, some students chose to attend DILC to learn more about their heritage and study their language(s). My linguistics colleagues also served as an inspiration for the documentary. One day, Yueh-Chen Chien, a sociolinguist, handed me her copy of David Crystal's *Language Death*, which made it clear how high the stakes are in language loss for humanity. Linguists estimate that at least 3,000 of the world's 6-7,000 languages are liable to disappear before the year 2100; that is, two languages disappearing each month.¹³ With 96% of the world's population speaking only 4% of the world's languages, I wondered what does it mean to speak one's mother tongue? Or for that matter, what does one lose when one loses one's heritage language?¹⁴

¹³ David Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 19.

¹⁴ The documentary is meant to instigate dialogue, rather than to project a definite view that language revitalization is a must.

Given my observation over a course of two years of the conundrum of language death for my students, and regarding my own declining competency in my heritage language, in consultation with my students, we decided that tackling the issue of language endangerment through a collaborative documentary would be a worthwhile effort for us. In my recruitment of young collaborating co-directors through a Media Management course I taught, two students An-Chi Chen and Shin-Lan Yu, who are both indigenous, enthusiastically joined the team, while a few others wanted to share their stories for the film. The documentary focuses on young indigenous peoples' perspectives for two main reasons. One is that the two individuals who showed the most interest in the topic and desire to co-direct are two indigenous women. The second reason is the sheer fact that the extinction of Taiwan's indigenous languages is more imminent given the lower numbers of speakers, compared to the number of other minority language speakers; and these languages are not being passed down.¹⁵ The inclusion of Hawai'i was initiated by the College's Dean at that time, who had a few years ago visited the renowned Ke Kula 'o Nāwahīokalani 'ōpu'u (Living Hawaiian Life-Force School), a K-12 immersion school in Hilo on the Big Island. He encouraged us to visit the school. Our team also felt that a comparative approach would be fruitful, particularly with Hawai'i, which was known worldwide for its language revitalization efforts. Finally, An-Chi and

¹⁵ A low number of speakers does not necessarily constitute language endangerment if the language is being used and passed on, though it is one indicator of endangerment according to linguist Robert Blust.

Shin-Lan also believed that speaking with other indigenous youth their age could foster insight and support as they confront the daunting prospect of language loss.

Bringing Taiwan and Hawai‘i together however, produced other discursive effects. At that time, an influential DNA study that was also publicized through *The New York Times* concluded that Polynesians and Micronesians have no genetic relationship to Melanesians.¹⁶ Rather, the data showed that Polynesians and Micronesians are most closely related to Taiwan Aborigines and East Asians.¹⁷ The DNA study corroborated similar findings in the fields of archaeology and linguistics.¹⁸ Linguistically, Taiwan is home to nine of the ten Austronesian language subgroups. One-fifth of the world speaks an Austronesian language, spanning a large area of Oceania, which includes Taiwan, the Philippines, Madagascar, most of Indonesia, parts of New Guinea and Island Melanesia, as well as all of Micronesia and Polynesia. Taiwan is generally considered the cradle of the Austronesian language.

On the geo-political front, juxtaposing Taiwan and Hawai‘i re-orient these islands in the Pacific to foreground their colonial pasts and presents in relation to the continental nation-states of China and U.S., respectively. Taiwan and Hawai‘i are

¹⁶ J.S Friedlaender, F.R Friedlaender, F.A Reed, K.K Kidd, J.R Kidd, G.K Chambers, R.A Lea, J.-H Loo, G Koki, J.A Hodgson, D.A Merriwether, and J.L Weber. “The Genetic Structure of Pacific Islanders” in *PLOS Genetics* 4, no. 1 (2008): 173-190; John Noble Wilford, “Pacific Islanders’ Ancestry Emerges in Genetic Study,” *New York Times*, January 18, 2008, A6.

¹⁷ Our teams in Taiwan and in Hawai‘i are cognizant of how scientific data often conflict with indigenous peoples’ creation stories, yet take such data as a launching pad for further discussion.

¹⁸ Jared M. Diamond, “Linguistics: Taiwan's Gift to the World,” in *Nature*, no. 403.6771 (2000): 709.

islands that continue to seek sovereignty from two of the most influential nations on the globe. For the Taiwanese filmmakers, journeying to Hawai‘i to witness its language revitalization movement in action is not merely about learning successful language models, but an opportunity as well, to reflect upon similar socio-political histories of colonization and language suppression. Such parallel phenomena continue today for indigenous peoples in different parts of the world: A generation or two are punished for speaking their language, leading to the near extinction of their language and the realization that if something is not done, the language will be lost.¹⁹

Locating Capital

Media funding possesses its own politics and ideological underpinnings. Since I was keen on limiting artistic constraints for this particular work, especially given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, this intention influenced where and how I sought funding. One of the issues with artist funding in any country is whether a nation can handle critique and dissent in the hands of artists, particularly mediamakers. I was hesitant to seek funding from Taiwan Public Television Service Foundation because the media organization was undergoing major restructuring after the Kuomintang (KMT) party government went into office. For example, the KMT-affiliated board of directors demanded an increase to 60% in Chinese-themed television programming. In the past, colonial institutions like schools, universities and

¹⁹ Linguist Robert Blust emphasized this point at *Tongues of Heaven* public screening (University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa, HI, October 16, 2013).

museums were supported primarily to legitimize the colonial project and build a national imaginary bolstered by these structures. However, even as Taiwan moved toward democratic governance in the late 1990s, state funding always expected cultural and educational institutions to tow the party line. Funding resources are often tied to their particular interests. Funding amounts and requirements are currently dictated by the dominant two parties: the KMT, which is a vestige from colonial days with an ultimate aim for reunification with China; and the DPP, created as an opposition party to the KMT with a pro-independence stance. Beginning in 2008, the highly publicized account of controlling cultural content occurred with Taiwan public television. The ruling KMT party withheld funding from the organization's broadcast sector until greater Chinese-themed content was included, thus exemplifying the subtle and blatant ways in which state funding influences what kinds of cultural visibilities can emerge in the public landscape.

In 2008, I was fortunate to receive one of very few artist-merit grants in the U.S. from Creative Capital for the production of *Tongues of Heaven*. Additional funding came from the National Geographic's All Roads Film Project seed grant, established in 2004 to provide a "global platform for indigenous and under-represented minority-culture filmmakers around the world to showcase their talents and cultures to a broader audience."²⁰ All funded works were considered for programming in the annual All Roads Film Festival and other National Geographic-affiliated broadcast outlets. While the National Geographic Society is a non-profit

²⁰ "National Geographic Milestones," *National Geographic*, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://press.nationalgeographic.com/about-national-geographic/milestones>.

organization, its television division became a business enterprise in 1995, and in 1997 it went international, boasting a subscription of over 350 million viewers in 172 countries in 37 languages by 2012.²¹ Its funding structure is a combination of membership contributions from individuals, foundations, U.S. Federal agencies and corporations. The Society's rhetoric and mission are admirable: "We believe in the power of science, exploration and storytelling to change the world." Yet the "change" it imagines taking place through these endeavors is vague enough to accommodate the major corporate donors and weapons production partners like Lockheed Martin, and extractive industry partners like Shell and British Petroleum—companies that arguably do considerable damage to the planet.²² Nonetheless, Mark Bauman, the founding director of the All Roads Film Project believed that what the program was doing was "critical in the current age of global conflict and mistrust" and that "The world is in need of more answers and more perspectives on a lot of the issues that we seem unable to solve now."²³ Notable advisory board members included Māori filmmaker Merata Mita and Spike Lee. However, in 2013 the All Roads Film Project was dismantled, noting officially that it "did not generate the audience needed to sustain it as a separate strand of programming," thus speaking to the precariousness of alternative funding and programming approaches for profit-driven media entities.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "The Power of Philanthropy," *National Geographic*, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/explorers/support/annualreport13/files/Donors.pdf>.

²³ Stefan Lovgren, "Nat'l Geographic Film Fest Gives Voice to Unsung Cultures," *National Geographic News*, October 28, 2004, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/10/1028_041028_all_roads.html.

This signals that no consideration or possibility can be given to the time it may take to generate or engage new audiences, or to valuing niche viewing as an equally quality experience.

In her book *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*, film scholar Patricia Zimmermann urges that independent documentaries need to rethink their future and purpose in light of the assaults against documentaries in the U.S. due to increasing deregulation of public telecommunications globally, privatization of the media sector, and conservative governance. She writes:

This is a war over a discursive territory, a war over how the public spaces of the nation are defined and mapped, a war between the faux homogeneity of corporatist multiculturalism that absorbs and vaporizes difference and a radical heterogeneity that positions difference(s) and conflict(s) as a core of contestation over identity with frisson as its modus operandi.²⁴

In her study, she offers numerous examples of such attacks, with one being funding. She demonstrates that grants for documentaries have diminished dramatically over the last twenty years in the U.S. What was formerly a venue to showcase low budget independent film productions, the Sundance film festival has gradually become a marketplace for a different kind of film production where “independent” is often appropriated for aesthetic and marketing purposes. Currently, big budget documentaries for Sundance or public television are generally conservative forms, as they need to be character-driven and use genre conventions of narrative structure.²⁵

For example, prior to receiving the two grants for *Tongues of Heaven*, locating

²⁴ Patricia R. Zimmermann, *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

funding was initially challenging. What I found compelling was how the film project, as I had proposed it, was not appropriate for U.S. public television funding. One reviewer's comments encapsulated this for me:

Telling a story about language is difficult so the quality of the characters and their stories become really important. What I find intriguing about this project is also what I find challenging. I can see by the sample tape that Anita is able to craft an interesting story using this technique. But there has to be a *narrative thread that is interesting enough to keep a general audience engaged...*(my emphasis).

The above comments remind me of Elizabeth Povinelli's notion of eventfulness. As an anthropologist and mediamaker, whose life long research with Aborigines of the Northern Territory in Australia with the latest being the Belyuen community via the Karrabing Film Collective founded in 2010, Povinelli's critical theories engage with what she calls "late liberalism." She argues that in late liberalism, the ethical demands of lethality must conform to the spectacular—the catastrophic, crisis-laden and sublime, in order to garner "empathic identification." Late liberalism, having entered a "new stage of reflexivity," is a "belated response to the challenge of social difference produced in the wake of anticolonial and new social movements, and the alternative social world and projects potentially sheltered there."²⁶ Thus late liberalism is a social plan that aggregates social worlds through "figurations of tense, eventfulness and ethical substance," and any individual or groups considered the "social otherwise" would have to "find a way of persisting and enduring in these late liberal ways of making live, making die, and letting die."²⁷ Mass media certainly

²⁶ Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

contributes to what constitutes these ethical demands of lethality through the kinds of visibilities it makes possible. But what about the “slow rhythms of death” that occur in the wake of such catastrophe, such as that of language death? What of understanding lethality “within its own terms (its dailiness, ordinariness, livedness)”?²⁸ The “public” in public television has become increasingly privatized, particularly in the U.S., with the idea that “any social investment that does not have a clear end in market value... fails economically and morally.”²⁹ Instead, what matters for television broadcast has largely been dominant modes of eventfulness in storytelling that can hold a general audience supposedly conditioned to three-act structure storytelling, and happy or hopeful endings. Yet, for my co-directors and me, it is through the very ordinariness of struggling with one’s heritage language and its attending issues that the nuances of agency, will and accountability, can be brought to light. In the end, some funders believed we could do this, and fortunately without much restriction. Sometimes cracks and gaps in the system—whether in the name of “corporatized multiculturalism”—exist, are created, sought or discovered, that allow independent producers such as myself, albeit for a brief moment, to engage in a spirited documentary practice with radicality and experimentation.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 153.

²⁹ Ibid., 23.

³⁰ Zimmermann, *States of Emergency*, 49.

Working Together

Our documentary would become both an intercultural and intracultural production due to the very nature of the topic of indigenous language endangerment and revitalization, the institutional and personal alliances across Pacific Rim territories, and the small population numbers of indigenous communities we were working with. In our preparations for assembling the production team for *Tongues of Heaven*, I contacted the Academy of Creative Media at the University of Hawai'i since they were offering a course on Indigenous Filmmaking. The renowned Māori filmmaker Merata Mita (who passed away in 2010) was teaching the course at that time; she was also one of the founding members of the Advisory Board for the National Geographic All Roads Project. Although we were aware of the small numbers of indigenous students in our production courses, we shared our efforts to nurture new talent in the growing field of indigenous media.³¹ For example, Māori Television had launched in 2004 and Taiwan Indigenous Television (TITV) in 2005, the first in Asia. When I started teaching at DILC in 2006, TITV needed trained indigenous producers and the DILC was one of the primary sources for their station. Merata, instead, led me to her former student, Malia Nobrega, who became the field producer for the film. Malia herself learned Hawaiian at UH, became a media and technology specialist at the UH Center for Hawaiian Language, and continues to be an active participant in United Nations meetings like the United Nations Permanent

³¹ Merata had one Native Hawaiian student in her class and that he did not speak Hawaiian. Merata Mita, e-mail message to author, April 13, 2008.

Forum on Indigenous Issues, and other international forums on biodiversity and bioprospecting. Aware of the dearth of indigenous women filmmakers in general, Malia suggested that we make the team all women. At that time, Taiwan did not have any indigenous women directors. The first film made by a Taiwanese indigenous woman appeared in 2011 with the feature narrative *Finding Sayun* (Laha Mebow). Therefore, Malia suggested we recruit two young women, Kainoa Kaupu and Hau'oli Waiau, and by August 2008, our team of six women was ready to begin our collaboration, one that would span the next two years (figures 2.1 and 2.2).



Figure 2.1. Co-directors meet in Honolulu, *left to right*: Kainoa Kaupu, An-Chi Chen, Apay Ai-Yu (translator) Tang, Shin-Lan Yu, and Hau'oli Waiau



Figure 2.2. The film crew visits the Ke Kula ‘o Nāwahīokalani ‘ōpu‘u (Living Hawaiian Life-Force School), a K-12 immersion school in Hilo on the Big Island. *Left to right, front row:* Steve Fujimura, Anita Chang, An-Chi Chen, Shin-Lan Yu, Kainoa Kaupu, and Malia Nobrega

Filmmaking is generally a collaborative medium. However, since I began making films in Taiwan, namely with the production of *62 Years and 6,500 Miles Between* (2005), *Joyful Life* (2007) and *Tongues of Heaven* (2013), the conscious decision to think and work collaboratively have lead me to critically evaluate my and my collaborators’ working methodologies in order to propose a modest blueprint for an aesthetically, ethically and politically engaged documentary collaborative praxis. Visual anthropologist and filmmaker Sarah Elder offers solid guidelines to follow, particularly in situations of potentially unequal power relations. She advocates establishing horizontal power relationships as much as possible where “each is

accountable to the other.”³² She writes, “Accountability to one’s community is experienced in many ways: through kinship, shared geography, reputation, economics, love, or a mutual moral base.”³³ In assessing accountability, I find it necessary to understand how I, as a filmmaker, and the people involved come together in the first place to make a documentary. From whom and where did the idea for the documentary emerge? How and where were the resources acquired for producing the work? For this particular work involving several communities, what kinds of community(ies) were summoned or activated as a result? Activating or bringing community(ies) together through the filmmaking process involves determining whether the relationship with filmmakers is an ongoing one, or a provisional one. If provisional, what mutual contributions can filmmakers and community members make to a spatially circumscribed community? If ongoing, what are the interests in the continuity and sustainability for such practice?

My experiences making films in Taiwan have been centered within temporary communities, built from global community interests, tied to a place. My use of the term “community” comes from new media scholar Michele Willson’s broad definition of community as “ways of being-together.”³⁴ For Willson, sociality and membership in traditional, modern and postmodern communities vary based on choice. Sociality and membership in traditional communities is not by choice,

³² Sarah Elder, “Collaborative Filmmaking: An Open Space for Making Meaning, A Moral Ground for Ethnographic Film,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 2 (1995): 97.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Michele A. Willson, *Technically Together: Re-Thinking Community Within Techno-Society* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 1.

whereas in modern communities, membership is by choice. In postmodern communities, however, choice can be extended in both traditional and modern communities. Willson argues that this increase of community memberships and “specialization” of communities lead to a tendency toward less commitment and thereby “less individual risk and less comprehensive bonding for participants.”³⁵ Where then is community filmmaking situated with respect to degrees of commitment, risk and bonding, particularly, for filmmakers? What is the level of commitment to the community for the filmmaker, and the degree of individual risks or stakes to the filmmaker? That is, who is most materially affected by the work—especially for a postcolonial community that often includes its diasporic members? Hence, an ethics of collaboration is needed. In this regard, Elder presents a set of important questions to consider in collaborative documentary productions: “Who owns my image, you or me? What constitutes an image? Who should control its design and benefit from that design? Which culture’s concept of ownership does the filmmaker honor? Hers or the subject’s?”³⁶

As the one who spent the most time and effort to produce and co-direct the three documentaries shot primarily in Taiwan, I have considered additional questions to accountability, such as how can the positionality of being Taiwanese American facilitate or thwart collaboration abroad in Taiwan? What is the nature of working among such differences that seem at once distancing, yet intimate? How can distance be theorized as a potent mediator? What does it mean as a Taiwanese American to

³⁵ Ibid., 41.

³⁶ Ibid., 97.

feel connected, get involved and engage in communitarian, solidarity-building activities? How might such collaborative praxis carried out in the context of Asia expand the radical possibilities of Asian American independent filmmaking?³⁷ Filmmakers' identification(s) with their subjects, when based on identity-markers such as race, ethnicity and/or gender can bring certain sensibilities to the treatment of their works such as deeper engagement, knowledge and sensitivities. Yet these identification(s) do not necessarily absolve or lessen other differences or the outsidedness that film collaborators experience.

With regards to inhabiting both my own sense of insidedness and outsidedness as a collaborator, extending to the more solitary endeavor of editing, I draw on two different concepts to address such insider/outsider status, particularly relevant to my own diasporic condition. The first is literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "creative understanding" and second, new media artist Beth Coleman's theory of "race as technology." On creative understanding Bakhtin writes:

Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*. ...A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a

³⁷ These questions are addressed in the essay "On the Communal Other: Collaborative Documentary Praxis in *Joyful Life*," in *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 177-187. I also analyze the film's context, development, and methodology in order to theorize a social documentary practice that is reflexively integrated with the wider issues at hand.

kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths.³⁸

Late in the passage Bakhtin writes, “Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched.”³⁹ Bakhtin’s idea of creative understanding offers a useful framework for cross-cultural engagement, particularly in situations of difference or incommensurability. Literary scholar Michael Holquist describes Bakhtin’s interest in exceeding boundaries and at the same time the need to be aware of the “biological limits of our perception, the structure of language, and the laws of society.”⁴⁰ However, Bakhtin’s notion of no merging or mixing of cultures does not account for interactions between individuals with bicultural backgrounds like myself; that is, having grown up with and between two cultures. It also assumes “unity,” when time, space and culture are in constant flux. This brings me to Coleman’s notion of the “flux of race,” and its usefulness, in addition to Bakhtin’s “creative understanding,” to theorizing a collaborative practice that takes into consideration both myself and my collaborators as racially Asian.

³⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail, “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ Michael Holquist, introduction to *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), xix.

In conceptualizing race as a technology, Coleman argues for a re-tooling of race first, as a self-extension that “may be exploited to liberate race from an inherited position of abjection toward a greater expression of agency.”⁴¹ For Coleman, agency “indicates presence, will, and movement—the ability to move freely as a being,” and it also includes systems that are concerned with “how beings are subjected in systems of power, ideology, and other networks.”⁴² By exercising such agency then, Coleman argues that “race as technology” is a “disruptive technology that changes the terms of engagement with an all-too-familiar system of representation and power.”⁴³ This in turn offers a “prosthetic logic” whereby “the historical weight of racism may be transmuted into a lightness (or speed) of being,” and that “[p]erhaps this ‘light subject’ portends a metaphysics of race, in which race and technology are linked not to settle human limits but instead to explore human thresholds.”⁴⁴ While Bahktin’s “creative understanding” addresses working alongside borders of these human limits, Coleman is suggesting a way to explore these borders or thresholds. Thus, for an Asian American filmmaker working in Asia, or a Taiwanese American filmmaker working in Taiwan, a respectful and meaningful collaborative filmmaking praxis entails a continual enactment of “creative understanding” when outsiderness is more clearly felt. At the same time, a racial—and one could extend Coleman’s theory to ethnicity and gender—prosthetic logic could explore where those racial thresholds

⁴¹ Beth Coleman, “Race As Technology,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 70 (2009): 177.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

meet and intersect, allowing for new, creative and perhaps greater exercise of agency in the collective struggle.

In many ways, *Tongues of Heaven*'s collaborative process can be more closely described through art historian Miwon Kwon's idea of a "collective art praxis" as a "*projective* enterprise." I interpret Kwon's use of the term "projective" to mean a mode of community-based art practice that is not determined by the community's "authenticity" as described ("descriptive"), but by a practice that is projected from various directions that unsettle notions of otherness. Her flexible framework allows for a more complex set of relations. She writes:

[Collective art praxis] involves a provisional group, produced as a function of specific circumstances instigated by an artist and/or a cultural institution, aware of the effects of these circumstances on the very conditions of the interaction, performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessary incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process. Here, a coherent representation of a group's identity is always out of grasp.⁴⁵

Kwon is referring specifically to site-specific artist- and/or institutionally-led enterprises, in which the artist is often an outsider who enters into a community that is often circumscribed as a marginalized other, and she proposes a praxis that acknowledges the constant flux of identities. The degree of outsiderness or positionality of the artist of course is not always so clear-cut, and so I would add to Kwon's "identities": affinities. Our small filming team was established on such affinities—our passion for filmmaking and harnessing its expressive potentials, an

⁴⁵ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 154.

awareness of asserting “digital subjecthood,”⁴⁶ and our intrigue with each of our native languages as elusive yet deeply imbedded in our being and culture, and as further articulated by sociologist Manuel Castells that “language, and particularly a fully developed language, is a fundamental attribute of self-recognition, and of the establishment of an invisible national boundary less arbitrary than territoriality, and less exclusive than ethnicity.”⁴⁷

Process and Content

Affinities, solidarities and collective struggle characterized our intentional togetherness during the filming process, leading to activities that generated creative intercultural and intracultural exchanges via personal interactions and digital audio-image technologies. These activities were initial explorations of the creative process as a way to discovering the final form and content. In 2008, Shin-Lan, An-Chi, Kainoa and Hau‘oli completed an intensive videomaking workshop that I conducted in separate locations: Taiwan and Hawai‘i. My participation as an artist, especially as an experimentally-oriented filmmaker, was most evident as I presented them with exercises to consider the multiple relationships of image and sound in a moving image medium such as film and in this case, digital video. I wanted the women to first experience phenomenologically with image and sound before bringing dialogue into

⁴⁶ Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 20.

⁴⁷ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 52.

the exercises. Several considerations guided my reasoning, one of which was to allow for an openness in exploration and experimentation that could resist “realist aesthetics,” which film theorist Catherine Russell claims can be dismantled to allow for the “ongoing cultural encounter, translation and transition” of the human condition,⁴⁸ and which Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton emphasizes is “vital for meaning and self-critical assessment.”⁴⁹ Additionally, this methodology offered pathways for a feminist and an indigenous film practice at the levels of address and the mise-en-scène. At the level of mise-en-scène, I am interested in mobilizing feminist film theorist Teresa de Lauretis’s concept of the cinematic “space-off”—the space “not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible”—to theorize how avant-garde films make visible the space-offs such that the “subject of feminism,” like gender, is a “movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses.”⁵⁰ In terms of address or an “aesthetic of reception,” where the spectator is the movie’s main focus, De Lauretis proposes that:

who is making films for who, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom—then what has been seen as a rift, a division, an ideological split within feminist film culture between theory and

⁴⁸ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), xvii.

⁴⁹ Langton, *Well, I heard it on the radio*, 85.

⁵⁰ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987), 26. De Lauretis develops the “space-off” concept of representation in an earlier essay “Rethinking Women’s Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory” upon viewing *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1983) and *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983).

practice, or between formalism and activism, may appear to be the very strength, the drive and productive heterogeneity of feminism.⁵¹

As we proceeded through the exercises, each co-director was aware that her short recordings were to be seen by each other, and in some sense, for each other.

I also considered the advantage of the unique capabilities that digital video provided that film did not, such as the ability to record long takes, greater mobility, and greater spatial access. Digital video's affordability and portability allowed the women to work more independently and spontaneously, to make editorial decisions like reviewing recorded footage and possibly re-recording, and selecting the footage they want to show. With the increased ease of use of digital videos cameras, video sketches become more viable as a mode of working creatively with moving images. These digital video sketches became the basis of the material that would comprise the final documentary *Tongues of Heaven*, and would guide the aesthetics of user-generated content onto the interactive documentary web platform *Root Tongue*, the topic of Chapter 5.

Through these digital video sketches, I wanted the women to engage separately with image and sound as an effective method for becoming acquainted with the technology and to explore how the relationships between their bodies, perception, recording environments and camera mediate what is captured. Beginning exercises were: 1) Using only image, record your comfort zone, 2) Using only sound,

⁵¹ Teresa De Lauretis, "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory" in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice R. Welsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 148.

record your favorite sound, 3) Think about why you want to learn your mother tongue. Then, record an image or scene that you will show to someone (does not have to be human) who you want a deeper connection with, 4) An image you would show your co-directors in Taiwan/Hawai‘i to let them know about your language and community.

After the workshops, I provided the women with additional guidelines to consider as they ventured on their own: 1) Identify something in your life related to language acquisition that concerns you which may include the inability to connect more deeply with family or community members, questions about culture and identity, hopes and uncertainties about the future, or moments of personal clarity and insight. How would you use the language of film to explore this? And 2) Make a short video with these themes in mind: land, culture, language, ancestors. These were never hard and fast rules, and I encouraged them to explore freely as they pleased. During a subsequent gathering in Hawai‘i, the women shared their select footage, which inspired dialogue about language, family, identity, land, home and more. The group shared their thoughts, concerns, insights and methods related to the enormous challenges of revitalizing their languages. These efforts culminated with the one-hour documentary *Tongues of Heaven* that brought together young indigenous women from islands in the Pacific around the topic of language, and at the same time the film showcases their creativity as artists and their “digital visual capital” as indigenous women.⁵²

⁵² Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 16.

The woman-centric nature of the project was also a conscious formation in the beginning but was not foregrounded as a primary dynamic in our time together in workshops, outings and discussions, although gender dynamics certainly have an impact on content. While I had opened the documentary project to all students in the Media Management course, just two young indigenous women, namely An-Chi Chen and Shin-Lan Yu, expressed interest in collaborating as co-directors, and one other indigenous woman, Yan-Fen Lan, expressed interest in being recorded. Subsequently, when I approached my field producer Malia about establishing our team, she suggested, and I agreed, that we experiment with an all-women production team. What does it mean to create a temporary space without male-centered views or male domination? What kinds of contemplation and sharing can be ignited that would not be otherwise? Such spaces privilege the young women's voices, image-making and perspectives—a privilege that may not be possible under different circumstances. Part of the balancing act in my feminist film practice, with this particular work included, is to provide the context and conditions for creative content production that establish gender awareness while allowing for what is beyond the figure of the Woman.⁵³

When the film opens with the question, “Do you speak your mother tongue?” each word intercuts with a single scene from the film. The word “mother” is followed by an image of a woman singing to a slumbering infant in her arms, and who then speaks to the camera. While this juxtaposition points to the mother in the term “mother tongue,” this meaning also becomes a figure of speech for native language,

⁵³ Woman with the capital letter is used to refer to the essentialized representations of women. De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 9.

or the language of one's formative years. Observers may reference the female figures in the documentary; however, the intellectual and creative expressions of the women in the work exceed merely that which represents Woman. That is, their explorations, problem-solving and actions are not fixed within what feminist scholar Nefreti Tadiar refers to as a "restorative political purview" of gender or indigeneity, rather they involve what she further argues to be "other social axiomatics—other forms of selfhood and political ontologies...within which the life practices to which they refer (and others we might not recognize as such) might be differently coded, regulated, and transformed."⁵⁴ Thus, the work is more concerned with what the figures of the women are *doing* and the differences between them, more than just being Women. What thresholds or boundaries are they crossing? What knowledge and practices are they sharing? Why should we care about how they care? Why should we care about disappearing languages?

Spivak provocatively addresses such similar questions in relation to gender and agency in her essay "Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet," initially delivered at the Stiftung Dialogik lecture series on refugees and migration policy at Zurich in 1999. In it she urges us to re-think and re-imagine planetarity as a "mode of intending" when faced with aiding or caring for one another. She writes:

If we imagine ourselves as planetary accidents rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us, it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away—and thus to think of it is already to

⁵⁴ Nefreti Tadiar, "If Not Mere Metaphor...Sexual Economies Reconsidered," *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, Issue 7.3 (Summer 2009), http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/sexecon/tadiar_01.htm.

transgress, for, in spite of our forays into what we metaphorize, differently, as outer and inner space, what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not indeed, specifically discontinuous.⁵⁵

She argues that such “planet-thought” imagines an alterity that does not pursue a self-interest that requires the other for its own consolidation of self. Though the focus of her address is governmental and non-governmental foreign aid, migrancy and multiculturalism, her proposal extends to wider socio-political issues relevant to understanding the nature of responsibility under postcolonial, capitalist and postcapitalist conditions. She asks: “How can we provide adequate justification for giving care, for considering the capacity to help others as a basic human right? How can we inscribe responsibility as a right rather than an obligation?”⁵⁶ Given that capitalism was obliged to destroy responsibility, she urges that a postcapitalist structure would need to re-incorporate responsibility as a “para-individual structural responsibility.”⁵⁷ This imperative of responsibility-as-right, she continues, “must be understood and valued (an aesthetic education!) as *defective for capitalism* rather than necessarily *precapitalist* on an interested sequential evolutionary model.”⁵⁸ Preferring dialogic over dialectical reasoning, and in an exercise of planetary poiesis, Spivak proposes that the dominant and subordinate must rethink themselves as “interpellated by planetary alterity” in order to make their shared practice on planet home flourish. She suggests that with the support of cultural workers and educators, the coming

⁵⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in The Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 339.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

together of those “below” or underclass immigrants who still practice the remnants of a pre-capitalist responsible “pragma,” and the dominant who is educated, that they together earn a “right to win responses from both sides.” She then writes: “I think the real winners in this transaction will have been women on both sides. Let this remain a conjecture for the future anterior, to be opened up, again and again. How is this to be done? Civil policy makers will have to learn some languages, clearly.”⁵⁹ The need for policy makers “to learn some languages” implies the importance of opening up and learning the precapitalist pragma and worldviews contained in those languages. While she necessarily concludes her essay with the call to imagine “anew imperatives that structure all of us, as giver and taker, female and male, planetary human beings,”⁶⁰ by declaring that women will be the real beneficiaries of planetary responsibility, Spivak evokes the productive connections between empathy and experiences of structural and personal gender oppression. Grappling with such responsibilities as conveyed through personal digital video sketches, the women and I in *Tongues of Heaven* offer a window into our thoughts, experiences, strategies and appeals to the difficult topic of language endangerment and revival in a capital-driven world.

Form

Through film and video, Mike Mitchell, Kidlat Tahimik, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Bangana Wunungmurra animate the term “native” in unique ways that re-

⁵⁹ Ibid., 348.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 350.

appropriate the origin and nature of this naming device. Whether used as a right to name oneself and protect one's place on earth, to lay bare the power dynamics which produces it, to uncover the underlying desires that evoke it, or as a symbol to create a connection through culture, decent and land, the moving "native" image is live and well. In *YAOIL*, Mitchell further uses film to hold up a mirror to the Mohawk activists and the government authorities in a gesture that would later be deemed as "image sovereignty."⁶¹ Media scholar Brendan Hokowhitu defines mediated sovereignty, often referred to as Fourth World Media,⁶² Fourth Cinema or Fourth Media, as a biopolitical act as much as it is "the determination of Indigenous peoples to represent and perceive their epistemic knowledge through the media as they deem appropriate, meaningful, relevant, and valid."⁶³ How and what one perceives, and subsequently captured through audio-visual technologies are key premises to visual sovereignty, a concept that is mobilized in the *Tongues of Heaven* production process. *Tongues of Heaven* deals with the dwindling of languages specific to indigenous peoples in Taiwan and Hawai'i, chosen specifically for the degree of endangerment these particular languages face due to multiple socio-political factors of suppression and neglect. What is "native" in this work is further complicated by the multiple stories, situations and opinions that converge onto the various scenes of indigeneity, and thus,

⁶¹ Hokowhitu and Devadas, *The Fourth Eye*, xxxix.

⁶² Acknowledging the varied ways in which the term "Fourth World" is used, in the context of media production, Shohat and Stam define Fourth World as "the still residing descendants of the original inhabitants of territories subsequently taken over or circumscribed by alien conquest or settlement." Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 32.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 113.

an exploration of formal techniques in personal camerawork is necessary, as is within the *mise-en-scène*—and this is where the dialectic between form and content is ignited.

The act of looking is politically charged in situations of unequal power relations, and more complexly so when technologies of vision partake in the transaction, one that is particularly historically pervasive in the imaging and recording of indigenous peoples. Rony's study of the early days of proto-cinema and film as an ethnographic tool asks "what it means to *see* ethnographic film as performer, filmmaker and audience."⁶⁴ Referring to Félix-Louis Regnault's chronophotography of West Africans and Malagasy, Rony writes:

These performers were people who returned gazes and who spoke, people who in many ways also were seeing anthropology. Of course, since we have no written record of the thoughts of these particular individuals, and of many of the indigenous peoples who were made the object of written and filmic forms of ethnography, I agree with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that there is no simple way of recovering their subjectivity, of hearing them speak.⁶⁵

However, by examining the chain of looks, Rony argues that multiple subjectivities are circulating at the scene. In fact, it is the native's gaze that is captured. It is a gaze that Chow further elaborates as one that "bears witness to its own demolition—in a form that is at once image and gaze."⁶⁶ Chow argues that it is not the colonizer who is the active gazer of the native "object," but "the colonizer who feels looked at by the native's gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor retaliation, makes the colonizer

⁶⁴ Rony, *Third Eye*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁶ Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?," 342.

‘conscious’ of himself, leading to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth ‘reflected’ in the native-object.”⁶⁷ Both Rony and Chow reveal the native image looking dynamics in terms of modalities, conditions, interest and fascination. Rony concludes her study by stating, “Who is photographing and what is being photographed are no longer innocuous questions.”⁶⁸

Autoethnographic practices continue to present viable alternatives to dominant, objective modes of experience and have produced vastly growing micro-histories in its wake. In defining autoethnography, Russell writes:

Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a “staging of subjectivity” – a representation of the self as a performance. In the politicization of the personal, identities are frequently played out among several cultural discourses, be they ethnic, national, sexual, racial, and/or class based. The subject “in history” is rendered destabilized and incoherent, a site of discursive pressures and articulations.⁶⁹

The increase in accessibility and portability of video camera technology produced a series of video diaries by individuals rarely depicted in their respective mainstream media cultures. In *AKA Don Bonus* (Sokly Ny and Spencer Nakasako, 1995), a teenage refugee from Cambodia records his life over a span of one year during his senior year of high school. The precariousness of his and his family’s new life in the U.S. and his personal struggles are revealed in immediate video documentation interspersed with intimate reflections while facing the camera, and by extension

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Rony, *Third Eye*, 218.

⁶⁹ Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 276.

facing the public. After much resistance from U.S. public television producers, who were concerned that the production quality was substandard, *AKA Don Bonus* was finally aired on POV, the showcase for U.S. independent documentaries since 1988. Using similar techniques, at the initiative of the Innalik School, Canadian National Film Board funded the documentary *Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive* (Mila Aung-Thwin, 2004) that confronts the issue of youth suicide in Inukjuak, Quebec, through the personal digital video cameras of eight Inuit teenagers. The documentary begins with Montreal-based filmmakers teaching camera techniques to the students and leading classroom discussions on drug abuse and youth suicide, and then continues with views onto each student's personal lives and environment through their unique styles and perspectives. They occasionally return to discussions on issues encountered during their recordings, such as generational barriers. The serious topics of these two video diary documentaries produce a somber tone amidst the rambunctious energy characteristic of teenage years. While personal camera work reveals reflexive gestures such that the viewer is aware that particular persons are operating a camera and telling their story, the recordings still retain their authenticity and perhaps perceived as even more authentic. That is, different than the days of celluloid filmmaking, digital video aesthetics produce a larger degree of familiarity with greater number of viewers due to the increasing number of viewers who have the experience of making their own digital video recordings. This familiarity offers a connection that brings awareness to digital video technology's capabilities and attending personal gestures. Nevertheless, these kinds of personal camera work,

viewership and recordings produce their own set of problems and points to the limits of reflexivity as a progressive demystifying mode of documentary production. Yet, for social issue documentaries such as the ones I discussed above, authenticity is a necessary aspect of such audio-visual recordings that indexes the real, because the real from which it came has real material consequences.

Such authenticity of the indexical real holds true for the case with *Tongues of Heaven* since the content or topic of language endangerment does not lend itself to the parodic or the fake, or mobilizing an inauthentic identity, as some autoethnographic works have successfully done. However, I tasked myself with the challenge of pushing further the reflexive potentials of documentary while remaining grounded with the social issues at hand. Given the myriad forms of visibility that the “native” or indigenous peoples of Taiwan are engaged in, including the documentary *Tongues of Heaven*, I was interested in not only making visible their visibility, but to make palpable the entire enterprise of looking/viewing/gazing as a mode of participation, by attending to the affective and intellectual operations occurring within the spectatorial act.

Tongues of Heaven opens with the question: Do you speak your mother tongue? The “you” addresses the viewer and intends to activate internal dialogue that situates the viewer in relationship to the concerns that lie ahead. Because one’s relationship to their native and/or heritage language is a highly individuated one—which includes one’s family relationships, environment, and value-system—I chose the form of personal camerawork to tell the stories, with the anticipation that these

stories will be shared at the final workshop. The presentation of a problematic or revelatory moment is shaped by the relationship between the women and their cameras, and this impacts the way in which the recorded image mediates communication between the women and me. Each woman handed me her recordings on digital videotape to watch, which I viewed on my own. How the recordings spoke to me, and how I received their messages are differently experienced than person-to-person communication, as expression through the moving image medium operates on different cognitive and affective registers. The temporal lag from when the recordings were made to the time of viewing induces a retrospective, and at times haunting experience of viewing the past in the present while simultaneously making the past present. When I viewed the recording that Shin-Lan handed to me of her reflections on being alone after her father had been rushed to the hospital, our relationship had changed. I was deeply moved by it, as this form of moving image transmission is different than relaying to me in person: "Oh Anita, my Dad's in the hospital." The recorded image allowed me the time to view, imagine and think through Shin-Lan's state of distress and how she was processing it through the digital video camera. Thus, a more personalized relationship between the sender and receiver was constructed and enacted with the camera, and to a greater degree these days given the increase in the availability of digital audio-visual recording devices and exhibition platforms.

Although I posit that all camerawork is personal to a certain extent, it is only when viewers become aware of the personalized nature of the images they are seeing

that they identify the camera operator and perhaps identify *with* the operator auteur. There is added meaning to these images—as opposed to those images created through a surveillance, mounted or wearable camera—in that they mean something to the person who is handling this technology and pointing at the world, as well as produce a sense of ethical mooring. While personal camerawork also foregrounds the nature of subjectivity, it is only a *strategy* for seemingly greater authenticity, which inevitably diminishes its reflexive potentials. Rather, *Tongues of Heaven* foregrounds the varying degrees of authenticity you can achieve with personal camerawork, but not through an arrival at some Truth, but through expressivity and relational looking. Every time one looks—whether behind or in front of the camera, or sitting in front of a screen—a relationship is enacted. How this relationship works is a major aspect of the critical practice within this documentary.

As an early work of reflexive autoethnography, Trinh's *Reassemblage* (1983) attends to such looking in a few scenes. Halfway through, we see extreme close-up shots of unnamed African girls, while she narrates, "Watching her through the lens, I look at her becoming me becoming mine." Near the end, we hear her again, "What I see is life looking at me," while seeing variously framed shots of roaming cattle and the remains of dead cattle. She continues, "I am looking through a circle in a circle of looks," as we see extreme close-up shots of, again, African girls looking askance, with occasional glances towards her camera. As viewers, we watch and listen to Trinh's subjective experience of filming and viewing, and perhaps connect it to our own viewing experiences. What is obscured in *Reassemblage* and what I want to

make evident with *Tongues of Heaven* is the context of viewing that includes geopolitical conditions and connections of audio-visual and institutionalized contact.

In *Tongues of Heaven* I critically take to task the nuanced dynamics of looking, particularly toward the media-saturated native stereotype, through the kinds of relationships that appear and are felt for the women co-directors who are recording, being recorded, viewing recordings, along with the audience who are viewing the women viewing, the public viewing, and the native “viewing” them. Some images are seen more than once but presented in a different context. This allows the audience to reflect back on how they as viewers are looking at any given moment—whether as voyeurs, or as co-spectators, and perhaps even to identify as a spectator. I also employ “contact zones” as a conceptual visual framework and as documentary mise-en-scène in juxtaposing contemporary scenes of indigeneity.⁷⁰ Through editing, certain aesthetic moves are possible which take viewers inside and outside of various contact zones, with these zones being the documentary itself, the stories told, and the various scenes of indigeneity. For example, Shin-Lan is first introduced in voice-over near the end of the section featuring the Aboriginal Culture Village theme park (figure 2.3). Up until we hear her introducing her Truku background, the indigenous peoples we see in the theme park section are primarily performers on display. The scene then cuts to a talking head image of Shin-Lan in a traditional interview style

⁷⁰ Mary L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6. Pratt defines “contact zones” as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”

set-up to a scene of Shin-Lan inside the Taroko National Park Museum, located in what was once the land of the Truku people. Within this scene, she touches the various bodily parts of the animal statues on display to indicate what she and by implication, the Truku people, enjoy eating (figure 2.4). Whereas the animal display is intended to educate visitors about the flora and fauna of this particular national park, Shin-Lan's tour offers a drastically different view as an indigenous person. This scene is then followed by Shin-Lan's camerawork as she records and talks to her mother as her mother engages with customers in their family-run tribal shop located in their village (figure 2.5). At one point her mother must deal with a rude customer, exposing a common dynamic between indigenous retail owners and non-indigenous customers.



Figure 2.3. Aboriginal Culture Village in *Tongues of Heaven*



Figure 2.4. Shin-Lan Yu at the Taroko National Park Museum in *Tongues of Heaven*



Figure 2.5. Shin-Lan Yu interviews her mother at their family tribal shop in *Tongues of Heaven*

Thus, the personal views enacted through the young women's camerawork are juxtaposed with explorations into various spatial and knowledge terrains within various types of scenes accessible to the general public about Taiwan's indigenous

peoples. This allows viewers to see permutations of certain values repeated. Each scene is institutionally affiliated or institutionalized in their specific locations, bringing visitors, spectators, and consumers into various contemporary contact zones. Museum, theme park, national park, tribal shop, tribal land, and the mediated camera itself present different modes of knowledge production about Taiwan's indigenous peoples. These contact zones begin from a distant one-way viewing position to become a more transactional one, allowing viewers to distinguish, and perhaps even experience for themselves, the multiple kinds of gazing, looking and spectatorship that such dynamics produce. Yet within these multiple settings of looking, lurks the reference, such that each transition to another setting of looking "lets the problematic of referentiality interrupt."⁷¹ These repeated interruptions juxtaposed between scenes of An-Chi Chen's and Shin-Lan Yu's personal expressions and voices allows for the question: Where does real value lie?

In the ever complex field of relations, inflected by power, that continue to encroach upon and contain what is indigenous, how can new forms of subjectivities be imagined that do not inscribe one as subject, nor cause one to inscribe oneself as subject? Perhaps a place to begin is to refuse *what* one has become as so eloquently articulated by Foucault, and to reengage with the question of *who* one is,⁷² and even perhaps *when* one is. This is lucidly illustrated by Shin-Lan Yu's camerawork when she visit's her family's tribal shop that caters largely to Taiwanese tourists, and other

⁷¹ Chow, *The Age of the World Target*, 69.

⁷² Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982): 785.

tourists from Korea, China and Japan. The scene captures her mother both as Shin-Lan's mother and as shop owner. Her mother explains to Shin-Lan, who is operating the camera, how she learned to speak Taiwanese (Minnanese) from the tourists, but also her attempts to teach the tourists their Truku language. The scene immediately cuts to her mother as she assumes the role of shop owner and must deal with a rude customer, a common occurrence for indigenous businesses like Shin-Lan's family. With both scenes recorded from behind the counter, Shin-Lan's camerawork presents a double "elsewhere" of representation, moving between the "space-offs" of her mother as an indigenous shop owner having to deal with a rude customer, and as a Truku mother making a living on her ancestral land.

Near the end of *Tongues of Heaven*, Shin-Lan takes the term "mother tongue" to heart and explores her village landscape usually teeming with the Truku language at a moment when she is alone, by herself in the village, void of the language. Her audio-visual gestures immerse viewers in the temporality of place and her home. Up until this point, we have seen representations of the kinds of encroachments that fracture and scatter communities—labor cash economy, discrimination, environmental disasters—and yet we see how one family, Shin-Lan's, have negotiated these encroachments. Yet the most difficult one thus far, because of its invisible and slow nature, is the encroaching loss of their native language. In a dramatic moment at the realization of the possible loss of her father when he is taken to the hospital, Shin-Lan takes up her camera to consider this dire possibility. The first image is a static medium wide shot of a shed. In a somber tone, she begins:

Yesterday, Father went to the hospital. I am here at his shed. No one is here. Today, Mother also went to the hospital to visit Father. If Father really does leave us then Mother would have no one to speak Truku with. I very much hope Father's body will quickly get better. Because this place cultivated my habit of listening to Truku. This is our mountain home. It is also my father's favorite spot. But there is no one here right now. So there's a sense of desolation. Although I can't really speak Truku and can't understand much but I will try to listen. My parents still wish I can speak Truku. It's possible I can try to speak it.

The image cuts to a handheld shot moving through a grove of fruit trees. Shin-

Lan continues:

When Mother is planting she would teach us how to pronounce the names of each plant. But sometimes I would remember it and at times I would forget. [in Chinese] Orange. I haven't spoken it in a long time so I've forgotten how to say it in Truku.

The image cuts to a handheld medium shot of a single bare-branched tree with clothes hanging. She continues:

This is Mother's clothes drying area. She's always hanging things on the branches. Mother loved speaking Truku to the trees, chickens, ducks. Mother says they understand. At her side, I would conveniently learn some Truku.

The critical relationship between human, environment and language is never more vivid as through Shin-Lan's digital video camera—as we look with her, through the duration of a long take, as we follow her through her physical and affective worlds, and as she remembers who she was, ponders who she is now and who she might become given such predicaments. We are left with the question, “If you were me, what would you do?”—a question that is could be further engaged on an interactive, participatory online platform, the subject of Chapter 5.

An Essay on Editing *Tongues of Heaven*

Prologue

Editing is a power wielded in filmmaking that is often under-acknowledged. Despite the collaborative nature of the production process for *Tongues of Heaven*, I wrote the script and edited the work. Therefore, I find it valuable to disclose in some form and degree, what documentary director Frederick Wiseman calls the “private debate” editors have when assembling a film. Most notably, early film practitioners Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov and Maya Deren have used their works to illustrate and support their theories on editing. Contemporary filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha has detailed her creative and intellectual processes for certain editing decisions. In writing about the editing of *Tongues of Heaven*, I have chosen the essayistic format because it lends itself to self-reflexive engagement with topics that usually relate to some forms of socio-political crises or aporias. Editing an experimental documentary about language, identity, and culture involves complex negotiations around issues of decolonization, recognition, essentialism, marginalization, inclusion and exclusion, theoretically and in practice. These negotiations are often wrought with anxieties, ambivalences, discontent, and anger, as well as potentialities. Thus, the essayistic allows a relationship to form between the self and the public in such contested situations of (post)coloniality.

While in the previous chapters I have laid out the various social, methodological and discursive terrains from which the work had materialized, the following essay on editing assays or weighs my personal reflections as filmmaker/editor during the editing stage, along with the writings of students enrolled in the Multilingualism and Ethnic Groups course at National Dong Hwa University (NDHU) in Taiwan during Fall 2014 upon viewing *Tongues of Heaven*. This was a freshman elective course offered by the Department of Indigenous Languages and Communication; students outside the department were also eligible to enroll. The course objectives were to foster a broad understanding of “Indigenous culture, history and language,” “Indigenous communication theory and community/social practice” and “multiculturalism, cultural pluralism and intercultural communication.”¹ Since the impetus for the making of *Tongues of Heaven* originated with my students while I was teaching at NDHU, the written essays that they submitted reflect an important facet of the intended audience for the documentary. While I do not necessarily fully agree with all the sentiments disclosed, such montaging of our texts and thoughts through the essay form serve to expand the breadth of thought with other voices, to de-center my voice, and reveal our connective experiences.

In juxtaposing their reflections as “watchers” with mine as “maker,” I also aim to produce not so much a comparison of intention and reception, but a survey of “directions” and “orientations” that Christian Metz refers to as the “figures of enunciation” in a film. In pointing out the inadequacy of using narratology’s notions

¹ Multilingualism and Ethnic Groups course syllabus.

of “enunciator” and “addressee” in the context of film viewing, Metz proposes that films’ enunciators are more like “directions (belonging to the geography of the film)” and “orientations discovered by the analyst.”² These students, as analysts, offer key insight into the predicament of young people in Taiwan as they consider the future of their language and identity in relation to personhood and nationhood.

Essay on Editing

Before viewing the film, I was thinking about its title, “The Language of Heaven.” Is this language already in heaven and gone, or is this language as beautiful as heaven? The world’s languages are gradually being replaced by more powerful languages, thus beautiful languages that carry culture are heading to heaven. –Chaoyi Ding

To respond to a question in the film, “What do you lose when you lose your native language?” I believe that when you lose your mother tongue, you lose your ethnicity. If you cannot speak your language, can you confidently tell people you are of a particular ethnicity? –Nin Li

FLUX. Editing is organizing time. Footage that was shot in the past is brought into the present, to be seen in the future. Some images still refer to their corresponding

² Christian Metz, “The Impersonal Enunciation: Or, The Site of Film (In the Margin of Recent Works on Enunciation in Cinema),” *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (1991): 765.

matter in the present, but some images do not, because the matter has been transformed beyond recognition or has simply disappeared. The image, without its originary corresponding matter, can now bask in its own aura. The wall along which An-Chi glided her fingers and the carvings above, the chief's home where we peered in to catch glimpses of ceremonial objects and heirlooms, the rolling fields of millet—all destroyed by the forces of nature.³ Many blame global warming for wiping out hundreds of years of these ancestral lands inhabited mostly by indigenous peoples. I did not know that when I shot footage at Wutai Village, that it would become an act of preservation. Something as casual as having fun with your camera becomes an historical homage. I now understand why every time my father would project old super-8 home movies when growing up, my mother's eyes would glisten in the flickering dark.

“Saving indigenous languages is like trying to save it from the violent waves. Take for example the Pingpu people. They were once the largest ethnic group in Taiwan but have been washed out throughout history and with no language, so what are they left with? –Chaoyi Ding

³ An-Chi's village, where we had filmed, was located in the mountainous region that was worst hit by Typhoon Marokot on August 8, 2009. The record-breaking rainfall produced landslides that resulted in 700 dead or missing. See Shou-Hao Chiang, and Kang-Taung Chang, “The potential impact of climate change on typhoon-triggered landslides in Taiwan, 2010-2099,” *Geomorphology* 133, no. 3-4 (2011): 143-151.

So here I sit in front of the editing timeline and wonder what is the purpose of this footage, to me, to the film, and more so, to An-Chi and the people she knows who once lived there. There is no there over there anymore, only a was-there over here. This is what I have to work with. Or not. I can find images from there transmitted via bits signals shooting through space, almost at the speed of light. The present is always becoming past, so editing is about organizing the past for the future experience of viewing immersed in the present. Being aware of the past-ness of the audio-visual recordings offers the framework from which to engage with it in the present.

The character in the movie says that she wants to revitalize her mother language, but there's no will to do it. Before I saw the movie I had the general thought that to communicate to the vast majority of people, use the Chinese and English languages. Why use the mother tongue? My body doesn't want to learn my mother tongue but my heart wants to. I've been struggling with this for a long time. After watching this movie, I understand that the mother language is me, my life, my culture, and I cannot lose it. –Haojun Chen

Perhaps I'm still walking towards the path to becoming Amis. I have to make big efforts to walk every step, and I know on this path I will have few companions. But I'll still continue to step forward. If we don't do it, nobody will. –Shiming Ruo

For me, am I really dreaming about saving a language, or is it that I really want to learn a language? –Liangying Hu

As time moves forward, a slow death always seems to set upon us when we think of endangered languages. We seem to only hear about them when news stories tell of linguists rushing to the ends of the earth to record a sole surviving speaker. When we visited An-Chi and Shin-Lan's peer, Yan-Fen, who is actively learning Tsou Kananabu from her grandfather, one of ten speakers of this language (who is now deceased), we positioned him at the center of the frame in a close-up shot. We turned the camera on, and silently listened as he addressed the camera. Only the cicadas dared to interrupt him. When he stopped, Yan-Fen asked if he could translate what he just said since none of us understood what he said. "Oh yes," said grandpa. "I said my name, I said that I lived here, and the downside is that my parents did not diligently teach us our language." When I am in Taiwan, the pace of transformation is quick and steady, but when I am in the U.S., the pace is much slower. Time is ticking, change is happening, but transformation into what? How about what is right now?

What makes me sad is not knowing when my mother tongue will leave this world. And even more sad is that even though we want to stop it from disappearing, with each generation there are fewer speakers and less people studying it. Even our generation cannot completely use it to communicate and much less have a chance to use it. We are not going to be like our parents or grandparents. What must we do to reduce the

rate of diminishment? The previous generation is getting older and is leaving this world. I'm afraid to think of when my mother language will disappear. Who am I going to be? Will my life be affected? Will our culture diminish just like our mother language? I'm afraid to imagine...Maybe I cannot put into action to recover my mother tongue, but I hope we will all keep this consciousness alive. –Haojun Chen

I'm going to find people to get together and find our roots so we can accomplish the mission of passing down our cultural heritage. –Yanshi Chu

VISION. I have tasked myself with how to let “reality” speak for itself, not so much in the observational sense only, but to put pressure on our act of seeing and believing. The cameraperson instigates the field of vision, and I as the editor must figure out how to bring gazing, spectatorship, our desire in seeing, and our choice in seeing, to the foreground of the film frame, hence the mind. Selection is happening, enacting itself and choosing what viewers can see. As viewers, we naturally browse and gaze, search for meaning, manage our feelings, and at moments we let go of these tendencies, letting ourselves go. I would not know how to make a didactic film about language endangerment, nor do I want to. Rather, as social philosopher Theodor Adorno, in writing about the essay form, eloquently puts it: “The pleasures which rhetoric wants to provide to its audience are sublimated in the essay into the idea of the pleasure of freedom vis-à-vis the object, freedom that gives the object more of

itself than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas.”⁴ In fact, the “pleasures of freedom vis-à-vis the object” is quite a seductive notion, and feels like what I really want to do, or is it? Does not freedom have its dangers, especially the freedom of referentiality? According to Rey Chow, “[r]eferentiality may in the end require us to accept it more precisely as a limit—as the imperfect yet irreducible condition that is not pure difference but a hierarchized differential, one that is thoroughly immersed in and corrupted by the errors and delusions of history.”⁵ In identifying the limits of poststructuralism’s main theoretical tenets, that of temporality as indefinite deferment of the signified, and that time does not coincide with itself, Chow demonstrates that in “rewriting referentiality as an illusory effect produced by the play of temporal differences,” poststructuralism’s motivity is one of a “compulsive interiorization—so much so that even what is excluded, as well as the act of exclusion, has to be cast by way of (or mediated through) interiorization, as a trace, an inscription and so forth,” leading to the foreclosure of “X,” which Chow marks as marginalized groups and non-Western cultures.⁶ Thus Chow argues that what is more productive is:

to let the problematic of referentiality interrupt—to reopen the poststructuralist foreclosure of this issue, to acknowledge the inevitability of reference even in the most avant-garde of theoretical undertakings, and to make way for a thorough reassessment of an originary act of repudiation and expulsion (of referentiality) in terms

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Essay as Form,” translated by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Fredric Will, *Telos* 40, Summer (1984): 168.

⁵ Chow, *The Age of the World Target*, 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

that can begin to address...the scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of mankind by another.⁷

While Chow and Adorno are referring to linguistic operations, an interesting challenge is how might a filmmaker heed Chow's call "to let the problematic of referentiality interrupt." How could cinema bring some of its tools to bear in facing this challenge, tools that exceed that of language alone?

First, back to the idea of how to make a film that addresses language loss—what are the forces that lead to language endangerment and loss? The majority of languages endangered and lost are minority languages. Therefore, one cannot talk about language endangerment without talking about the minority, who is most often the marginalized other, hence "X." Besides death, what would cause X to stop passing down their language? What material and immaterial barriers prevented X's language from being passed onto the next generation of speakers? There are no simple answers to these questions, but one barrier is definite, and that is will. The will of the speaker to pass it down, and the will of the receiver to learn it. What is shaping or pressing on this will? One factor to explore is how a nation or society treats minority groups, including how it sees the function and value of indigeneity within it. Put another way, how are minorities or indigeneity capitalized upon (or not) and for whose benefit?

After seeing the movie, I realized that it was only recently that I got more active in searching for my own culture... I don't speak the Amis language and didn't know

⁷ Ibid., 69.

much about the culture, so my sense of identity is diminished. I didn't volunteer to tell people I'm indigenous and I didn't want to be perceived as indigenous. I also didn't want to know about my culture because I felt that the elders didn't know how to protect themselves, speak their minds, and I thought they were ignorant. –Yanshi Chu

The film gave me the feeling of puzzlement, helplessness and sadness because young people are moving away from the village to the city to live and work for economic reason causing the village population to be reduced to only the elders and children. And the situation is worsening. Just like me, I was not born in the tribal village as my parents moved away and severed ties with the tribe. –Jingen Wu

Various “contact zones” are available to the general public in Taiwan as they engage their curiosity and interest in Taiwan’s indigenous peoples. Some of these zones are institutionally supported, such as museums and national parks. Others are privately-run, such as theme parks, while others are family-run businesses located on the family’s tribal lands. Each zone produces different kinds of spectatorial engagements. By juxtaposing these various scenes of spectatorship, including the documentary itself through the women’s camerawork, the viewing dynamics and its power relations can be discerned, hence certain values repeated.

Yet within these multiple settings of looking, lurks the reference, such that each transition to another setting of looking “lets the problematic of referentiality

interrupt.” One of the most obvious interruptions occurs within a segment at the Aboriginal Culture Village theme park, between the cut from wax figures staged within a ceremonial event, to a stationary figure of a man sitting on a stump. As this wax-like stillness uncannily becomes real, this living simulacrum confuses viewers, returning us back to our “compulsive interiorization.” But where do we go to in this interior territory of ours? However subtle or dramatic they may be, these repeated interruptions of the referenced object through various terrains of spectatorship and knowledge are enacted, juxtaposed between scenes of An-Chi and Shin-Lan's personal expressions and voices. This allows for the question: Where does real value lie?

There is a section in the movie that moved me: “You have to think of a way to market yourself.” I knew that my identity among Taiwan’s mainstream society is a very little worthwhile group. I used to feel self-pity as an indigenous person, especially when I lived with my Han Chinese relatives. I was aware that my skin color is darker and was teased by my relatives because of it. In class and other places, I would find ways to hide my identity. I denied my indigenous identity. But later, I started to deeply understand indigenous culture, and discovered the precious value and mission of being an indigenous person. –Jingen Wu

If a person looks indigenous but does not recognize his culture, then he is a fake Aboriginal. But if a person loves the culture and can communicate with the elders, than he is a real Aboriginal. Do not use blood relations to think about this.

–Chienwen Chen

My tribal village is a tourist recreation area. During the summer tourists flock there for fun and visit our shop. When they ask about us, I will happily talk about our ethnic group, our culture and language. I tell them that Truku people are an optimistic, generous and cheerful people. –Shenhua Liao

VOICE. Amidst the flurry of tourists flocking to get their pictures taken with the live indigenous models in full costume, Shin-Lan is first introduced in the film via voice-over. Her introduction to us as a “pure” Truku woman, is set against the visible differences between tourist and performer. Because she is often asked whether she is of mixed non-indigenous Taiwanese and indigenous descent, which means she can often pass as non-indigenous in society-at-large, she is compelled to tell people that she is “pure.” What does it mean to deliberately claim your heritage when it is not obviously visible to others? What does it mean to voice and mark oneself? From pure surface to enunciation from elsewhere, this scene aims to contrast the various forms of indigeneity—from an impersonal situation of being a photo backdrop to an intimate documentary voice-over. Hence, the work moves from public display to the

personal, back to another type of public display, that is, the documentary presented before us.

How to make society see us without calling us names, without being magnified to be examined, without stereotyping, without any prejudice (in terms of drinking), but to be truly respected? Especially when I see the Aboriginal Culture Village scene, I felt very sad. –Chuyou Yang

Meandering through a wax display of indigenous sorcery, its display panel caught my attention (figure 3.4). There were buttons to push. Instructions prompted me: “Push the button to hear the Aboriginal voice.” I pushed the button, but nothing was heard. I pushed it again, the same: silence. The button was broken, perhaps by overuse. We want to hear the aboriginal voice, but no one knows it is broken or they do know, but haven’t gotten around to fixing it.

I see my grandfather learn our native language and his attitude touches me. The elders are living teaching material. Grab the current time that you still have to learn. It is the duty of native speakers to pass down their language, and keep our culture. –Youshien Shen

Unlike previous times in the tribe, there was no money and no school. You can only follow your family to farm, hunt, and the like. So if our generation of young people

really want to learn our mother tongue, we must be industrious, like grinding the black rose stone. We must carefully carve it to produce a perfectly smooth and bright rose stone. –Shenhua Liao

SURVIVAL. My grandmother had always emphasized to my mother that in order to survive, one must learn the language of a strong, prosperous country, a “sunrise language” as opposed to one of a declining country or society, a “sunset language.” As a result, my mother was keen on having her children become fluent in English and speak standard English without an Asian accent. The benefits are clear, but what are the costs of being accent-free? With about 6,000 or so languages spoken in the world, and an estimated two disappearing every month, one may say to oneself, “So what? There are still thousands left.” Or one may be shocked at the rate of this loss. Even my immigrant parents who still speak their native language, challenged me. My father asked me: “What exactly do you lose when you lose your native language? Your soul?” How could I fashion an adequate response at that moment? Overwhelmed with emotion, I was rendered speechless.

On learning their native language, many young people will feel, “The heart has desire but power is lacking.” They do not know where to begin. Where can they learn it? I say keep expressing yourself in your language even if you don’t say it correctly. Keep on trying and you will learn. Making the attempt is most important. Let the

surging waves that continue to beat on the obstructing stones remind you not to give up. –Shenhua Liao

Culture forms what I am today, and language lets me understand our ancestor's wisdom and mountain world. –Huawei Lu

ENDING. Editors collect their favorite images and sounds, and at times think of the right moment to bring these recordings into the work. Sometimes the entire work or a major section is structured around these images. I have been advised to not let these favorite recordings dictate or distract editors from the pacing, style, information, argument and discourse they have set out or are tasked to assemble. However, when working with greater creative freedom, these recordings say something about editors', or more so, filmmaker-editors' desires. I was keenly aware of the ambivalence surrounding language revival and cultural preservation, especially through An-Chi's story as I was creating the script for the documentary. However, when I viewed Shin-Lan's recordings of her mother, I was curious at first about her mother's face, prominently filling the frame, and her direct address to the camera in the Truku language. I wondered why Shin-Lan chose to frame her mother in, what seemed to me, a striking composition? After I received the Chinese translation of the Truku, I began translating the Chinese into English myself. As I deciphered each phrase and the meaning surfaced, I found myself moved to tears. I was so powerfully affected that my immediate thought was this would be the final scene of the movie. No matter

how much I was focused on the complexity of the issues through youth perspectives on will, the fluctuations of culture and language, or the ‘natural’ phenomenon of extinction—all the factors that would go against, or make the task of language revival an enormously challenging task—here was a middle-aged mother answering her daughter’s question about why her Truku language is important to her. Later, after my emotional surge subsided, I struggled with whether I should end the film with this recording, as it may mute the frank admission from young people, like An-Chi, of no longer having the will to learn their heritage languages despite an awareness that they are critically endangered. However, the mother’s eloquence, her earnestness, her lived reality, her corporeality compelled me to end the film with her cogent plea. That despite foregrounding the perspectives of young indigenous peoples, the fact that Shin-Lan initiated this interview with her mother, highlights the importance of intergenerational relations as key to thinking about language survival.

“Although I am a Paiwan and Rukai, I chose to study the Rukai language, because the Paiwan population is larger than the Rukai, and it may disappear in the future if I do not learn it.” When I hear Anchi say this, I was surprised as I never thought Amis language is endangered because the elders in my family still speak it. But I grew up in the city and my parents spoke Chinese to me, so I am a stranger to my language as I learn it in school....When I asked my father why he did not speak Amis to us he replied, “What’s the point? You should learn English and that way you will find a good job....But now times are changing, and my father’s thinking has changed....he

will speak some Amis to us and let us remember it slowly. I think the ability to develop the child's family language should start from home....Although it seems that the current situation with the younger generation is very dangerous, and that Amis will likely go to heaven, more people are paying attention to language education and I hope our generation can be one that is even more dashing. –Shiming Ruo

My cousin wanted to learn the Saisiyat language and so he returned to the tribe. He spends everyday to do so and everyday he improves a lot. I'm impressed by his diligence. To learn one's language, attitude is very important. –Yanshi Zhu

Editing and the Interval

Film and video practitioners who theorize and write about their editing do so to advocate exploring the potentials of the time-based medium they are dedicated to. They put pressure on analog and digital cinematic tools to create new and energetic experiences of movie-watching that go beyond what has become clichéd or habitual viewing. Instead of “display[ing] things as everyone is in the habit of seeing them,”⁸ or producing the feeling of traditional dramas driven by three-act structures, these

⁸ Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), 46.

film practitioner-theorists aim to “shift our perception of reality and experience of cinema.”⁹

As in the editing of *Tongues of Heaven* for example, I was interested in re-enacting through editing certain kinds of habitual seeing within touristic settings and allowing the skillful work of intellectual montage to let the problematics of referentiality interrupt as detailed above. Montage theories of editing continue to be a critically viable technique for my work and particularly for certain key sections in *Tongues of Heaven*, particularly when montage alone achieves something greater than when voice-over narration is used. Eisenstein believed that cinema, more than any other art, is able to reveal or enlarge the “mutual work of frame and montage.”¹⁰ He considered the period from 1920 to 1935 to be one during which film-language developed as an expression of “cinema-thinking” meant to embody philosophies and ideologies that spoke directly to the proletarian experience.¹¹ Therefore, the technique of intellectual montage, whereby filmed shots or montage cells are edited together to produce a collision that gives rise to a concept, was conceived according to its social mission. As Eisenstein writes, this montage technique is “to form equitable views by stirring up contradictions within the spectator’s mind, and to forge accurate intellectual concepts from the dynamic clash of opposing passions.”¹² The resulting “intellectual dynamization” of such montage work is executed in the service of the

⁹ Trinh, T. Minh-ha, *D-passage: The Digital Way* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 146.

¹⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

Soviet socialist project. Thus, a major function of intellectual montage is that it does the work of ideology and discursive engagement, and in my case with the editing of the Aboriginal Culture Village segment, the work of discourses on authenticity, commodity fetishism, and nation-building can be activated and dynamically engaged.

Since the lifting of martial law in 1987, and in response to China's continued insistence that Taiwan is part of its territories, advocates for self-determination have mobilized Taiwan's histories, ethnicities, cultures and languages to assert Taiwan's distinction from China. Part of proving such distinctions or differences requires the labor of not just the researchers, but of those in the public and private realms of identity production and performance. This has led to a sort of renaissance of cultural revitalization activities, much of it government-funded, aimed at fostering and deepening pride in Taiwan's ethnic diversity. Indigenous peoples in Taiwan however, continue to be presented in a hyper-visible manner relative to their population numbers (2% of the total population), as they are perceived to possess greater markers of difference, such as language and cultural practices, but most of all they are not perceived to be Chinese. For example, since the early 2000s during the beginnings of the Democratic Progressive Party governance and the rise of foregrounding Taiwanese subjectivity, Taiwan's major local and global tourism advertisements were largely indigenous-themed (still so today but not as prominent).¹³ This usually entails the word "Naruwan," which is a greeting in the Amis language, along with an image of an indigenous cartoon character graphic, creating a new national brand so to speak.

¹³ Bi-Yu Chang, "From Taiwanisation to De-Sinification: Culture Construction in Taiwan Since the 1990s," *China Perspectives*, 56 (2004): 44.

While this culturalism is certainly a key activity in Taiwan's (post)colonial milieu, commodification of culture is inevitable, particularly as it pertains to indigenous peoples.

One example is the Formosan Aboriginal Culture Village, founded in 1986 by non-indigenous businessmen as a commercial enterprise. In 1987 the park drew 808,628 visitors, and in 2010, it drew over 2 million visitors.¹⁴ The park originally consisted of the Aboriginal Culture Village and the European Garden, with Joy World Amusement Park and the Cable Car added later on. The Aboriginal Culture Village is currently operated by indigenous peoples though it is not clear if this has always been the case. In a study conducted in 2010, tourism researcher William Hunter showed that the indigenous performers "consider their performance of culture to be a cornerstone of their identity and a mode for self improvement" and believed it strengthened their culture.¹⁵ The study further concludes: "The key principle is that whereas ownership of the performance commodity might not be totally controlled by the people who perform, the culture itself is."¹⁶ While I do not contest the study's conclusion, the small sample of interviewees does not fully represent the complexities of making a living working and literally living at the park and the nature of its entertainment and spectacular enterprise. My interest would be to consider the structural conditions in Taiwan (e.g., environmental degradation and disasters,

¹⁴ William C. Hunter, "Performing Culture at the Formosan Aboriginal Culture Village in Taiwan: Exploring Performers' Subjectivities Using Q Method," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 15, no. 4 (2013): 406.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

unemployment, cash economy system, discrimination, etc.) that compel indigenous performers to choose to work at this particular park as opposed to somewhere else, and in general the culture of spectatorship in relation to indigeneity.

Therefore, the *mise-en-scène* (or what is contained within the frame) is also critical to this work, as is thinking and working through temporality, as form and content, within the act of editing in the broadest Vertovian sense of the term. While Eisenstein's montage theory conceived of shots as "*depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content" until they are juxtaposed through editing "into *intellectual* contexts and series,"¹⁷ his contemporary, Vertov, conceived of editing in broader terms that encompassed the time of observation without a camera, post-observation reflections, during filming, after filming and during the actual splicing, which include the "hunting for montage fragments."¹⁸ He writes: "I make the viewer see in the manner best suited to my presentation of this or that visual phenomenon. The eye submits to the will of the camera and is directed by it to those successive points of the action that, most succinctly and vividly, bring the film phrase to the height or depth of resolution."¹⁹ In the particular segment at the theme park, I am interested in not so much "points of action," as in showing what Vertov refers to as the "most advantageous sequence" of subjects in motion, but the points of transaction from one touristic site to another. That is, each touristic site offers a certain type of sensory transaction in exchange for the payment the tourist gives.

¹⁷ Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 30.

¹⁸ Dziga Vertov, Annette Michelson, and Kevin O'Brien. *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

This segment begins at the entrance of the theme park with an image of tourists walking in a topiary garden against a backdrop of a large European-style building. The scene then cuts to a larger-than-life crab topiary. The audio track is the voice of Auntie Lai, a Rukai activist and cultural worker, as she expresses her opinion about how the government can actively ensure the protection of indigenous lands and their resources. In the decision to create this segment, I think about how juxtaposing the concept of topiary traditions as the art of training a plant into a desired form, and the enterprise of staging indigeneity at a commercial park could foreground and connect these different forms of desire and control. Therefore, as the segment moves from one section of the park to another, questions may arise in the film viewer's mind: How can we equate a crab topiary to Taiwan's indigenous lands? How did the vision for this theme park come about and for whose benefit? Through a montaging of oppositions that creates points and counterpoints, "directions" and "orientations," various facets of key issues have potential for being stimulated.²⁰

The rhythm and pacing within each shot and the movement to another shot is critical to re-enacting the touring gaze (and in many ways to reproduce how I experienced this gaze), and this required thinking and working through temporality, as form and content. In Vertov's theory of intervals, the space between each cut, "are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic

²⁰ Metz, "The Impersonal Enunciation," 765.

resolution.”²¹ Trinh further elaborates on Vertov’s concept of intervals as constituting “interruptions and irruptions in a uniform series of surface; they designate a temporal hiatus, an intermission, a distance, a pause, a lapse, or gap between different states; and they are what comes up at the threshold of representation and communication...”²² For this segment, the distance or gap of the intervals connecting each tourist area of the park could not be too wide, in order that the ‘interval’ is not made obvious. The pacing and switching of tourist sites are evenly timed in an attempt to put viewers into a simulated state of touristic viewing, in order to make the following intervening sequences more dramatic. This begins after a series of indigenous wax figures, where the segment then cuts to the indigenous man sitting on the stump in a slumped over posture (figures 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3). Even if the man is not seemingly wax-like, his stillness, whether resting, tired or sick makes his slight movements interrupt the touristic gazing of the Aboriginal Culture Village segment. This scene cuts to indigenous performers who are neatly lined up as photo companions for tourists. This cut also creates a counterpoint, broadly, to the animated work of the indigenous performers within the entire theme park segment.

²¹ Ibid., 8.

²² Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Cinema Interval* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xii.



Figure 3.1. Aboriginal Culture Village



Figure 3.2. Aboriginal Culture Village



Figure 3.3. Aboriginal Culture Village

This brings me to consider the function of temporality for this particular segment. In addition to the “temporal hiatus” of intervals, I would add the time interval occurring within the *mise-en-scène* as a key formal element to notions of *framing* as perspective and as a way of being in the world. Gilles Deleuze’s film philosophy is a useful conceptual tool in this regard to expand the notions of intervals from in-between shots to the *mise-en-scène* itself. In particular is Deleuze’s notion of the time-image, as seen in post-war modern cinemas such as neo-realism and the new waves, that foregrounds temporality over movement. He explains that the destructions of war had left in its wake “empty or disconnected any-space-whatevers replacing qualified extended space.”²³ In such situations, characters no longer react and act as they would in the movement-image. Rather, these situations have become “pure optical and sound situations, in which the character does not know how to respond, abandoned spaces in which he ceases to experience and to act so that he enters into flight...”²⁴ But the time-image character “has gained in an ability to see what he has lost in action or reaction: he SEES so that the viewer’s problem becomes ‘What is there to see in the image?’.”²⁵ While Deleuze’s analysis is focused on narrative cinema, I find his notion of time-image to be applicable to the documentary genre, especially given that many of the post-war cinemas he is referring to index the real, or the world as is. Further, his theory on the time-image can extend to other situations of destruction and, I would add, re-construction, such as that which occurred as a result

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 272.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

of colonialism's violence and its current manifestations today, as exemplified by the existence of the Aboriginal Culture Village.

In response to the (post)colonial conditions, such as cultural destruction, of Taiwan, the theme park was essentially created to commodify the celebration of diversity and difference. Moving through the park as a tourist and filmmaker, I was not only disoriented but was left to "see" the various points of transaction and movement of bodies from one section to another. The moment I saw the indigenous man sitting on the stump, the time-image came into being, beginning from my perception-imagination, to become a digital moving image. Such metamorphosis is made palpable through making temporal the act of framing. Up to the moment when the image of the man on the stump appears, the pace of browsing, what is seen and how it is seen or framed becomes evident. Temporality, as a character, is used to create viewing conditions whereby viewers' thoughts have the space to resonate with themselves. This includes, what I had previously delineated, Chow's heed to expose the limits of poststructuralism's notion of temporality as indefinite deferment or suspension of the signified leading to a compulsive interiorization that forecloses marginalized groups and non-Western cultures. Viewers of this segment are given an opportunity to see and feel how capital animates exterior and interior realities, but only in relation to experiencing the "aberrant movement" of the man on the stump. As Deleuze has articulated, the everydayness of aberrant movements is one where time is anterior "over all normal movement defined by motivity" or "controlled flow of

action” and in this park theme segment, activating this motivity is capital in the broadest sense of the term: monetary, social, cultural and visual.²⁶

On movie-making, film director Robert Bresson once asked: What is – face-to-face with the real – this intermediary work of the imagination?²⁷ As tourist, camera operator and editor, I noticed and subsequently made visible the abandoned affect I imagined of a man in indigenous dress sitting slumped over on a stump. Through the interval, as it exists between each shot and within each shot, a mutual space is created for pause, reflection and sometimes a disruption of the imagination, leading further to an awareness of the interval existing within as viewers and spectators.



Figure 3.4. Aboriginal Culture Park in *Tongues of Heaven*

²⁶ Ibid., 37.

²⁷ Bresson, *Notes*, 72.

Coda

In the last scene from *Tongues of Heaven*, Shin-Lan and her mother are sitting on the couch. Shin-Lan asks her mother, “Just speak about the importance of the mother tongue. Any thoughts?” Her mother responds, “Yes, I already said it.” “Nothing too long, something shorter,” Shin-Lan says. “You can edit it,” her mother retorts while pointing at the camera and us, the viewers. Shin-Lan sighs. In the next shot, Shin-Lan’s mother’s face fills the frame, her eyes cast down. She raises her head slightly and looks directly at the camera. In the Truku language she says:

Qurung nami mniq dxgal Teywan ka yami seediq tnpusu
只要我們這些原住民住在台灣的土地上
So long as we indigenous peoples live here on the land of Taiwan,

Hncian rudan ka kari o,
長者們留下來的族語,
each language left by the elderly,

Iya bi shngii.
我希望你們不要忘記
I hope you do not forget.

Nasi ungat ka kari rudan do o, hawan bi kida
因為若是長者們的話語失落了將會是一種遺憾
Because it will be a pity when the words of the elders disappear.

Kari rudan o gnarang paah rudan sbiyaw
母語是原住民世代地傳承下來的
The mother tongue originated from successive generations of indigenous peoples.

Niqan gaya rudan ka ga kska kari hiya
語言中蘊含了文化傳統的重要性
Language contains the significance of cultural norms,

Saw ta aji empeydang ni, duwa ta kgdhug mhiyug
幫助我們不會迷失，幫助我們站穩腳步
so that we will not get lost, will not get tripped.

Ga miniq kska kari rudan hiya kana ka knkla nii
這些就存在於長者的智慧話語中
This is all contained in the fine words of the elders.

Nasi saw nii ungat ka kari Truku do o
如果就這樣讓賽德克太魯閣語消失了
If you let the Truku language slip away,

Maha ungat ka gaya aji uri o gaya rudan ta uri da
我們就失去了「gaya」，也就是我們的文化傳統
we will lose our “gaya,” our cultural norms,

Maha ungat ka kari uri da, yasa ga mniq kska gaya ka kari nii.
也失去了語言和文化，因為它們就存在於「gaya」之中
and lose the language and culture because they are all contained in “gaya.”

Nasi su ini shngii ka kari o, qmlqa su dxgal siida
如果你沒有忘記，那麼當你踏上了土地
If you do not forget it, and when you walk on the land,

Maha su qmlahang balay ni, aji maha niqan sunu ka dxgal uri
你就不會魯莽大意，土地也就不會崩塌
you will not be reckless, and the land will not fall.

Aji su empeydang ni emptakur, maha malu bi ka daun su.
你就不會迷失，不會被絆倒，你可以順利的通過
You will not get lost, not get tripped over, you will squarely pass through.

Brahaw misu balay, iya bi shngii ka kari ta.
我希望你不會遺忘我們的族語
I hope you will not lose our native language.

Saw ga matas ka lqlaqi o
還在讀書的兒女們，
Those sons and daughters who are studying,

Usa ni, sai bi miying duri ka kari namu nanak.
你們一定要回頭去尋找你們的母語
you must turn around and find your mother tongue.

Psai bi qsahur namu ni, ptasi ka kari namu.
在心中記住，然後用筆寫下來
Remember it in your heart and use a pen to record it.

Saw maha tduwa mniq ana bitaq knuwan ka kari ta ni gaya ta nanak uri.
我的願望是我們的「gaya」和語言能永遠流傳
My hope is that our “gaya” and language will last forever.²⁸

²⁸ Translated by Apay Ai-Yu Tang.

Networked Audio-Visual Culture and New Digital Publics

Networked Audio-Visual Technologies

With the development and rise of networked communications technologies, artists are presented with multiple digital platforms with which to produce and present their works. As online moving image capabilities continue to improve in resolution, uploading and streaming capacities, filmmakers and distributors have taken advantage of this additional viewing platform. They have also utilized the Internet for marketing their films and expanding audience engagement. The digital structure of audio-visual information that allows for nonlinear, fragmented viewing experiences continues to inspire new forms of moving image making, such as interactive storytelling and interactive documentaries. Interactivity takes on different forms. Sometimes viewers, now participant or user, are asked to make choices regarding the temporality and narrativity of set content. This set content forms the database from which participants access and engage with the work. At other times, users can contribute to the documentary content with new material transforming the experience and the database. This interactive mode of documentary is an emerging and dynamic field that promises to summon, engage and form new digital publics.

Given these new forms of digital moving image capabilities, filmmakers can reconceive the notion of temporally fixed presentations of moving image expression

structured with a clear beginning and ending, and consider the potential of other forms of narrative or documentary engagement. Those committed to temporally fixed movies use digital platforms primarily as a supplement to display excerpts, trailers, or condensed versions that still point to the larger work. However, despite the desire to elevate the temporally fixed movie as the main feature, engaging digital screens is an increasingly reflexive and intertextual experience. It seems the more private and smaller the viewing environment, the more disruptive, fragmented, and reflexive the viewing experience. The advantage of these various viewing environments is that spectators' attention is less controlled, or at least spectators have more options as to when and how much they want to engage. However, for filmmakers, especially of longer works, the spectator's attention that they hope to inspire is more distracted. This is one of the main challenges, as well as opportunities, for filmmakers as they continue to utilize multiple transmediated digital platforms for their works. It is a challenge that I have taken on in the production of the transmedia documentary presentation *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* that comprises a feature documentary and an interactive web platform that extends audience engagement motivated by the issues raised in the documentary through online dialogue and uploads of creative user-generated content.

The term "transmedia" was first coined in 1991 by Marsha Kinder with the publication of *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games*. As a supplement to convergence theory, she aimed to foreground the deliberate moves by global media entertainment corporations to produce across media platforms and to

examine their cognitive effect on consumers. Since then, “transmedia” has been used in a wide range of contexts primarily referring to experiencing a single thematic or program across multiple mediums. “Trans-” means “across,” “through” and “beyond,” but always evoking an origin or location of movement from and to another location. “Media” is a means or channel of communication. In many ways, viewing and discussing a movie with another person, whether during or after, is a transmedia experience—with the movement between human and cinema as mediums of communication. Transmedia then acknowledges the medium. Whereas intertextuality operates at the level of meaning and semiotics, medium implies materiality and its attending sensations. Each medium communicates images and sounds in ways unique to itself that subsequently produces certain affects that inevitably have an influence on the meaning and text.

In the context of the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* project, its transmedia aspect is a deliberate decision to expand the various points of access to the discourse surrounding the documentary topic, specifically that of language endangerment and revitalization. Both the movie medium (as digital projection, DVD, streaming online) and the web medium (as desktop or mobile computing devices) call for different kinds of engagement, and geographical and demographical reach. What is similar however is attending to the issues raised in the documentary. In this way transmedia documentary art and activism seems a more accurate description of the project. Considering the Internet’s interactive, information-sharing and connective capabilities, web platforms can contribute to social engagement and action around the

very issues presented within the documentary itself. How can online and offline activities revolving around a digital documentary be mutually enhanced? In an effort to engage people deeply after a cultural experience, how might these online and offline forms and experiences create a new documentary mode and/or aesthetics in the field of new digital media? Furthermore, how might new digital publics, subpublics (i.e. alternative), and counterpublics (i.e. oppositional, interventionist) be engaged and created? What kinds of community configurations, membership and sustainability might emerge from these digital publics, and particularly for its migratory and diasporic members who are one of the targeted users of the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* project? And for under-represented producers, what opportunities and challenges do such digital media tools offer?

This chapter engages with these questions by initially examining the rapidly growing field of networked audio-visual images. Since user-generated videos figures prominently on the *Root Tongue* platform, I provide an analysis of recent technical developments with the largest video-sharing website, *YouTube*. Looking at several examples ranging from grassroots blogs, social media sites to a big budget public museum platform, I analyze the form and nature of participation and community that these networked audio-visual sites solicits, including their potentials and limitations. Particular attention will be paid to the advantages it has offered new producers, given the increase in online audio-visual production created and presented by under-represented producers, especially for indigenous producers and their audiences. This analysis brings together the formal, theoretical and practical aspects of online audio-

visual platforms and the notions of communities and publics they potentially create that inform the praxis of *Root Tongue* in its pursuit of a new form of transmedia arts activism. This praxis is discussed in the following chapter.

Increased access to audio-visual technologies brings greater opportunities for the under-represented (or mis-represented) to be creators themselves. Furthermore, the availability of online presentations through platforms such as *YouTube* and *Vimeo* allow, and thereby encourage, small-scale productions using inexpensive audio-visual capture technology like a webcam, or mobile phone. Such possibilities have produced new aesthetics and relationships to the compositional frames and spaces unique to smaller audio-visual devices. *YouTube* has increased its range of media, from commercial productions to serendipitously produced footage. Between the carefully edited to raw media, it has it all. This compels online enthusiasts to self-label and situate their creative endeavors as hobbyist, amateur or professional, influencing how and where their work is presented in the online world. For those whose works do not show on television or theatres, online streaming greatly expands viewership potential. As the number of moving image works continue to increase, makers who want any viewership can opt for streaming.¹ Furthermore, film festivals justify their rising entry fees, which average \$50, to the human resources needed to review the thousands of submissions they receive, and this makes it difficult for makers with less means to submit their works. Thus, the current state of viewing platforms for independently-

¹ The submission for Sundance Film Festival exceeded 12,000 for the first time, of which 1.4 percent were selected for programming. E-mail message to author, November 28, 2012.

produced films and videos is becoming more limited to smaller screens, as large screen options have become fewer and far between. This has also affected where public discussion of a work takes place. Whereas festival question-and-answer sessions were more feasible, discussions have migrated to community-based screenings. Online discussions of films with the producer are rarer, though public television has offered online chat sessions with makers after a broadcast. In many ways, greater access to tools of movie-making does not necessarily mean a changing mainstream media landscape. In fact, commercial theatre productions have migrated to all possible viewing platforms, and whether intentionally or not, further marginalizing niche media. On the flipside, the popularity of niche media can be seen as a threat to mainstream media, such that territorial staking is required. The need to respond to decreasing numbers of theatre attendance, since the rise of home video entertainment, lead to the rise of event-oriented spectacles, like blockbusters, 3D and IMAX movies. How do niche media viewing choices impact mainstream viewing ones and vice versa? What is the main attraction for the movie-going experience anymore?

Given the current U.S. media landscape, under-represented producers continue to utilize networked media as a viable platform for creative expression. With the advent of the Internet, sociologist Manuel Castells theorized that contemporary human interactions have been characterized as increasingly networked, and “power in

the network society is communication power.”² Interestingly, Rey Chow characterizes online media today as a “dense strata” of material, referring to the overwhelming amount of audio-visual works already circulating and archived on the Internet, and more to come. She also refers to new media visibilities as “information objects,” which suggests a certain functionality as data, or bits of knowledge.³ But what of affect, especially given the numerous more personal and performative works that tend to appear online? Still, Chow’s characterization is provocative, for it also speaks to changing viewing habits as a result of the proliferation of digital media onto smaller screens, that of partial viewing. Like skimming a text, one scans for information.

One way to handle the diversity of audio-visual media, and to “direct” a viewer’s attention, is through differently themed platforms. For example, *Vimeo* has a reputation for hosting art-oriented videos with minimal advertising, *Fandor* and *Netflix* are subscription-based sites with *Fandor* offering art films and “classics,” and *Netflix* a variety of fiction and nonfiction movies and television shows. Curators or “tastemakers” and aggregators also help to narrow the choices for the viewer, as well as recommendations from friends. For the producer, *Vimeo* offers free hosting, and earning possibilities as a paid member through their Rent, Buy and Video on Demand subscription services. *Fandor* and *Netflix* are both curated sites, meaning submissions undergo a review process. *Netflix* offers a one-time payment on an agreed length,

² Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 53.

³ Rey Chow, *Entanglements: Or Transmedial Thinking About Capture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 165.

while *Vimeo* and *Fandor* pay a percentage based on total streaming time. Producers do not receive traditional royalty statements, and instead receive reports on minutes screened based on in-house analytics. However, many producers are worried about online pirating and hesitant to upload their works online, but the potential for increasing viewership is also causing many to do so.⁴

For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on *YouTube* because of its ambition and reach, which now covers many of the types of media listed above, including videos made by anyone who can. This is precisely why *YouTube* creates an unintimidating participatory environment, one in which users can test their talents, and do so for a potentially massive public across the globe, more so than other video streaming platforms. Such testing involves the potential for attention and interest from a largely anonymous viewership, with the possibility of recommendations and automated aggregations that fuel the visibility, and hence the popularity of the work.

While *Netflix* streaming currently occupies over one-third of broadband usage in the North America, *YouTube* accounts for about 16%.⁵ However, 80% of *YouTubes*'s views are from outside U.S.⁶ Since its launch in 2005, and purchase by Google a year later, *YouTube* has continually evolved in its technological capabilities. The capabilities relevant to the examples I will discuss in this chapter are:

⁴ *Vimeo* and *Fandor* representatives discussed the need for greater accountability to producers at the “Digital Distro 101” in San Francisco, March 26, 2013.

⁵ Todd Spangler, “Netflix Bandwidth Usage Climbs to Nearly 37% of Internet Traffic at Peak Hours,” *Variety*, May 28, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/digital/news/netflix-bandwidth-usage-internet-traffic-1201507187>.

⁶ “Statistics,” *YouTube*, accessed February 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>.

international reach beginning in 2007, now available in 70 countries in 76 languages; Partner Program launch in 2007; full-access for mobile devices, and text annotation and captioning/subtitling in 2008; live-streaming and auto-share features connecting social network sites in 2009; mobile platforms move to HTML5 compliant browsers increasing picture resolution in 2010; and redesigned central panel connecting to social network sites in 2011.⁷ In 2011, *YouTube* reported that 25% of global views came from mobile devices, and that number has since increased to 50% in 2016.⁸ The company prides itself on its liberal stance of “You” the individual: “YouTube’s mission is for YOU to discover and shape the world through video.”⁹ Indeed, they reported in 2012, over 350,000 news and politics videos were uploaded from Syria; 19,000 were uploaded tagged “Trayvon Martin;” and 10,000 were uploaded tagged “Pussy Riot.”¹⁰ At the same time, since first visiting *YouTube* in its earlier iteration, there has been a rise in advertising that clutters its site. Nonetheless, with more than one billion users, it is a force to be reckoned with.¹¹

The increase in multiple screens available for viewing audio-visual media has no doubt given more control to the spectator than ever before. Having to sit still

⁷ “YouTube Facts and Figures (history & statistics),” *Supermonitoring.com*, last modified May 17, 2010, <http://www.website-monitoring.com/blog/2010/05/17/youtube-facts-and-figures-history-statistics>. “Press room,” *Youtube*, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.youtube.com/yt/press>. “Statistics,” *YouTube*, accessed February 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>.

⁸ “Statistics,” *YouTube*.

⁹ “YouTube Facts and Figures,” *YouTube*.

¹⁰ “New on YouTube: 2012 in review,” *Youtube-global.blogspot.com*, last modified December 19, 2012, <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2012/12/news-on-youtube-2012-in-review.html>.

¹¹ “Press room,” *YouTube*.

through a full-length feature film with one's head aimed directly at one large screen is not the only option for watching movies today. Of course, this kind of disciplined viewing has always been challenged, but more so today with other media viewing platforms. Without the "staging" of a show, and a presentation of the film we are about to see, the movie-viewing experience on smaller screens is an inherently reflexive experience. The need to handle the technology itself—turn the device on, find the program, insert a disc, click, upload, reload, play, pause, get comfortable, possibly troubleshoot, resume—makes moving image media consumption today increasingly disruptive and reflexive. Consumers can decide how, when and where they will sink into and be absorbed into the world of shadows. This bespeaks of greater viewing agency on part of spectators, with agency defined by Beth Coleman as "presence, will and movement (the ability to move freely as a being) and is not restricted to individuals but also pertains to systems, i.e., it concerns how beings are subjected in systems of power, ideology, and other networks."¹² Further, "[t]echnological agency speaks to the ways that external devices help us navigate the terrain in which we live."¹³ She argues that now, with the networked subject, she sees *agency as technology*, as the "disruptive technology"—"a world in which our reach is extended and amplified in terms of spheres of influence, site of engagement and presence to one another" [emphasis mine].¹⁴ With the emergence of pervasive media, "new practices of everyday engagement around a set of real-time, highly visual, and

¹² Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), 2.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

cooperatively shared technologies” marks the “end of virtual and the acceleration of the augmented.”¹⁵ Coleman proffers the notion of “X-reality,” in which networked subjects exist within a continuum of exchange between online and off that traverses the virtual and the real. The screens of audio-visual media are certainly one of many augmentative devices in Coleman’s X-reality. I take this to further mean that in order for “agency as technology” to be a “disruptive technology,” questions of content *within* the augmentative device must be just as disruptive.¹⁶

Digital Publics and Participation in Theory

Before moving into specific examples of the disruptive and alternative potentials via new digital networked media, it is critical to understand who or what exactly is the subject or public to be engaged or activated in order to identify the limits as well as the transformative potentials of digital publics. This section outlines some of key interventions into notions of publics and participation, and their implications within digitally networked systems of communication. Particular attention will be paid to how ideas of the offline and online spheres of publics, counterpublics, and community operate, intersect, and interact to create multiple ways of being together in community, as a public and with oneself.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ And perhaps one day, the material form of augmentative devices will take into consideration its impact on the environment and the well-being of the people whose labor produces them.

Social theorist Michael Warner's writings engage and expand Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere developed in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in ways useful to surveying the discursive and technological interventions into the notions of "public" and "participation."¹⁷ According to Habermas, the rise in print technology led to the formation of the bourgeois public sphere aimed at bringing the private concerns of individuals into the public to increase awareness and deliberation in order to influence state power. Participation in this public sphere entailed varying degrees of reading, writing, discussion and debate, which privileged rational-critical participation as the basis for liberal governance. Warner observes that Habermas's public is "a special kind of virtual object, enabling a special mode of address... where a key development is the fiction of 'public opinion' as the ideal background of all possible publics."¹⁸ However, according to Habermas, as corporate control of media increased beginning in the late nineteenth century, the possibility for a robust public sphere declined. Public opinion was and continues to be reduced to polls or media experts. For Habermas, "modern society is fundamentally structured by a public sphere, including the critical consciousness of private people, but that these public ideals and norms are betrayed by modern social organization."¹⁹ Along with his Frankfurt School colleagues Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critiques of the culture industries, the passive consumptive

¹⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 43.

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 55-56.

¹⁹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 43.

spectatorship induced by media technologies like movies and later television further undermined the effectiveness of an engaged and informed public sphere.

Certainly Habermas has been criticized for overly romanticizing the public sphere as social imaginary where rational-critical debate can make a difference against larger governing entities, when in reality, this sphere of writing, discussion and debate was mainly comprised of white middle-class literate men, implying large degrees of exclusion. That is, “the public sphere is a principal instance of the forms of embodiment and social relations that are themselves at issue,” implicated in larger power dynamics of struggle.²⁰ Where there exists a large public sphere there are bound to be alternative or “subpublic” forms of address engaged in different efforts based on interest and locales. A subpublic which is more oppositional and/or interventionist in its address are what Warner refers to as a “counterpublic,” where its

conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness.²¹

In general, when individuals arrive at the point of needing to address any public, they engage in struggles over the conditions that bring them together as a public.²²

The key features that comprise a public are often misinterpreted and misused, and in fact, a public has important features to take note of in order for it to retain its

²⁰ Ibid., 54.

²¹ Ibid., 119.

²² Ibid., 12.

greatest power: its existence “by virtue of being addressed.”²³ This circularity or reflexivity of discourse empowers the addressor and addressee with the fact that a public is self-created and self-organized. It enables the idea of writing, reading and speaking as belonging to a sovereign being. Warner explains that many efforts are made to give agency to *the* public or *a* public, whether through voting or polling, but this so-called granting of agency only removes the key function of publics, that of discursivity.

The nature of any public participation is shaped by the stakes involved, including negotiating the terms of privacy and publicness. The arena within which a public comes into being determines how these terms are defined and negotiated. Subpublics and counterpublics have materialized into interventionist forms such as clubs, associations, zines, community and pirate radio, public access and satellite televisions, ethnic-themed programming, and independently produced art. Sociocultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has written extensively on the emergence of diasporic public spheres that continue to arise from the domination of electronic media in mass media.²⁴ These new technologies allow for a variety of transnational discourses to emerge, from diasporic members’ involvement with and influence on politics in their home countries to environmental, women’s and human rights activism that make viable such diasporic public spheres. For Appadurai, these diasporic public spheres are the “crucibles of a postnational political order” that

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 22.

create formidable post-national imaginaries.²⁵ The materialization of the documentary transmedia project *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* arises directly from the modern condition of increased migration and the dominance of electronic mass media—one that will be further illuminated by the anticipated deterritorialized participation on the platform.

Thus, with the Internet, comes a proliferation of digital publics, bringing into relief the conditions of membership to publics and communities, the multifaceted nature of public and private, and ultimately its effects on personal agency and empowerment. How can we differentiate offline and online “publics” from “communities”? That is, how different is membership to an offline public as opposed to membership to an offline community? How different is membership to an online or digital public as opposed to membership in an online community? Certainly, online activity can supplement and strengthen ties to real space publics and communities. However, considerations of time, space and affect are useful to the analysis here.

Despite numerous attempts at a definition of community, Internet scholar Michele Willson distills it to its essence as “ways of being-together.”²⁶ An understanding of community requires “balancing concerns for the freedom or autonomy of the individual and concern for social integration,” which involves what she refers to as the “differentiating/integrative dilemma.”²⁷ She also outlines three forms of sociality that provides an integrative view of membership, choice and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Willson, *Technically Together*, 1.

²⁷ Ibid., 2.

belongingness when referring to notions of community. In traditional communities, sociality involves membership that is not by choice, such as a community one is born into. In modern communities, one is free to choose membership as the boundaries are more porous, and in postmodern communities, degrees of choice are extended in both traditional and modern communities. As a result of this extension, member identity is more flexible because one is not constrained by an embodied or geographically-situated identity, allowing for the possibilities of membership in different communities. Willson argues that this increase of community memberships and respective “specialization” of these communities lead to a tendency toward less commitment and thereby “less individual risk and less comprehensive bonding for participants.”²⁸ This, coupled with what technology has enabled with regards to organizing and aiding communications across these different communities, including online communities, have ironically led to what Willson refers to as a postmodern hunger for community.²⁹

Bringing together Willson’s framework of community and Warner’s explication of publics can help to elucidate how digital technologies of communication are altering the nature of participation and membership in both realms of human activity. Communities are formed and come together because of a similar set of values, interests, affinities and resources that require maintenance and support. Community members contribute in varying degrees according to group protocols or of their own volition. Generally there is a feeling of belongingness. As contact

²⁸ Ibid., 42.

²⁹ Ibid., 2.

between different groups of people increased, so to, “stranger-relationality.”³⁰ Such co-experience resulted in both tighter gate-keeping and more open entry into pre-existing communities, but also the formation of new communities. Choice of membership to different communities increased as well.

Publics, on the other hand, are formed through a discourse of strangers. Anyone who pays attention, even momentarily, whether as resonance or dissonance, becomes a public. Feelings of belongingness operate at the level of discourse—mutual strangers who think, believe, critique or feel alike, perhaps even touch the private parts of each other’s minds that a community cannot. Disclosed members of such publics do in fact come together to form communities, particularly communities of action. According to Warner, however, this then is no longer a public. Indefinite openness to strangers is the key difference between a public and a community.

With the rise of online publics and communities, a plethora of choices in participation and membership are made available, as they are with publicness and privacy. The publicness of community-oriented websites is enlarged, and thus stranger-relationality, making it become more like a public. This further begs the question as to whether the Internet is one large public? Moreover, the public, subpublic and counterpublics found online are becoming more like communities as hyperlink and embedding features create community-like relationships. Some community sites do retain features of a traditional community, such as stricter membership protocols, and some discourse-oriented sites remain strictly for

³⁰ Warner provocatively suggests that a public is stranger-relationality in a pure form. Warner, *Public and Counterpublics*, 75.

information, opinion and debate. However, the variety of digital platforms today have blurred the boundaries of community and publics, whereby their overlapping or conflation is more common. This intermixing of community and publics online is one indicator of the complexity of our social nature, in that digital platforms display and enable greater expressivity of our social selves, multiple personas, and struggles, however macro or micro they may be. This has led to “virtual communities” enacted entirely online, celebrated by some as being free from the physical, spatial or temporal constraints of offline communities allowing for more freedom and equality.³¹ On the other hand, choosing anonymity or partial disclosure of one’s identity online also indicates that the online world may just be too public, or the responsibility of participation online is not what one wants to shoulder. This produces the need for greater judgment, gate-keeping and risk management by the online user as to the trustworthiness of the information and activities enacted before them.

Digital platforms, nonetheless, have revolutionized the possibilities of communication and participation, particularly for “home” cultures and their “remote” members within and across national territories to form, strengthen and sustain both community and publics. These new technologies have expanded how and when to be a community member and to be a public. Whereas staying connected was limited to letter-writing with stretches of time in between, increase in the adoption of telecommunications technology across the globe meant that telephone conversations could supplement letters. Improvements in telecommunications infrastructure

³¹ Willson, *Technically Together*, 59.

increased the affordability of long distance calling, and came to provide the infrastructure for faxing and emailing. The invention of e-mail allowed for almost instantaneous communication and information-sharing across vast distances as long as both ends were connected. Around the same time cable transmission and satellite signals enabled the viewing of multiple television programming, including ethnic and language specific programs, heralding what political scientist David Elkins called the end of mass media and the era of “targeted” or “addressable” audiences and towards a deterritorialized form of media consumption.³² Likewise, the World Wide Web has developed to provide increased information sharing activities. Digital platforms today include the transmission of information and multimedia data through cable, satellite and terrestrial broadcasting, and through the Internet on computers and mobile devices. Many of these are cross-platform devices, where content can be shared across them. Digital platforms include television, movies, websites, applications, multi-user domains, user-directed/generated sites, e-learning and social media. These, coupled with “real-time” or synchronous interactions across platforms, speaks to new forms of connectivity and ways of being together across space and time, producing new affect, subjectivities and intersubjectivities.

These technologies that enable the creation of new “virtual ethnic communities,” or the strengthening of existing ones, are premised on the assumption of a need for support, on the means and willingness to use modern technologies, and on the availability of the infrastructure for these technologies that also include the

³² David J. Elkins, “Globalization, Telecommunication, and Virtual Ethnic Communities,” *International Political Science Review* 18, no. 2 (1997): 144.

relevant languages.³³ The need for support depends on the reasons for separation in the first place and the meaning of this separation for both the diasporic member and their home members. How far apart are they? How long has the separation been? Is it temporary or permanent? What factors determine how they want to stay in touch? As Elkins notes, technology “opens up or makes more visible previously blocked or unnoticed options; but having more or newer options does not guarantee which option a person or community will choose.”³⁴ More importantly, these diasporic public spheres are producing dynamic flows between, what Appadurai calls, “lived neighborhoods” and “virtual neighborhoods.”³⁵ He writes that “virtual neighborhoods are able to mobilize ideas, opinions, moneys, and social linkages that often directly flow back into lived neighborhoods in the form of currency flows, arms for local nationalisms, and support for various positions in highly localized public spheres.”³⁶ He also notes that the virtual electronic neighborhoods were limited to mostly transnational intelligentsia. However, since his twenty year-old study, these virtual neighborhoods are increasing rapidly to include many more diverse players.

My father is one such example of the effects of a growing virtual electronic neighborhood. For my father, Tai-Ming Chang, who came to the United States in the mid-1960s to attend graduate school, he left or rather fled Taiwan with deep hopelessness toward the political state of the island, especially having witnessed state corruption and atrocities under martial law. As a young intellectual, his future and the

³³ Ibid., 147.

³⁴ Ibid., 146.

³⁵ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 194.

³⁶ Ibid., 196.

future of his parents and relatives by association, were not secure if he stayed. In an interview I conducted, I asked him questions about his experiences staying in contact with friends and family in Taiwan. He said he would take our family to attend the local chapter of Taiwanese Association of America events during the Lunar holiday, where politics was also discussed. During the summers he and my mother would attend the association summer camp that lasted for several days, and which included social activities and a series of lectures and discussions from visiting Taiwanese intellectuals on the political state of Taiwan. He, and many other Taiwanese in exile, would contribute to discussions and donate money toward what would later become the island's oppositional party, the Democratic Progressive Party. In addition to these summer lectures, his main source of information about Taiwan came in letters and telephone conversations with his family, recently travelled friends, a state-produced newspaper that was two weeks behind when it arrived, and U.S. news coverage of major events (mostly earthquakes). The technology that had the biggest impact for him in terms of connecting him to Taiwan was satellite television in the early 1990s. For the first time, he could see and hear the sounds of his "home" and watch its local news, whereas previously, images of Taiwan were limited to newspaper photos. Email allowed him to immediately contact friends in the U.S. and abroad after a news event to discuss politics or election strategies. Although he could no longer vote, he participated by writing and giving advice to friends who were living in Taiwan. He also continued donating to the opposition party. He explained that the television programs, including real-time shows, made him (and continues to make him) feel

more connected to Taiwan. He said, “It means you feel more part of the society, the community, and more attached. I feel I care because the more you know, the more you care.” I asked what he cared about the most. He replied:

I care about the well-being of the people there because they are in the place from where I came from. We are rooted from there, and so we are touched to that piece of land. Well-being of people means the well-being of land. I will always care about it. Lots of our memories are there, though we only lived there for a little over twenty years. How land resources are managed and used, how the island is being run, that all affects the well-being of people living there.³⁷

His satellite television subscription is limited to ten channels representing a broad range of views in Taiwan. He reads Internet news to obtain in-depth coverage of news items, or non-televised news. However, he still prefers the sights and sounds of television, including Taiwanese soap operas. Since the opposition party scandal in 2008, he and many others have taken a break from attending gatherings put on by the Association. The organization however continues to maintain community *and* a subpublic. It now has a website (*taa-usa.org*) which mainly helps to organize and announce petitions, social gatherings and lectures, but also provides comprehensive links to like-minded news sites and online groups.

Digital Publics and Participation in Practice

As digital communications technology grows, so do the opportunities for debate, dialogue and relationship-building among those who are geographically

³⁷ Tai-Ming Chang, interview by author, May 25, 2013.

dispersed, forming what Appadurai calls “communities of imagination and interest that are geared to their diasporic positions and voices.”³⁸ The rise of Internet forums and social media has also created new options for staying connected to members with similar ethnic ties. *Planet Tonga* (forums.planet-tonga.com) is one such site that began in 1998, and uses the text-based forum powered by the open software phpBB (figure 4.1). Casting a wide net to keep membership as open as possible, the masthead states its mission: “Largest online community for Tongans and other Pacific Islanders.” Anyone can register as long as one agrees to its terms of participation including its right to edit, remove or close a topic. In addition, users must agree to use respectful language and not post “material that may violate any laws be it of your country, the country where ‘Planet Tonga Forums’ is hosted or International Law.” Discussions are held mostly in English but also in Tongan, with numerous topics ranging from government and politics, faith and religion, people finder/genealogy, romance and relationships. The highest participation falls under the topic “Game Room / Loki Va’inga: This is where you can play forum games. Come on in, join in a game, post a new game and have fun.” *Planet Tonga* also has a website (planet-tonga.com), *Twitter* account and *Facebook* page (facebook.com/planettonga) that was created in 2012. All these sites announce location-specific events and gatherings. *Planet Tonga* says that it is the largest online community for Tongans and other Pacific Islanders. Whoever (since no personal information is given) is “Planet Tonga,” they keep the posts up-to-date. Joining *Planet Tonga* is made easy, as is

³⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 195.

deciding to join. Its forum site is the most accessible to all to read and browse. Any member can begin a discussion thread. Generally though, the forum is fairly anonymous, and yet this is where most of the discussion occurs. In this way, the site succeeds in alleviating the “differentiating/ integrative dilemma” that Willson refers to in addressing community. Through text-only communication, and relative anonymity, interaction can occur with little pressure to conform. It may even encourage breaching sensitive topics that would not otherwise be discussed in person. For example, in ethnographer Helen Lee’s study about Tongan diasporic youth and their interactions on the Internet, she found that a forum such as *Planet Tonga*, “allowed users to air their concerns” and broach topics that are rarely discussed openly by Tongans due to customs of proper behavior which do not allow for young Tongans to express their opinions.³⁹ Lee further noted that for Tongan diasporic youth who did not know the Tongan language, they experienced a “double barrier” online because some of the Tongan websites claim that a true Tongan is one who can speak the language. She also found that the young Tongans who did not know the Tongan language mostly participated in the English-language websites, concluding that language usage on the sites themselves affected user participation. Therefore, the website design shapes the openness and accessibility that may allow for certain, more heated debates, and of course alters user subjectivities therein. Although *Planet Tonga* calls itself a community, it also addresses a public, specifically a subpublic. As

³⁹ Helen Lee, “Debating Language and Identity Online: Tongans on the Net,” in *Natives on the Net: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age*, ed. Kyrá Landzelius (New York: Routledge, 2006), 164.

audio-visual platforms develop and become more widely used and incorporated into community-oriented websites, it would be interesting to see how this shapes the intensity of online discussion and debate since the participants are technically not anonymous.

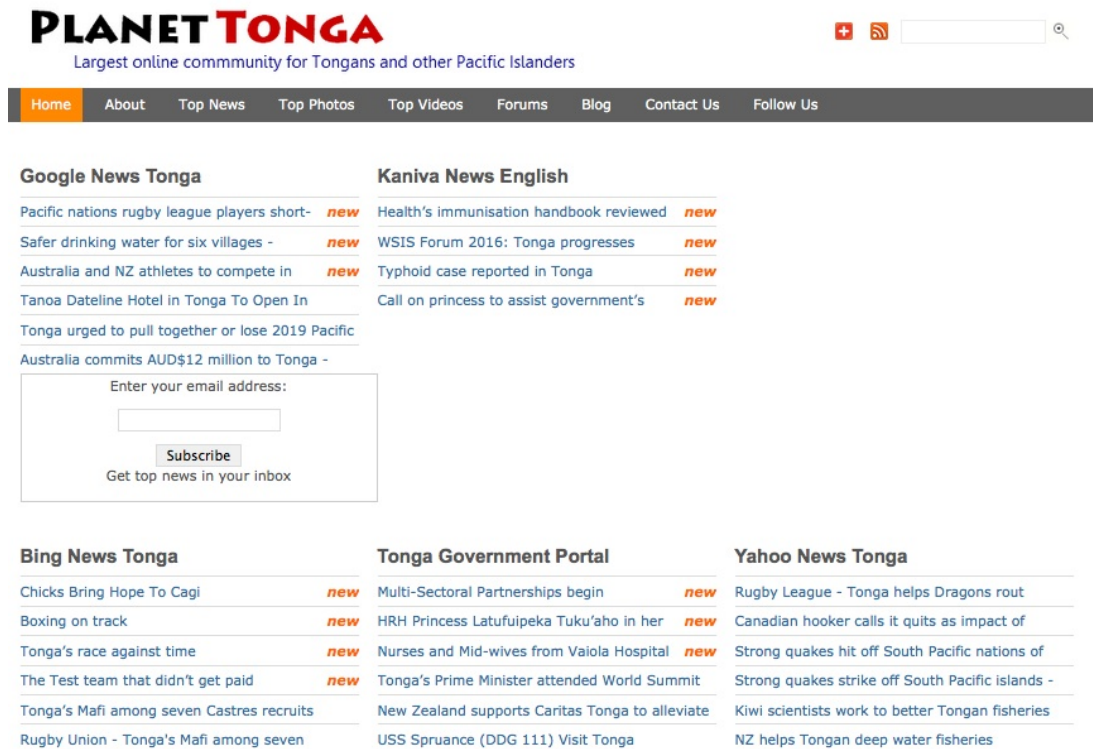


Figure 4.1. *Planet Tonga* Website

While the *Planet Tonga* sites are mostly text-based communication, though they are becoming increasingly visual, other attempts have been made to utilize visuals or visual communication as a way of bringing self-identified members together online and offline. This effort was conducted by the state-funded Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, with the multimedia technology group, Gibson International, as part of its long-term *Our Space* multimedia exhibit called *The Wall*,

which ran from 2008 to 2014 (figure 4.2). *The Wall*, as installation, takes advantage of various forms of visitors' mobile devices and is clear that *The Wall* is "where you create the action." Viewers create still and moving images of themselves in relation to New Zealand, as place, nation, history or imaginary, and upload them to the eighteen meters-wide museum wall. Date and time are recorded and displayed providing a temporal structure for the work. *The Wall* changes every minute during the museum's operating hours. The overall tone is fun, playful and unthreatening. Its focus on creativity and individuality (thus difference) allows greater permutations of identity and culture to emerge. *The Wall* exhibit also has a companion website (ourspace.tepapa.com/home/wall) where photos can be uploaded online and reflected on *The Wall* museum installation. This allows for remote visitors to contribute, with little prompting other than what one reads on the website's bilingual English-Māori heading: "The Wall—a constantly changing window/Te Pakitara—he ao huri noa. Nau te rourou, naki te rourou, ke ora ai te iwi/With your contribution and my contribution, the people will thrive." Such a prompt produces certain affective responses aimed to guide participation. The participant is left to decide how their participation would contribute to the thriving of a people or nation (what the word "iwi" also means). "People" is left fairly vague, though it seems to point to a sense of community in that each person's actions together are necessary for sustaining communities in good relations. More simply put, without working together, we cannot thrive. At the same time, *The Wall* exhibit also caters to the individual, as

participants can purchase sections of the wall they have created, or locate their image through the online exhibit.



Figure 4.2. Visitors create and upload onto *The Wall* at the Te Papa Museum.

Overall, Te Papa’s efforts with the ongoing *The Wall* exhibit are laudable in that it offers another way of being together, as in David Harvey’s notion of a politicized geography of visualization, without being didactic. Harvey’s conception of a politicized geography (a concept most likely inspired by art) is able to accommodate artistic activity and its representations in mutually symbiotic ways. Art works at the level of materiality (though for film and new digital media this may not be immediately apparent) but more importantly, on the level of immaterial spatio-temporality, the internalized spacetime within matter and process.⁴⁰ With the rise of

⁴⁰ As one of the main views of space in relation to time that Harvey presents, “spacetime” is philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s conception of the inseparability of space and time as they are internalized within matter and process. For example, “Memories and dreams are the stuff of such fusion.” See the chapter “Spacetime and

new media art and art that harnesses the Internet, it becomes obvious more than any other communication tool, how Internet-based expressivity is capable of bringing together absolute space, absolute time, relative space-time, and relational spacetime into one location through the mediating screen. Absolute space is space that is fixed, immovable, measureable, and distinguishable from time. Absolute time is the linear unfolding of time. Relative space-time are processes and motion whereby history and geography cannot be separated. And relational spacetime is space and time internalized within matter and process; it is immaterial but objective and actional. In doing so, there is a certain sensory honing in on space and time relationships that allows for a visualization of heterotemporality and heterospatiality. These kinds of arts-based visualizations can help us to see the “innumerable and seemingly inconsistent spatio-temporalities that coexist within our social world.”⁴¹ They help make sense of the cogredience of these different (hegemonic and particular) spatio-temporalities within certain social formations, and consider where resistances can happen along these spatio-temporalities. The montage effect of individual expressions, locations, and things framed generally within the context of New Zealand biculturalism displayed on *The Wall* offers the potential for these resistances to be played out and projected, particularly the online component where participants have the alone time to think and deliberate. By hailing, “Hey public, how are you part of our community?” without clearly defining its contours, participants are asked to

the World” in David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 137.

⁴¹ Ibid., 156.

reflect some aspect of themselves to others, producing a collection of reflections appearing next to others, re-signifying their own reflections.

The infrastructure of such a multimedia feat cannot be ignored as the multimedia company Gibson International created the technology for the *Our Space* exhibit, which cost \$6 million. Resources must be considered when analyzing the creation and the real and potential effects of digital publics. Who owns and maintains the infrastructure? How stable is it (i.e., connectivity, processing speed)? What are the hardware and software requirements (i.e., who has access)? Where and how is information archived and stored (i.e., ownership and control)? What are the human and material resources needed for all of the above to exist? At times, websites come into being due to a crisis, where these considerations of infrastructure recede, and harnessing the whatever-is-available tool of speedier, wider communication takes precedence. Furthermore, why go public? Warner writes that “One doesn’t ‘go public’ simply as an act of will—neither by writing, not by having an opinion, nor by exposing oneself in the marketplace. The context of publicness must be available, allowing these actions to count in a public way, to be transformative.”⁴²

This was the case with *Marokot 88news.org*, a Wordpress blog turned website (*88news.org*) created shortly after Taiwan’s worst landslide disaster caused by typhoon Morakot on August 8, 2009 in the island’s southern regions⁴³ (figure 4.3). The typhoon left about 700 dead and 25,000 people evacuated, isolating those in the

⁴² Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 63.

⁴³ 莫拉克 88news.org, accessed February 29, 2016, <http://www.88news.org/>.

mountainous regions.⁴⁴ Blogging in general is a quick, easy and low-cost way to get a message out, and in Taiwan it is the preferred choice. Video blogging was created in response to the narrow coverage by mainstream media of the victims' plight (many of whom were indigenous peoples) in order to present their perspective on the situation and the ineffectiveness of subsequent government action and policy. Local people were interviewed and their videos uploaded onto the site using *YouTube*. Many issues were discussed regarding finding and rescuing survivors, aid relief, food, water and shelter.



Figure 4.3. Marokot 88news.org Website

⁴⁴ Ching-Ying Tsou, Zheng-Yi Feng and Masahiro Chigira, "Catastrophic Landslide Induced by Typhoon Morakot, Shiaolin, Taiwan," *Geomorphology*, no. 127 (2011): 167.

Soon after, issues of relocation and readjustment rose to the surface. The up-to-date news provided relatives and fellow Taiwanese in surrounding cities and other parts of the island an on-the-ground people's perspective of the disaster, in contrast with the mainstream government reportage. It was citizen journalism at its best. While *Marokot 88news.org* was and continues to be a counterpublic, it also served to rebuild community. From the ruins, the volunteer staff of local people and supporters documented complaints of government actions, as well as onward self-determination to rebuild regardless of government assistance.

The site has now evolved from video blogging to a website featuring localized coverage based on regional and tribal affiliations. The breadth of coverage includes the growing of food, building new schools for the children, fixing bridges and roads, challenges of resettlement, and environmental activism; included are local announcements of events and ceremonies. The authors, images and people on the site are also mostly identified so anonymity is not an issue. In fact, the website needs to be visible, using photos and videos, as this is important to its publicness, and to its theme of accountability. Why did this landslide occur in the first place? Who, if anyone, is responsible? Why did so many people have to die? How to prevent another one from occurring? The website is co-sponsored by a range of supporters from environmentalists, professors, social workers and laborers. Their motto, "Keeping watch. Helping each other | 1460 days after the disaster," speaks to the community-sustaining and public awareness work that such sites can accomplish, counter to the official public news and to the ineffective state efforts towards the people's needs.

The above example provides a mere glimpse, in late 2009, into the capabilities of digital platforms to achieve greater connectivity in speed, breadth and style (i.e., video) to serve counterpublic activities. The magnitude of its potential showed its face in the Egyptian revolution in early 2011. Prior to the occupation of Tahrir Square, blogging sites, *YouTube* videos and *Facebook* posts were the main digital platforms to mobilize supporters and protestors. Many activists suffered government repression, and communications infrastructures were partially shut down. However, due to the variety of analog communications outlets still available and variously protected government communications sites, international supporters and hackers were able to open some lines of communication.⁴⁵ The Egyptian revolution was an indication of what globalization scholar Saskia Sassen describes as “microinstances of partial and incipient denationalization,” and a move towards a kind of global citizenship.⁴⁶ She writes, “Insofar as the new network technologies strengthen and create new types of cross-border activities among nonstate actors, they enable the constitution of a distinct and only partly digital condition variously referred to as a global civil society, global publics, and commons.”⁴⁷ What compels individuals, beyond embodied and geographical identification, into action of mutual support speaks to what Elkins refers to as the “unbundling” condition of the postmodern world, a loosening of national-territorial affiliation, aided by such profusion of

⁴⁵ Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), 61-66.

⁴⁶ Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006), 375.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 376.

communications technologies, that allow for the: “ability to add identities rather than being forced to substitute one for another; multiple identities and “cross-pressures” to enhance rather than inhibit one’s options; to anchor one’s uniqueness in the complex constellation of communities to which one chooses to make a commitment; and the opportunity to be different people in different settings.”⁴⁸

For those individuals who are connected online, at whatever speed, choices compete for their time and attention, influencing their levels of commitment and involvement, whether as a public or a community member. While the Internet certainly provides an ongoing space of encounter for discourse, time and attention is also needed to reflect upon the begotten information, however briefly the information appeared. How and when to be a public and to be a community member are ongoing challenges for the digitally connected individual. On a cautionary note, Willson argues that the same technologies that enable and enhance relationships across time and space, are also the ones that “provide the settings of the increased individuation and compartmentalization of the individual...leading to increasingly one-dimensional relations that are practiced instrumentally.”⁴⁹ She continues, “Thinner selves are less likely to be able to accommodate or negotiate confronting situations or exposure to difference.”⁵⁰ This is certainly a bold claim, but what further interests me is what Willson argues, noted earlier in this section, that an increase of community memberships and respective “specialization” of these communities, tends to lead

⁴⁸ Elkins, “Globalization,” 150.

⁴⁹ Willson, *Technically Together*, 207.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

toward less commitment and less risk for participants. I would argue that online community participation in fact involves risks, but of a different kind—those regarding privacy issues and an increased need for risk management. And with a growing visual culture online, additional management is required to present (or not) one's embodied self. Social accountability and trust has always been an issue with the anonymity that online culture produces. However since the past few years, with major privacy breaches from companies like Facebook, Google and Sony, a host of other mobile device-related privacy breaches, and government access to digital data, users are becoming both more vigilant in their privacy and anonymity, *and* desiring of more full disclosure of user identity. Foucault's infamous Panopticon theory of self-surveillance is certainly alive and well today. What are the lessons to be learned given these current conditions and risks of participation in these new digital publics? Sassen stresses the importance of place-based local centers or agencies as relays in social movements involving resource-poor individuals. Castells recounts the analog television lines that were critical in maintaining communications during the government shut down of the Internet.⁵¹ Further, without accountability or trust, how can one have a sustaining relationship to a community? Perhaps a collection of momentary feelings of belongingness is enough, as opposed to thicker commitments and attachments. But once those digital tools are swept away or inoperative, what offline connections will come to the rescue?

⁵¹ Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 61-66.

New Digital Media and Indigeneity

The possibilities for under-represented producers to face the public using networked media are advantageous on many fronts. Sassen urges that because “the ascendance of digitalization is a new source of major transformations in society, we need to develop it as one of the driving forces of sustainable and equitable development in the world”⁵² Further, given Sassen’s observation in 1998 that “[d]igitization and the growing importance of electronic space for private and public activities have further relocated various components of politics away from national governments,” it is no wonder that as early as 1991 with the listserv *NATIVE-L*, indigenous peoples, who have consistently sought greater autonomy or sovereignty from nation-states, have harnessed the potentials of Internet technologies to connect with like-minded individuals and further their agendas.⁵³

However, it is not enough to use the Internet to strengthen visibility, but to consider how indigenous peoples use their “digital visual capital.” Referring to women and minorities, media scholar Lisa Nakamura further suggests that we ask: “In what ways are their gendered and racialized bodies a form of this new type of capital? What sort of laws does this currency operate under? It doesn't change everything, but what does it change?”⁵⁴ These questions also allow for the possibilities of engaging the human as an “experimental object” of signification.

⁵² Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: New Press, 1998), 193.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁵⁴ Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 16.

According to visual arts scholar Jennifer González, race discourse is a “dynamic system of social and cultural *techniques* carefully calibrated to constrain, define, and develop a nexus of human activity where the ontology of the human, the representation of the body, and the social position of the subject intersect.” She then cites the fields of law, commerce and medicine as continuing to “employ the human organism as an *experimental* object of signification.” Thus, she believes that the Internet can offer “a new opportunity for such experiments in signification to play out, rather than as the condition for their disappearance.”⁵⁵

Such experiments in signification for indigenous producers have grown online to include creative expression as well as “inreach” and “outreach” efforts to promote indigenous agendas within their groups and without, both of which become mutually beneficial.⁵⁶ For example, in the spirit of the infamous Zapatista movement, and armed with wider choices of networked communication tools, the transnational activism of Peruvian indigenous peoples had delayed the corporate drilling of oil on their ancestral lands in the Amazon. Their activism intensified in June 2009 when police forces started firing, from the ground and helicopters, at the people who had peacefully surrounded a road blockade for over almost two months. The government portrayed the violent break out as one instigated by violent actions from the protesters. To counter these official claims, activists and bloggers uploaded alternative videos to *YouTube*, which further catapulted their cause into the

⁵⁵ Jennifer González, “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 42.

⁵⁶ Kyra Landzelius, *Natives on the Net: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.

international limelight. Despite their oftentimes geographical isolation and small numbers, indigenous peoples have been able to build larger alliances around the world through the coordination of bloggers, *YouTube* and social media platforms.⁵⁷ Even the young Peruvian American activist Q'orianka Kilcher, has harnessed her Hollywood actress persona to garner support and build an activist youth base, particularly through *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Her *Facebook* description states: "Video cameras are such a powerful weapon of truth against human rights abuse and government oppression, violence and discrimination. It's about educating people!"⁵⁸ A recent tweet "Why I do What I do-parts of my life" links to a partially functioning website *ActivistTube.com*, where the "Tube" is the same graphics of the "Tube" in *YouTube*. There, a *Vimeo* video "why I do what I do" is available to view.⁵⁹ The 26-minute documentary consists of a montage of environmental atrocities, her voice-over, and a televised interview with Kilcher on *Democracy Now*. Cobbling together a set of audio-visual media platforms, however partial they are, Kilcher continues to

⁵⁷ Teague Schnieter, "Social Media and Online Technologies for Indigenous Rights in Peru," *Hub.witness.org*, last modified September 17, 2009, <http://hub.witness.org/en/blog/social-media-and-online-technologies-indigenous-rights-peru>. For indigenous video and web activism on mining via trans-local communications networks, see Dorothy Kidd, "'We Can Live without Gold, but We Can't Live Without Water': Contesting Big Mining in the Americas," in *Project Censored 2015: Inspiring We the People*, eds. Andy Lee Roth and Mickey Huff (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014).

⁵⁸ "Q'orianka Kilcher," *Facebook*, accessed February 29, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/QOrianka-Kilcher/132845368672>.

⁵⁹ When first accessed in May 2013, the video had 356 hits. It is no longer on YouTube, but had been uploaded by a Vimeo user two years ago so is still accessible online. *ActivistTube.com* is also currently not available, which speaks to the volatility and ephemerality of Web data and information.

mobilize her digital visual capital as “actress and activist” to raise awareness of pressing issues and promote activism among younger viewers.

Kilcher’s networked agency is apparent and models the possibilities for interested users to fashion a kind of X-reality that Coleman identifies. Unique digital platforms that feature the works of under-represented or indigenous producers have also been developed. In response to the media hegemony of Hollywood in Africa and the ubiquitous use of mobile phones, South African Emma Kaye conceived of the mobile phone platform, *Bozza* (*bozza.mobi*) launched in early 2012, where African artists and filmmakers can potentially earn money through self-publishing and featuring their works on the site. As “Bozza's mission is to enable talent discovery,” content is free for users, and revenues are generated through the promotion and selling of their works, and advertising. Videos are uploaded using their mobile application via *YouTube*.

IsumaTV (*isuma.tv*) is another audio-visual platform catering to indigenous productions. Funded by the Canadian government and launched in 2008, it is the “first northern internet distributor for Inuit and Aboriginal film, TV and new media” (figure 4.4). The site manages over 5,000 videos online in fifty languages. One of *IsumaTV*'s sponsors, DIAMA (Digitizing the Inuit and Aboriginal Media Archive), aims to preserve and upload audio-visual materials collected since the 1970s. *IsumaTV* also runs a separate web project *Digital Indigenous Democracy TV* that features Community Radio, Video/TV, Human Rights, Maps and News information pertinent to indigenous life and activism. Like many audio-visual platforms with a

growing archive, the information can be overwhelming. The filtering system for *IsumaTV*'s channels still needs improvement, as well as the access to the 5,000+ videos online. *IsumaTV* uses its own video player, but also maintains a *YouTube* Channel to maximize its visibility and outreach.

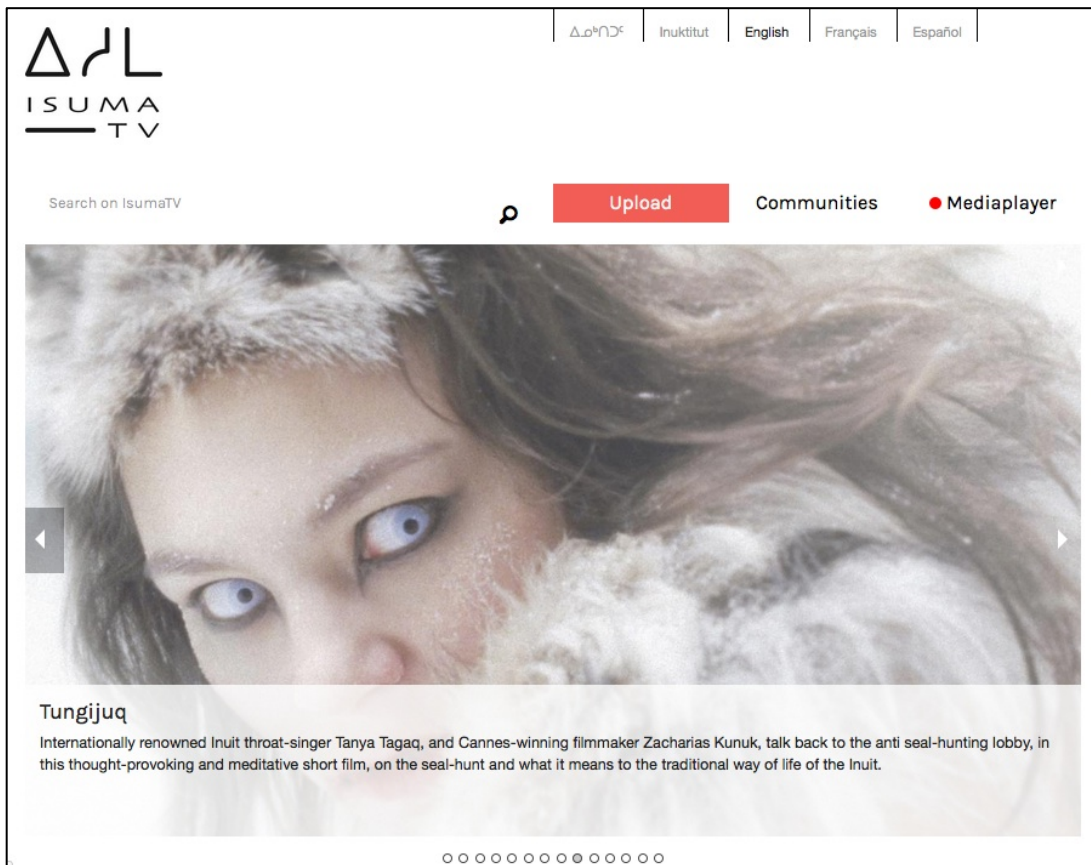


Figure 4.4. *IsumaTV* Website

Since the use of the Internet by indigenous peoples to connect across distances as early as 1991 with a listserv *NATIVE-L* to discuss indigenous issues in the

international realm, challenges and concerns continue to arise.⁶⁰ In the pre-*YouTube* days, debates among indigenous artists and scholars have questioned the appropriateness of network technologies to native worldviews. Loretta Todd, an independent film/video artist of Métis and Cree origins cautions against being sucked into a cyberspace and virtual reality “still anchored to reenactments of western cultural consciousness.”⁶¹ Furthermore, how do indigenous peoples reconcile the placeless-ness of virtuality, when the power of place and the “enduring spatial nexus” of place figures prominently in articulations of indigeneity?⁶² Additional challenges to consider are articulated by Alopi Latukefu, a regional manager for a broadband network linking Aborigine communities in Australia. He asserts that “one must take into account the power relations that decide whose knowledge is valued...”⁶³ including the tendency of network knowledge to replace other knowledge systems.⁶⁴ In 1995, sociologist Sherry Turkle asks, “Will it be a separate world where people get lost in the surfaces or will we learn to see how the real and the virtual can be made permeable, each having the potential for enriching and expanding the other?”⁶⁵ Almost ten years later, cultural critic Olu Oguibe continues to find frightening the

⁶⁰ Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart, *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 21.

⁶¹ Loretta Todd, “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace,” *Immersed in Technology*, eds. Mary Anne Moser and Douglas MacLeod (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1998), 192.

⁶² James Clifford, “Indigenous Articulations,” *Contemporary Pacific* 13 no. 2 (2001): 482.

⁶³ Wilson and Stewart, *Global*, 289.

⁶⁴ Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 174.

⁶⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 268.

repercussions of replacing “direct contact with people” with a “severance and withdrawal into the virtuality of interfaces and symbols, of signs taken for wonders.”⁶⁶ Certainly, some of these questions are still pertinent. Coleman’s X-reality addresses some of these concerns as a way of being, whereby one’s agency is the technology through which one extends one’s influence across various augmentative devices. No doubt, the increasing availability and mobility of audio-visual media has brought the power of vision and speech to bear witness and be captivated.

The growth of audio-visual productions by under-represented and indigenous producers while encouraging, may eventually reach a point of clamouring to be seen and heard. Already, the information and database management of audio-visual media pose a challenge as to how to make this “dense strata” of information intelligible and easy to access. Filters, algorithmic aggregators, and tastemakers help to decipher, present and recommend works to viewers. The question is, as is in the real world, which works get pushed to the foreground and which to the back? In such continued “battle for the media frame,” Chow states that the conceptualization of the postcolonial needs to “address these newly multiplied visibilities and the global and local constituencies that are formed and unformed in relation to the so-called shadow media.”⁶⁷ This “shadow media,” a term borrowed from anthropologist Patricia Spyer, is “the tangential, mobilized infrastructure of a counter-discourse to conventional national and international broadcasting.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, 189.

⁶⁷ Chow, *Entanglements*, 167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Another challenge is the lack of equal access to Internet connectivity and broadband technology. This is vividly described in Christian Sandvig's study of the Tribal Digital Village (TDV) members' struggles, innovations and triumphs of bringing Internet access to the Mesa Grande reservation in San Diego County. Many hurdles appeared: objectives of granting agencies, obtaining tribal leaders' consent, geographical isolation, difficult terrain and low funds. While Sandvig coins the phrase "appropriation toward parity," to describe the actions of TDV—2010 statistics show that only ten percent of Native lands had broadband Internet, unlike 65% of Americans—he reminds readers that this would not have been TDV's first choice.⁶⁹ Even *IsumaTV*, despite its robust audio-visual content, declares "Unfortunately, most Inuit communities don't have sufficient bandwidth to download IsumaTV's video content. With 7.5 million hits worldwide in its first fifteen months, IsumaTV films viewed hi-speed in Toronto, Paris, Helsinki and Beijing barely can be seen in Nunavut schools and homes where they are needed most."⁷⁰ Keeping in mind communications scholars Ernest Wilson and Sasha Costanza-Chock's idea that "terms like 'access' and 'participation' are a constantly moving frontier because of technological innovations," what kinds of looking are occurring?⁷¹ Are the ones who

⁶⁹ Christian Sandvig, "Connection at Ewiiapaayp Mountain: Indigenous Internet Infrastructure," *Race After the Internet*, eds. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 169.

⁷⁰ "IsumaTV Hi-speed MediaPlayer," *Isuma.tv*, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://www.isuma.tv/lo/en/local-servers>.

⁷¹ Ernest Wilson and Sasha Costanza-Chock, "New Voices on the Net? The Digital Journalism Divide and the Costs of Network Exclusion," *Race After the Internet*, eds. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 256.

are able to see digitally-networked images inside the field of action, as they are often conceived to be, the connected ones? Or are these connected ones outside of the field of action? As in Chow's recapitulation of Foucault's study of surveillance suggests, once again, in fact, "visibility is a trap," as it is "ultimately about the finitude of man."⁷² This is the challenge of our now seemingly hyper-mediated visible world of connected subjects—in the digital and non-digital sense of the term. In the meantime, shadow media is growing, moving strategically between visibility and invisibility, uploaded when summoned to action, and in the company of others, face to face.

⁷² Chow, *Entanglements*, 153.

Documentary and Online Transmediality: *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue*

Vision

Given the forms and nature of participation and community that various networked audio-visual platforms activate, and the potentials and limitations discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter analyzes the critical arts practice in the conception, design and production of the online platform *Root Tongue: Sharing Stories of Language Revival and Identity* (figure 5.1).¹ Currently in beta mode, this web-based application (operational on any computing device with Internet connectivity) presents an interactive version of *Tongues of Heaven* in order to facilitate exposure of and engagement with the complex issues of language endangerment. The *Root Tongue* web application does this by serving as a site for dialogue and participation in the effort to consider and/or revive endangered languages. It is designed to generate participation at specific moments within various scenes of the documentary, whereby dialogue is activated. Such dialogue can take the form of user uploads of creative personal responses via photos, music, writings and short videos, and/or user commentary on these uploads. Language-learning assets also become part of the resources on the site that may include dictionaries, pronunciation

¹ The use of the term “platform” to describe the *Root Tongue* web application refers to both the digital environment and the communications system that enables and shapes the transmedia experience. This is further elaborated upon in the platform section of the chapter.

guides, language-learning videos produced through collaborative field recordings with linguists, and virtual language nests. These digital assets will eventually serve as an archive. *Root Tongue*'s innovation lies in its design that foregrounds dialogic participation through creative expression and storytelling in addressing the often vexed and challenging topics of linguicide and revival. Hence, the *Root Tongue* online platform aims to pilot new forms of engagement with documentary and new digital media, and to provide space for new projects on race and online culture, indigeneity and virtuality, digital publics and ethics. In doing so, the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project contributes a theory and practice of networked digital video, one that serves and produces new forms of sociality that bolsters deterritorialized interventions and cultural work. Theories on third cinema methodology, critical design, digital networks, information infrastructure, dialogical aesthetics, community, publics, online cultural representations and digital ontology serve as critical frameworks for addressing the production challenges of the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project, leading to the emergence of a third digital documentary practice.² This chapter discusses how these theoretical frameworks inform, and are subsequently energized by, the project's aspiration to mediate across space, time, localities and languages to extend engagement on socio-cultural and political issues around language endangerment and revitalization via acts of spectatorship, commentary, discussion, creative production and activism.

² I am grateful to Lisa Nakamura for proposing the term "third digital documentary" to describe the transmedia activist project *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue*.



Figure 5.1. *Root Tongue* Web Application

The idea for including a web-based component to the documentary project on language arose from a conversation in Taiwan with my teaching colleague and linguist Amy P. Lee, when she explained that one of the biggest, if not the top, contributors to language loss is fragmentation of speaker communities, and—particularly for Taiwan’s indigenous peoples—the fragmentation of family units. The idea is if you do not have anyone to speak to and/or you do not hear it, the language will most likely atrophy. A typical scenario is parents who spend most of their time working away from the tribe (*buluo*) in more populated towns and urban centers, while their children are raised by extended family members, usually grandparents. When the children reach school-age, they begin learning Mandarin, the official language of Taiwan, eclipsing their heritage language(s). In order to attend middle-school or high school, young people usually have to leave their *buluo* and commute long distances to school, which sometimes requires walking one or two hours. If they choose to start working, many young indigenous peoples are compelled to find work

in urban centers.³ The migration of people to more populated centers in search of work is nothing new in human history. Rather, how can the current mobility patterns of young indigenous peoples in Taiwan be understood in the context of contemporary telecommunication technologies—technologies which may encourage, ease and/or extend commutes and distances between work and *buluo*. How can Internet technology be used in bridging spatial gaps in order to maintain ongoing links with tribal or remote communities, such as cultural or linguistic links? What would attract young indigenous peoples to a website containing, showcasing and discussing their heritage languages? How could such a website contribute to virtual and local community-based learning experiences?

The use of digital technologies in helping to revitalize endangered languages is growing, particularly in the areas of language apps, browser interface, social media and video games.⁴ For example, India is poised to be the second country with the largest number of Internet users, where language activists are using mobile phones to communicate with and document speaker communities,⁵ and building digital

³ Media scholars Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart reference El Guissé's 2004 speech at the UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, Working Group on Indigenous Populations, linking globalization to the trend of young indigenous peoples' assimilation and migration to urban areas. See Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart, *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 11.

⁴ Allyson Eamer, "How Technology is Helping People Learn—and Even Save—the World's Languages," *Global Voices*, July 3, 2014, <https://globalvoices.org/2014/07/03/technology-helps-people-learn-save-languages>.

⁵ Bijoyeta Das, "Social media rescues dying Indian languages: The Internet and mobile communication are doing the most unexpected - resurrecting hoary languages given up for lost," *Aljazeera*, December 29, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera>.

language archives, as with the People's Linguistic Survey of India which completed its documentation of the country's 780 languages.⁶ In the U.S., Native-American communities, like the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, are using apps, *Facebook* and *YouTube* to attract young language learners to learn their heritage languages.⁷ These digital tools are promising in confronting the daunting task of language revitalization. However, as Inee Slaughter, Executive Director of the Santa Fe-based Indigenous Language Institute says, "What we caution is that these are purely tools, and they do not substitute for a person's willpower and discipline to study and learn the language."⁸

Addressing the will to learn a non-dominant heritage language started to become an important focus for the *Root Tongue* platform, especially since no online language and documentary platforms were covering this critical aspect of language revitalization. While there are online platforms for language and cultural archiving (e.g. FirstVoices Language Archive, Living Cultural Storybases, Mukurtu, Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures, Phonemica, Taiwan e-learning and Digital Archives Program, Wiki for Indigenous Languages, Wikitongues), language documentation (e.g. DOBES Documentation of Endangered

com/indepth/features/2013/11/social-media-rescues-dying-indian-languages201311277047252312.html.

⁶ Rudraneil Sengupta, "Ganesh Devy | Each language is a unique world view," *Live Mint*, August 17, 2013, <http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/Jnwhm6vGQfNtTfNgbL9j4O/Ganesh-Devy--Each-language-is-a-unique-world-view.html>.

⁷ Michelle Rindels, "To save endangered languages, tribes turn to tech," *AP News*, April 17, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/save-endangered-languages-tribes-turn-tech>.

⁸ Ibid.

Languages, Digital Archiving Yami Language Documentation, People's Linguistic Survey of India, Talking Dictionaries, Sketch Engine), language learning and application downloads (e.g. Learn Manx, Mango Languages, MaoriLanguage.net, Ogoki, Thornton Media) and endangered language advocacy and resource (e.g. Endangered Language Fund, Endangered Languages Project), currently there are no websites that address the hurdles and triumphs of indigenous and minority language learning and revival efforts. While there are documentaries about language revival efforts, such as *We Are Still Here* (Anne Makepeace, 2011), *Language Matters* (Bob Holman, 2015), *Rising Voices/Hóthaniŋpi* (Lawrence Hott/Diane Garey, 2015), there are no interactive documentary online platforms addressing this topic.

Furthermore, the issue of will figures prominently in the *Tongues of Heaven* documentary. Co-director An-Chi Chen differs from the other co-directors in that she questions whether the loss of a language is so dire. She is fully aware that the Rukai language will most likely die with her generation, but she remains ambivalent. During production, she explained that one of the reasons is that she views her tribe as being socially conservative; therefore, other than being able to speak with her father's relatives, she does not see other practical uses for the Rukai language. She is wondering whether she will continue learning Rukai at this point, not only because it is difficult, but because she lacks the motivation to do so. In an effort to find motivation, she interviews her peer, Yan-Fen Pan, who is making efforts to revitalize her native language, Tsou Kananavu, considered moribund by linguists. Yan-Fen is interested in documenting and learning the language herself via her grandfather, one

of less than ten speakers remaining (and who has since passed away). An-Chi views Yan-Fen and her Hawaiian collaborators' revitalization efforts work as admirable, but still cannot find enough inspiration to continue learning the Rukai language. Near the end of the film, she admits, "I don't have the will to learn my native languages."

In the two years that it took to shoot the documentary, An-Chi began with an interest and attempt to learn the Rukai language in a university setting and ended with deciding that she did not have the will to continue learning the language. This speaks to the importance of will in learning non-dominant languages, particularly among young people who are more focused on fitting in with the dominant culture. Visibility then is an important component in language revitalization efforts. How can we make visible the existence and value of minority and indigenous languages in everyday landscape? With respect to online spaces, some efforts are being made to display web browsers in indigenous languages, such as Mozilla Colombia's collaboration with linguistics and anthropology students to document and bring back to use, the officially extinct Muisca language.⁹ This is a laudable effort given that the dominant language used on the Internet is English (25.9%) followed by Chinese (20.9%).¹⁰ I will discuss this further along in the chapter. Indeed, education scholar Mark Warschauer, a proponent of the use of information and communication technologies in promoting literacy, believes that the Internet can strengthen the value of a

⁹ Eduardo Avila, "Bringing the Muisca Language Back, One Word at a Time," *Global Voices*, March 27, 2015, <https://globalvoices.org/2015/03/27/bringing-the-muisca-language-back-from-extinction-one-word-at-a-time>.

¹⁰ "Top Ten Languages Used in the web – November 30, 2015," *Internet World Stats*, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>.

language. He first notes that according to sociolinguists, the survival of languages depends not so much on numbers of speakers but rather on “*will* and *transmission*” and that new media can certainly assist in language transmission.¹¹ Moreover, he continues, “the most important role of the Internet is not its impact on *transmission*—which must continue to occur through oral interaction in families and schools—but its impact on *will*.”¹² He further quotes language scholar Nancy Hornberger who emphasizes that “language revitalization is not about bringing a language back, it’s about bringing it forward.”¹³ In his two-year study of students enrolled in a computer-intensive Hawaiian language class at University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa, Warschauer also observed that the Internet tended to highlight the role of language, while masking the role of other identity markers, thereby promoting a more inviting experience to explore and learn the language, and be empowered.

Given the importance of will and visibility in language revitalization efforts, I redirected the focus of the web platform toward offering a space for dialogic and creative participation, along with language-related resources. Because linguistic death is generally a slow death, and sometimes not apparent until the last speaker is remaining, the dialogue and actions around language endangerment must be ongoing. These conversations often consider the nature of crises and actions particularly as it relates to familial, community, and government efforts, the desire of speakers to pass

¹¹ Mark Warschauer, “Language Identity and the Internet,” in *Race in Cyberspace*, eds. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 166.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

down their heritage languages, and the will of the next generation to speak it. Therefore, both the *Tongues of Heaven* documentary and *Root Tongue* web platform are conversation pieces to share the kinds of challenges and successes facing language revival work across the globe. The stories emerging from each woman's personal camera and each user-generated upload participate in the ongoing process of history-making and memory work that privileges creativity as a critical mode of contemplation.

Challenges – Form

This section outlines the questions and challenges posed in the conception, design and production of the interactive and participatory *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project. I begin with the project's various states as form, function, and platform. As a transmedia project that originated first as a documentary, one initial question is: what has happened to the documentary form as we know it, in contemporary popular culture, film studies, journalism or contemporary art? In these fields and beyond, the documentary form is fulfilling the needs of practitioners and audiences within these fields, giving it a flexible career in its display and dispersal. Audiences, producers, the works, critics, technology and institutional infrastructures have always been key players in shaping and re-defining documentary, and in the past decade or so, online digital technologies have become a player as well. These technologies are contributing to the ways producers engage and play with the world

before them, and with the imaging and recording technologies at hand. For example, what does it mean when contemporary artists engage in documentary(-like) productions? How are they deploying documentary techniques? Are they inventing new ones? Or are they only deploying various aspects of “the real”? Or is their material merely that of the two-dimensional moving digital image of the “real”?

In discussing the various modes of documentary techniques, Nichols emphasizes that these various modes are “continual explorations of form in relation to social purpose.”¹⁴ Further, Nichols asserts that to speak of a documentary tradition:

obscures the blurred boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, narrative and rhetoric, poetry and spectacle, documenting reality and formal experimentation that fueled these early efforts. This tradition of experimentation continues to this day but in relation to new forms and new techniques from animation to reenactments: it is what allows documentary itself to remain a lively, vital genre.¹⁵

The documentary genre or form then arises from such evolving infrastructures that are invented and/or enable various ways of recording the historical world that best engages with a social purpose. The question is whether this would include nonlinear documentaries, such as the still emerging field of interactive documentary or “i-doc.”

New media scholar Sandra Gaudenzi, who first coined the term “i-doc” writes:

Any project that starts with an intention to document the real and that does so by using digital interactive technology can be considered an interactive documentary (i-doc). This definition does not consider the i-doc as an evolution of linear documentary in the age of digital media but as a new form that uses interactivity to position the viewer within the i-doc itself, demanding her to play an active role in the

¹⁴ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 33.

¹⁵ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 121.

reconstruction, presentation, and negotiation of the facts it wants to convey.¹⁶

At the inaugural i-Doc Symposium in March 2011 held in Bristol, England, the i-doc definition encompassed digital platforms that allows for interactivity such as “web, DVD, mobiles, GPS devices and gallery installation.”¹⁷ On behalf of Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s *docubase* website, a “curated database of the people, projects, and technologies transforming documentary in the digital age,” media studies scholar William Urrichio situates interactive documentary as “new documentary.” This “fast-emerging form” is “untamed,” “unruly,” “defies categorization,” “affords new vantage points, and requires new literacies.”¹⁸ Unlike “i-doc,” “new documentary” retains the full term “documentary,” and points to documentary as its inspirational and aspirational foundations. At the time of this writing, *docubase* currently features 249 projects and its database continues to grow. However, as software theorist Wendy Chun, a staunch critic of the neoliberal trend to “personalize power,” indicates, “This ‘making new’ reveals the importance of interrogating the forces behind any emergence, the importance of shifting from ‘what is new’ to analyzing what work the new does. What enables anything to be called

¹⁶ Sandra Gaudenzi, “Interactive Documentary,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin J. Robertson (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 282.

¹⁷ Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi, “Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 6, no.2 (2012): 126.

¹⁸ William Urrichio, “About,” *docubase*, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://docubase.mit.edu/about>.

new, and how does it affect other fields that it draws on to make this claim?”¹⁹ In not doing so, Chun believes that this “prevents active thinking about technology-knowledge-power.”²⁰ Indeed, this new documentary and i-doc field is growing in support from a range of institutions, such as educational institutions, media and arts non-profits, public television, governments (with Canada’s National Film Board leading the efforts), corporate media and the military.²¹ Scholarship in the field is growing but more is needed in charting out the history and development of interactive documentary. One contributing factor in its development is indicated: media hybrid corporate practices such as transmedia franchising, which changed cultural and consumption behaviors of viewers.²² As a response to these consumptive behaviors and/or an experiment with media hybrid platforms, news services such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, and public media institutions such as the National Film Board of Canada, have pursued and produced likeminded productions on nonfiction subjects.²³ By the second i-Doc Symposium, since it was clear to participants that the “interactive documentary genre” was no longer for niche audiences and had entered

¹⁹ Wendy H. K. Chun, Anna Watkins and Thomas Keenan, *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4; Wendy H. K. Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), xii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

²¹ Pat Aufderheide, “Interactive Documentaries: Navigation and Design,” *Journal of Film and Video* 67, no.3-4, (2015): 69.

²² Julie Levin Russo, “Many Copies: Cylon Television and Hybrid Video” in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, eds. Wendy H. K. Chun, Anna Watkins and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2016), 441.

²³ Two leading scholars in the i-doc movement, Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi, had worked in interactive television and television production, respectively, prior to their academic careers. Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi, “Interactive Documentary,” 128.

the mainstream, its existence was no longer a question. This included all the other projects elsewhere referred to as web-docs, hypertext docs, database docs, transmedia documentary, cross-platform documentary, participatory documentary, collab-docs, locative documentary, serious games, docu-games and pervasive media. As the i-doc website states, “What unites all these projects is this intersection between digital interactive technology and documentary practice.”²⁴

This newly proclaimed form is the interactive mode of documentary, one that can certainly be added to Bill Nichols’s categorization of six modes or tendencies to characterize different types of documentaries, following the last in the list, the performative mode.²⁵ The interaction takes place between the user and the digital artifact. Gaudenzi notes that in a traditional documentary, while the negotiation with reality is among the “space, the filmmaker and the filmed subjects, in an i-doc this negotiation has to involve the user and the medium.”²⁶ Whereas the traditional linear documentary involves authorial interpretation and/or argument, this activity is left to user(s) to change and/or contribute to the nonfiction content or discourse. Formally, the temporal and epistemological structures are fundamentally different. Giving agency to the user is a common sentiment in the analysis of interactive documentaries. Attention, physical and mental work are required of the user as they are potentially co-interpreters of the evolving content before them. However, what exactly is the kind or scope of agency presented or given to the user? How is attention

²⁴ “About,” *i-docs*, accessed February 17, 2016, <http://i-docs.org/about-idocs>.

²⁵ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 210-211.

²⁶ Aston and Gaudenzi, “Interactive Documentary,” 284.

begotten? What kinds of movements are required or desired? Where is the thinking or argument or interpretation happening? Where is and who draws the line to demarcate this difference between producer and user considerations? Like a linear documentary, databases with set content are not value-free, as screen media scholar Jon Dovey notes, “databases themselves are not just neutral machines but are constituted through particular value systems and limit or afford user actions.”²⁷

Even as the producers, authors or artists are now context providers within the interactive documentary form, and are no longer “forcing a point of view,” they are still providing a context—one that is not one-hundred-percent neutral.²⁸ However, when author-artists are part of the larger conversation with users, this creates more transparency and builds online trust. As an interactive documentary form, *Root Tongue* asks: What are trust-building strategies for creating online participation and community? What are the stakes for myself as the context-provider that users would feel compelled to participate in the interactive documentary? What is the personal and social purpose or benefit of this interaction? What do we all get out of it? Interactive documentaries are faced with some major challenges: the “work” required on the part of the user; the required infrastructure and devices; and having to compete with other attention-seeking activities on the Internet. While still a relatively uncharted territory

²⁷ Jon Dovey, “Documentary Ecosystems: Collaboration and Exploitation,” in *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses*, eds. Kate Nash, Craig Hight and Catherine Summerhayes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 27.

²⁸ Aston and Gaudenzi, “Interactive Documentary,” 133.

of creative documentary practice, filmmakers like myself have taken on the challenge of addressing the limits and possibilities of its form.

Challenges – Function

Root Tongue's goal is to be an online platform that extends audience engagement motivated by the stories and issues raised in the documentary *Tongues of Heaven*. Given that interactive documentaries are contingent, mutable, and dynamic due to its digital state, *Root Tongue* can function as a stand alone work or a companion to *Tongues of Heaven*, depending on when and how participants enter the transmedia experience.²⁹ Participants decide on whether they want to partake in one or both. Ideally, participants engage both mediums to fully experience the complimentary effects of linear documentary storytelling construction and the evolving participation of viewers in response to excerpts from the documentary. Although documentaries are increasingly viewed online, with interactive possibilities like leaving comments, pausing and moving the progress bar, viewers are aware of what a linear documentary does; the big shift is when viewers can change the story and contribute to the argument. In the case of *Root Tongue*, regardless of whether participants have viewed *Tongues of Heaven*, its contextual frame creates a dialectic between a linear documentary and the potential of its interactive aspects. In doing so, certain aspects of the linear documentary are retained: authorial perspective(s);

²⁹ Dovey, "Documentary Ecosystems," 14.

sustained development of an idea, story or argument; and audience expectations. The experience of spectatorship is differentiated between a completed linear documentary and fragments from the same documentary. Since documentary is often considered a complete work, the transmedia experience may relegate or re-situate it as something else. With the transmediated experience or the movement back and forth between fragments, the construction or discourse of the linear documentary becomes more pronounced. This begs the question as to whether the linear documentary is a fragment of the entire experience as well (albeit a highly organized one). Issues can circulate in different forms, at different times, for different purposes. The issues are still at the core of the transmedia documentary experience. Moreover, as movies, videos, television programs and music are being redefined as software or data, what is fluid and changeable, and what is not? Certainly, the desire to understand the complexity of an issue or problem is constant, especially when seen directly tied to material and lived realities. This brings us back to the human, to the material world. Like corporate transmedia experiences that attempt to get viewers to consume in the most optimal matter for monetary gain, the transmedia documentary attempts to raise awareness of social issues in the most optimal matter for engendering social change.

The key, then, is to imagine the kinds of experiences that each medium within the transmedia work has to offer, identify their potentials and limitations and to find ways in which they may supplement and/or complement each other, and in the case of *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue*, the hybrid presentation of both the linear and nonlinear documentary that can foster a dialectic of ongoing interpretation and

dialogue of the issues at hand given the surrounding intertexts. This formal choice also brings attention to the capabilities, function and aesthetics of specific mediums. The tendency to use “film” terminology when referring to video, or “oral history” when referring to digital storytelling, is the same in this case with using “documentary” when referring to i-doc works. The tendency or desire to refer to previous media forms or practices seems natural as either an homage to or an acknowledgement of similar overlapping practices. It only becomes problematic when claims are made that the new medium is performing the same kinds of functions as the former with its specific form, practices and institutional supports. This is often done in the case of perhaps bringing legibility or legitimacy to new practices such as the case with the now 16-year old U.S. digital archiving platform, *StoryCorps*, which claims in its “About” opening sentence: “*StoryCorps* is America’s oral history project”³⁰ (figure 5.2). In his pointed critique of *StoryCorps*’ claim to doing oral history, oral historian Alexander Freund charts the rise of storytelling as industry and technique in Western societies since the 1970s and situates *StoryCorps* within neoliberal formations from which arose hyperindividualism, lucrative self-help cultures, obsessions with trauma and survival, and public confessions. Freund argues that “storytelling is a new mass creed that makes people believe in storytelling as a panacea for all the ills of the world and their own lives” without acknowledging their underlying economic and political causes.³¹ As he explains, this is mainly due to the

³⁰ “About,” *StoryCorps*, accessed February 18, 2016, <https://storycorps.org>.

³¹ Alexander Freund, “Under Storytelling’s Spell?: Oral History in a Neoliberal Age,” *Oral History Review* 42, no.1 (2015): 103.

fact that because “storytelling conflates history and individual memory, public discourse is depoliticized.”³² In his plea to oral historians who have jumped on the storytelling bandwagon, Freund writes:

Unless we critically investigate the underlying politics of storytelling and its effects on society and democracy, we will be swept up by its ideological undercurrent. We can investigate it most effectively by historically contextualizing it and drawing on our understanding of narrative and the dialogic constructions of history and memory in interviews.³³

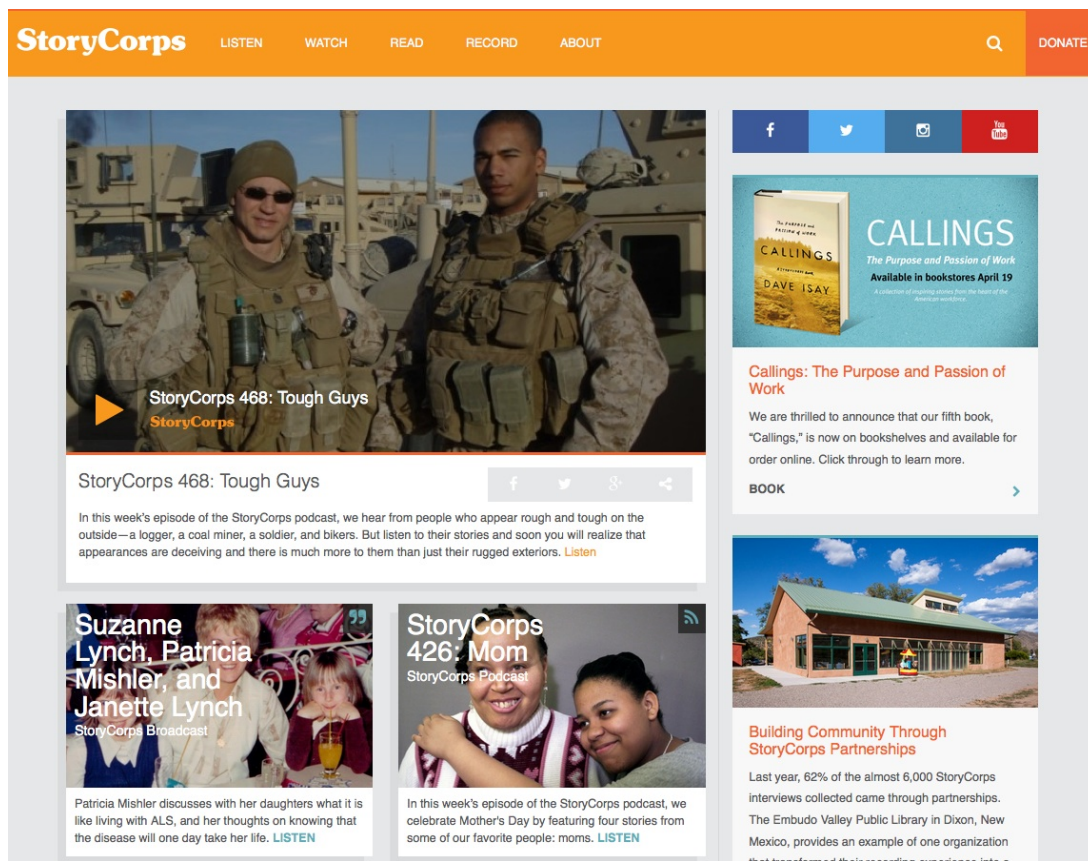


Figure 5.2. *StoryCorps* Website

³² Ibid., 125.

³³ Ibid., 109.

Freund also implicates the digital economy for fueling the storytelling craze by likening the use of *StoryCorps*' platform to *Twitter* and *Facebook*, calling it the “fast food” production and consumption of stories.”³⁴ In Freund’s asking “How has the rise of the digital media industry since the 1990s shaped storytelling?,” the core question becomes what does the “digital” allow and do?³⁵ In this sense, those of us working with digital media platforms in artistic and interventionist manners must consider the relationship between form and content in terms of how the form affects the content and vice versa, and at what point form and content are no longer separate entities, but mutually constitutive. Such is the critical practice with the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project to create a reflexive dialectics between the function of the linear and nonlinear documentary forms that affords viewers new awareness of digital documentary mediums’ specificities, capabilities and potentials.

Challenges – Platform

Given digital media’s diverse technologies, practices and delivery systems, and the mobility and mutability of its data, the increased potential for conveying and altering information comes with an increase in ethical concerns. At the level of content, film scholar Markos Hadjioannou argues that the symbolic bases of digital information does not necessarily mean a loss of authenticity or objectivity. He writes, “Rather, it induces an elimination of the existential awareness that the indexical

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 138.

image enabled, with its creative potential.”³⁶ Here, he is referring to the celluloid-based photographic image whereby the thing in the world is embedded in the medium’s silver halides, as opposed to the digital whereby the thing in the world is converted to ones and zeroes. Because of this, the digital has caused a historical and theoretical rupture in celluloid culture that changes both digital and celluloid media cultures yet retains some similarities. Moreover, according to Hadjioannou, the digital is an “image of thought” that “reconfigures understandings of the movie image on the basis of the ethical concerns raised with regard to the individual’s existential positioning in the world.”³⁷

Hadjioannou’s emphasis on the spectator’s increased reliance on their ethical positioning in the face of digitally-mediated imagery is relevant for digital documentary platforms. This is certainly the case with the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project as it harnesses the interactive capabilities and potentials of online technologies. Hence, a critical design is aware of how an online viewer or user’s ethical positioning is activated and how charged it may become, particularly given the increased engagement with screen cultures that often entail a more constant engagement with the public. This can surface when viewing the documentary material, deciding on when and how to participate, and negotiating the terms of privacy and publicness. One of the challenges in the design of *Tongues of*

³⁶ Markos Hadjioannou, *From Light to Byte: Toward an Ethics of Digital Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

Heaven/Root Tongue is how do these considerations affect online activist art projects aimed at creating subpublic or counterpublic dialogue?

A beginning question is: What do the social and political issues of language endangerment need? How can an expanded documentary address this? Certainly awareness, visibility, and dialogue are cornerstones of social activist work. Digital platforms can afford not only a greater spread of this awareness but an increase in the diversity of such exposure for a documentary and its issues. Furthermore, the nature of these platforms themselves signifies the context of mediation and the power dynamics involved to bring forth visibility. In digital media, “platform” can refer to the computational aspects of a digital system or environment, defined as the “material and formal construction of a system that enables developers to write applications and users to run them.”³⁸ However, for the purposes of this study, I am interested in extending the term “platform” to describe a communications system. Such a platform, according to filmmaker Meg McLagan and art critic Yates McKee, “is a performative context in which a circulating object stages its public presence, so to speak, so that its claims can be made.”³⁹ They write: “Platforms are not neutral spaces, but sites that produce the image politically. These platforms demand particular representational

³⁸ Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, “Platform,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin J. Robertson (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 393.

³⁹ Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 16.

forms, are coded with their own epistemological norms, and employ their own modes of address.”⁴⁰

Being cognizant of the “image-complex” available and each platform’s own specific codes, can help to create strategic approaches to materialize potential publics and participatory cultures. Certainly the main goal of transmedia productions is to maximize the reach of its content. Its multi-platform presentation also has the potential to attract a wider range of audiences who have different viewing habits depending on the technologies they are using. However, each of these platforms is value-laden in ways tied to the economic structures that support their very existence. What then would be an appropriate platform configuration that could best address the social and political issues of language endangerment? Further, how can online and offline activities revolving around a digital documentary on this topic be mutually enhanced? In an effort to engage people deeply after a cultural experience, how might these online and offline forms and experiences create a new documentary mode and/or aesthetics in the field of new digital media? How might new digital publics, counterpublics and subpublics be engaged and created? What kinds of community configurations, membership and sustainability might emerge from these digital publics, and particularly for its migratory and diasporic members who are targeted users of the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* project? And for under-represented producers, what opportunities and challenges do such digital media tools offer?

⁴⁰ Ibid., 17.

One type of platform that offers great potential, due to its aesthetic affinities with the experimental collaborative autoethnographic approach in *Tongues of Heaven*, is the art platform. In her in-depth study of art platforms, scholar of computational culture Olga Goriunova defines the art platform as a “network platform that produces art, here understood broadly as a process of creative living with networks.”⁴¹ She offers some useful considerations in thinking about how “free” we actually are when on the web, and when co-creating on an art platform. Goriunova writes:

Freedom and creativity are essential operators in both neo-liberal democracy and management jargon, but it is the concepts these strings of characters aspire to that are core to understanding modes in which cultures and art, free and open source software are made, not least as they are formatted into the ‘creative industries’.⁴²

At the same time, “freedom” and “creativity” are problematic terms for post-Marxists in this context. Using the free software movement as her example, she describes how the free software movement was appropriated by liberals who appealed to businesses, thereby enhancing liberal democratic society and the autonomy of liberal individualism. As for Marxists, freedom is interpreted as an opposition to constraint, and its impetus as rooted in coercion and dominance as seen in culture. Still, Goriunova believes, “[c]reativity is a chance to render a human being autonomous.”⁴³

In thinking more deeply about the value-coded platform, Goriunova’s discussion of the Autonomist Marxists, who believe in fact that capital extracts value

⁴¹ Olga Goriunova, *Art Platforms and Cultural Production on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

from the “entirety of social relations,” is also insightful. She describes social theorist Tiziana Terranova’s compelling argument that in postindustrial societies, “immaterial and affective labor rooted in human communication and relationships serves as a source of surplus value in the new process of production,” and that this includes “language competence, knowledge, imagination and social interaction as its sources of value.”⁴⁴ In critiquing the free software movement, Terranova argues that the gift economy of networks represents the basis of the digital economy that is in turn an essential part of late capitalist economy at large. That is, free labor is immanent and central to late capitalism, with the Internet as having always been a “gift economy” and an “advanced capitalist economy.”⁴⁵ Goriunova then points to a lack in Terranova’s address of free labor in that her notion leaves out the “dynamic of processual freedom in the sense of ‘liberation’ or moments beyond capitalism.”⁴⁶ Otherwise, she argues, “The total system has no exit and no outside, except for an annihilating catastrophe.”⁴⁷ In fact, in Goriunova’s study on art platforms, she is astutely aware of the increasing corporatization or control of the Internet, and hence, the platform itself and what that means for creativity and self-organization. As a way of addressing this tension while maintaining her optimistic stance on the potential of the digitally networked universe, she concludes, “Probably, art platforms can be

⁴⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

regarded as bastions of human dimensions in the space becoming increasingly and simultaneously formless and formalized.”⁴⁸

In Goriunova’s analysis, art platforms facilitate moments of processual freedom by enacting different forms of reality. However, processual freedom alone may run the risk of imparting a false sense of individual agency. Release and escape from the pressure cooker of power is fine, but that still leaves the systems of power in place. In fact, by allowing for releases, capital-driven power machines like the digital network economy ensure their flexibility, hence longevity. Perhaps a combination of release and mutation within and without would take the potentiality of the art platform to another level of social benefit and change. Certainly as the uploads of creative material continue to grow, the art platform aspect of *Root Tongue* will make evident the dynamic and evolving nature of articulations on the topic of language identity, endangerment and revival. Along with the expanding complex assemblages of these uploads, I will examine the activist platform to consider how the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* platform might be best configured to attend to the mutually catalyzing effects of creativity and socio-political change.

Activism

One of the initial questions for the transmedia *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* platform is whether it is a space to practice activism regarding language

⁴⁸ Ibid., 112.

endangerment and revival. In sociologists Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport's study of online activism, they begin by advocating for a shift from social movement scholarship to protest scholarship, given the technological advances of the Internet that continue to supplement, enhance and expand protest efforts. Whereas traditional social movements required copresence, defined as "the collectiveness of collective action—the idea that collective action requires the coordinated efforts of many people—and the physical togetherness that marks face-to-face togetherness as a specific way of working together," online activism does not.⁴⁹ They do note that certain issues of protest are more befitting for online use, such as stopping a proposal, and particularly for issues that "focus more on collaboration and common purpose and less on physical togetherness."⁵⁰ Thus, for Earl and Kimport, collective action can theoretically occur without collective identity.

Further, they argue that coming together for a protest can require varying degrees of time, money and effort. They note that in the past, when the stakes were high, like in the civil rights movements of the 1960s, it justified the costs. The question is if the costs are lower, can the stakes be lower too? It certainly can be perceived as such. The authors continue, "Or can they at least be personally felt stakes—committed fans, after all, consider their issues weighty—as opposed to ubiquitously political?"⁵¹ This leads me to consider why offline protests are still important. To protest is to make oneself visible, and to put oneself at risk of being a

⁴⁹ Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), 125.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

target of purposeful or accidental harm. What a protestor is putting at greatest risk, and thus what is at stake, is one's body. This is worlds apart from Earl and Kimport's "five-minute activist who navigates between participating in an e-tactic, checking Facebook, and doing job-related work on a computer."⁵² Both activities will necessarily be perceived differently by the public. One shows to the world an opinion on an issue for which one is willing to put one's body at risk, and the other only indicates an opinion on an issue. Hence offline protests are still critical, and will remain so for certain issues, especially those involving deeply embedded traditions and beliefs. However, knowing that online activism exists, especially its potential to enable more effective, more visible and highly coordinated collective actions, is empowering and an undeniable reality.

If the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia platform is an activist art project, what is the nature of this space? Is it designed as a space that offers the potential for activism, or is it a specifically designated space for activism? First and foremost, the platform offers the promise of creative and personal expression. Would an activist component turn some away? Or should the activist component be linked to another site? Regardless of the final design, the politics around language endangerment and revival will inevitably surface on the site, especially in the comment fields and perhaps in the personal uploads of video, audio, image and text. Moderation of content will be based on the terms of use. How much of the platform needs to be designed for direct political action aimed at the representative and/or state

⁵² Ibid., 184.

level, like petitions, or referendums? The design can certainly be flexible enough to incorporate a more consolidated space of political action. As an iterative process, the production of digital publics can be revised to accommodate fluctuations in user interest and participation, and the issues at hand. What is certain is that the interface design will be important for setting the tone of the online art platform, thereby influencing the possible forms and kinds of participation around a complex social issue.

Methodology

Keeping in mind both the artistic and activist aspects of the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* platform, I am interested in re-engaging Third Cinema praxis as an experimental methodology of transmedia arts activism, creating a new media form: the third digital documentary. What is revolutionary or causes revolutionary action through Third Cinema film and video can take on various forms and practices. In writing about Ousmane Sembene's films, postcolonial film scholar Teshome Gabriel notes for example that his films are not a call to action per se, but rather they serve as a warning. He writes that at the end of the film *Mandabi (Money Order)*, the concluding statement is spoken by the postman character Bah: “‘nous changerons tout cela’ (we will change all this). Although the declaration is not ‘a summons for action,’ it is, nevertheless, a call for reflection or a forewarning of what may follow

unless radical social change takes place.”⁵³ For Gabriel, the denunciation and warning in the film is what makes the film revolutionary, that is, gives the film revolutionary potential. Another revolutionary potential in Third Cinema praxis is the “film act,” an exhibition technique to interrupt the film and begin a discussion with the audience. This was a term coined and practiced by Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanos and Octavio Getino in 1968 when they screened their film *La hora de los hornos* (*Hour of the Furnaces*) under clandestine circumstances. In realizing a new facet of cinema, where spectators became participants, they noted three key factors to their revolutionary film act: “1) *The participant comrade*, the man-actor-accomplice who responded to the summons; 2) The free space where that man expressed his concerns and ideas, became politicized, and started to free himself; and 3) The film, important only as a detonator or pretext.”⁵⁴ *La hora de los hornos* itself rejects a linear narrative and is instead organized into a set of thematic chapters becoming a montage of historical facts, newsreels, story and experience, but most importantly, an “open-ended film” as a “way of learning.”⁵⁵ With discussions held in-between the parts, Solanos and Getino’s film act was an early iteration of a dialogical arts practice.

Writing in the context of contemporary art, art historian Grant Kester sets out to define the contours of an emerging dialogical aesthetics in arts practices that were increasingly set in non-conventional settings outside galleries and museums. His approach begins with defining art as providing a relatively open space within

⁵³ Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World*, 22.

⁵⁴ Solanos and Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema,” 62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

contemporary societies “in which certain questions can be asked, certain critical analyses articulated, that would not be accepted or tolerated elsewhere.”⁵⁶ He then discusses the added dimensions of “critical time sense,” “spatial imagination” and “dialogical and collaborative encounters” in defining a dialogical arts practice. A critical time sense considers the “cumulative effect of current decisions and actions on future events and generations. This represents an attempt to think outside, or beyond, immediate self-interest” and “to actualize the anticipatory appeal to a ‘viewer yet to be’.”⁵⁷ Having a spatial imagination involves the ability “to comprehend and represent complex social and environmental systems” and “to identify interconnections among the often invisible forces that pattern human and environmental existence.”⁵⁸ Such temporal and spatial insights would actually be achieved through dialogical and collaborative encounters with participants. Rather than a dialogic arts practice conducted in clandestine settings, these arts practices are publicly performed. He writes, “We might combine these approaches to say that the existing cultural construction of art as a privileged realm of free expression provides a quasi-protected opening onto a broader cultural and political arena within which these various forms of aesthetic knowledge can be mobilized.”⁵⁹ According to Kester, several interactions are foundational to a dialogical aesthetics: discursivity, reciprocity and corporeality. In dialogical aesthetics, “subjectivity is formed *through*

⁵⁶ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 68.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

discourse and intersubjective exchange.”⁶⁰ Following Bakhtin’s writings on dialogism, Kester writes that this intersubjective exchange is reciprocal and essential to a dialogical aesthetics in that it opens both participants “to the ‘excess’ that is made possible by the provisional blurring of boundaries between self and other.”⁶¹ Finally, corporeal interaction is foundational to a dialogical aesthetic.

Certainly the film acts that Solanos and Getino theorized and practiced in the late 1960s encapsulated Kester’s notion of dialogical aesthetics. Post-screening discussions of *Tongues of Heaven*, particularly those based in community settings, produced like dialogical aesthetics due primarily to the audience members’ background and interests but also to the time allocated to discussions, which at times lasted up to one hour. In fact, the Third Cinema methodology of film acts can be seen in the current transmedia documentary project *Lunch Love Community*, self-named an “open space documentary,” where “media socials” are offered at 90-minute gatherings of short film screenings with intervals of conversations between live speakers to “comment, question and activate audience participants.”⁶² The site states: “Participants leave our media socials with ideas, next steps towards action, and resources to carry on the work in their community.” The term “open space documentary” was coined by Patricia Zimmermann and filmmaker Helen De Michiel to describe an emergent framework for community-media involving openness in means (i.e., technological, collaborative, hyperlocal) and kinds (i.e., conversational,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁶¹ Ibid., 122.

⁶² “Media Socials,” *Lunch Love Community*, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.lunchlovecommunity.org/media-social>.

unpredictable) of dialogue that such documentary practice may produce.⁶³ However, what would film acts look like in an online context? What is the same or different between offline and online dialogue instigated by a work of art? Given Kester's elaboration on the foundations of dialogical aesthetics in arts practices located outside traditional settings, can arts practices located online for example, like interactive documentaries, challenge or expand his current notions of dialogical aesthetics?

In general, online public dialogue is predominantly text-based through forums handled by moderators and through comment fields. While video chats have steadily increased in use in the last ten years, text-based communication is still the dominant form of online social issue dialogue online among the public or strangers. Online dialogue can never approach the sensory experience of face-to-face communications with its attending gestures, nuanced utterances, tones, smells and the shared space of being together in conversation—the excesses and unpredictability that blur the boundary between self and the other person as described by Bakhtin. Online dialogue is not corporeal but modular and one that can be carefully modulated. It occurs among spatially and temporally-dispersed individuals, highlighting the individuated experience of engaging in online dialogic activities. While discursivity and reciprocity necessary for dialogic aesthetics are possible in the online context, corporeality is not. However, this is not to dismiss the mutually transformative potentials of public online exchange. In place of corporeal intersubjective

⁶³ Helen De Michiel, "Open Space Documentary," *A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change*, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://animatingdemocracy.org/working-guide-abstracts>.

transformations that take place in face-to-face dialogue, online dialogue not only activates but further deepens the “critical time sense” to which Kester refers. One of the main differences with print-based public dialogue and online dialogue is the temporal lag between reactions, commentary, and dialogue. The digital platform allows for at times immediate responses as opposed to waiting for the next day or next week’s print edition. As long as the web domain is functioning, online dialogue is alive, so to speak, as individuals can continue to engage with the issues beyond its initial prompt. In this way, the online platform is in a constant state of potentiality to actualize a “viewer to be” or participant to be. This brings about new relationships particularly with what already exists online at the time of engagement, and in this way an online dialogic arts practice can be considered “durational”—the kind of art experience dialogical arts practices induce, rather than one that is immediate.⁶⁴

Creating an online context for dialogic activities based on art can produce a sense of liveness through its re-animation of previously existing commentary and discussion threads. And if mechanisms are in place to alert participants of responses to their posts than this could close the time gap some more between dialogic acts. The *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* platform is an experiment in producing an online dialogic aesthetics via a documentary work. The online platform is designed to inspire responses by users through the uploading of perspectives and creative

⁶⁴ Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 12. To read another consideration of dialogism in electronic art, see Eduardo Kac, “Negotiating Meaning: The Dialogic Imagination in Electronic Art” in *Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language and Culture: Meaning in Language, Art and New Media*, eds. Finn Bostad, Craig Brandist and Hege Charlotte Faber (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

expression via photos, music, writings, and short videos, as well as commentary on already existing uploads located in the community gallery. Similar in spirit to the film act, the prompts or questions were created from offline discussions of *Tongues of Heaven*. Although these questions arose in different screening contexts, they repeatedly surfaced in discussions. Essentially, the *Root Tongue* platform is a supplement to the documentary *and* something new in its entirety. The platform, as a third digital documentary, offers a durational, dialogic art experience, in conjunction with taking action—whether creatively or politically in the effort to consider and/or revive endangered languages. Given the economic re-structuring of the global economy, which includes transnational media circuits, film scholar Robert Stam revisits the viability of Third World and Third Cinema praxis. He concludes, “As long as they are taken, not as ‘essential’ pre-constituted entities, but rather as collective projects to be forged, and terms ‘under erasure,’ both ‘Third World Cinema’ and ‘Third Cinema’ retain some tactical and polemical use for a politically inflected cultural practice.”⁶⁵ As a praxis of third digital documentary then, the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia platform cultivates the coming together of emergent new publics in an era of decolonization. With each upload and commentary, *Root Tongue* aims for amplification not only of its aesthetic force as an art platform of new cultural production, but as a live collection of articulated struggles arising out of the issues that language endangerment and revival entail.

⁶⁵ Stam, *Film Theory*, 291.

Team-building

The intended users of the *Root Tongue* platform were initially indigenous peoples living in Taiwan. They would be young Taiwanese indigenous users who desire to stay connected with or are curious about their languages; they may want to learn a language, or participate in discussions and debates on their language and other related issues; or they may just enjoy watching short videos. In terms of electricity, hardware and technology for Internet access, most dwellings in Taiwan have electricity. The very few *buluos* that do not have electricity are due to personal choice. The state-owned electricity company, Taiwan Power Company, has an ongoing program to donate computers and connectivity to *buluos*. If a household does not have a computer, their church or community center will most likely have computers for public use. In townships and urban centers, Internet access is available for free at public libraries, and is also available at an affordable fee at ubiquitous and always packed Internet cafes. The main interface language would be Chinese since the aim is to draw young people with none to varying degrees of competency in their native language. I was also interested in including an English language interface in order to broaden its reach and influence, particularly for the Hawai'i contingent. Although the discussion forum will most likely be in Chinese, other aspects of the web platform such as the videos or interface could prove useful and hopefully inspirational to invite participation across cultures and languages.

It was important that *Root Tongue* offered an open and safe space for young people to express themselves and that it be creatively inviting, while also featuring linguistically rigorous language learning content. Therefore, in thinking about the hosting institution, electronic artist Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga's use of writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger's table summarizing the "repressive" and "emancipatory" uses of media continues to offer a useful framework. These emancipatory aspects as summarized in Enzensberger's table are: decentralized program; each receiver a potential transmitter; mobilization of the masses; interaction of those involved, feedback; a political learning process; collective production; social control by self-organization.⁶⁶ What would most make *Root Tongue* emancipatory is its process as a "collective production." What would make it least emancipatory is the fact that the platform is currently undergirded by corporate platforms like Amazon Web Services to host its contents, making the program or project less decentered.

Our team in Taiwan, then and now, is comprised of *Tongues of Heaven* co-directors An-Chi Chen and Shin-Lan Yu, and National Dong Hwa University professors: linguistics consultants Amy P. Lee (Kavalan and Minnanese speaker), Apay Yang (a Truku speaker) and social media scholar Yu-Chao Huang. While we had worked with a web development company in Taipei, the lack of coordinated feedback resulted in an unsuccessful partnership. My return to the U.S. also prompted me to find an additional team based in the San Francisco Bay Area where collaboration, communication and an adventurous attitude were prioritized. I was

⁶⁶ Ricardo M. Zúñiga, "The Work of Artists in a Databased Society: Net.art As Online Activism," *Afterimage* 29 (2002): 9.

fortunate to have Michella Rivera-Gravage join the team as the interactive producer. Over the past ten years, she produced and designed interactive participatory media projects, and developed social media strategies within the public media sector. Some of her projects included directing the Digital and Interactive Media at the Center for Asian American Media in San Francisco, where she produced all web and new media projects, including the ephemeral *hapas.us*, a media-sharing site for multiracial Asians, the iPhone game “Filipino or Not” and a digital game based on a documentary film about the first Nepali women’s expedition up Mt. Everest. She brought in the Otherwise, Co. design team comprised of Asian Pacific American women to work on branding, identity, naming and interface design.

Critical Design

As we were designing the platform, I was also traveling with *Tongues of Heaven* to screenings at festival, university and community settings. The screenings were located throughout Taiwan, various parts of the U.S. and Europe. During extended discussions I came to realize that although the stories emerging from An-Chi, Shin-Lan, Kainoa and Hau‘oli’s cameras were specific and personal, audiences connected to their struggles. At that time I was interested in media design scholar Ramesh Srinivasan’s ideas on re-conceptualizing new digital media technologies by taking into consideration cultural beliefs, languages and values of Internet users in the developing world. He advocates for the importance of local ontologies and practices

over “singular Western-created representations of knowledge” in the design of new media objects with a focus on indigenous knowledge.⁶⁷ At the core of his argument is the need to interrogate the languages, architectures and infrastructures within which digital media designers work. Srinivasan’s revolutionary approach to culturally-appropriate digital media design is relevant for culturally, linguistically and geographically circumscribed communities. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the unequal distribution of language on the Internet is a major challenge to overcome. It limits the reach and possibilities, for example, of what the *Root Tongue* web application can do. I will discuss this further in the chapter.

While I agree with Srinivasan’s working methodologies, I am wary when something is claimed in the name of culture because of the risk of essentializing that culture, and of ignoring the inherent power dynamics that exist in upholding any particular form of culture, whether mainstream or marginalized. Perhaps the challenge of what media scholar Anne Balsamo refers to as the cultural “attunement” of the “technological imagination” is being aware of the power dynamics within any cultural context and intervening to rattle and shift those dynamics.⁶⁸ The challenge for my team was identifying our targeted users. Our team in Taiwan and California are from different ethnic, national and linguistic backgrounds and all of us have struggled with maintaining or losing our heritage languages. The documentary also resonated with people from backgrounds that were not indigenous or Taiwanese or Hawaiian.

⁶⁷ Ramesh Srinivasan, “Re-thinking the Cultural Codes of New Media: The Question Concerning Ontology,” *New Media and Society* 15, no. 2 (2013): 203-223.

⁶⁸ Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

As an artist working in such a collaborative context, we made the decision to expand our targeted users to those who have an interest in exploring the issues and challenges of language endangerment and preservation on a personal level. We also decided to begin with an English interface since this was the language that all the team members shared, with the plan to create multiple language interfaces in the future once we secured more funding. Whether on a desktop computer or on a mobile device, user experience is literally and figuratively framed. How we delineate the various frames sets the tone, solicits participation and influences the kinds of participation made possible. Frameworks can also be localized, indigenized and repurposed, depending on how flexible those frameworks are made. The challenge is finding the balance between acknowledging the kinds of participation we are soliciting, yet keeping it open enough, thus making critical design a necessary and viable practice.

In *Designing Culture*, Balsamo differentiates between invention and innovation in order to argue for a critical design practice in today's technological landscape. She writes, "Where the term 'invention' refers to a novel idea or thing, innovation implies the creation of unique arrangements that provides the basis for a reorganization of the way things *will be* in the future: in this sense, all innovations rearrange culture."⁶⁹ Therefore, taking culture as a "precondition and horizon of creative effort" makes innovation more innovative, and this would include designing practices that "hack the present to create the conditions for the future."⁷⁰ For Balsamo, a critical design practice then would understand that any design materially

⁶⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2, 6.

reproduces cultural beliefs, establishes identities, and codifies social relations. To push the challenge of critical design practice even further is to consider how such innovations would prevent being absorbed by the hegemon. That is, what is the balance between an innovation that is accessible and palpable for the public, but estranged enough to prevent corporate absorption.⁷¹

We focused our attention on frontend development (e.g. identity, graphical user interface) and maximizing free-to-low cost backend development through customization (e.g. functionality). We decided to build first for mobile devices, especially given the steady growth of smartphone usage worldwide, particularly among youth and young adults, and more recently in the U.S. in all age and income levels.⁷² Further, people have more constant access to their mobile devices than their desktop or laptop computers. Eventually, we plan to optimize for the desktop experience. We also decided that it was more economically sound to build a web application that could be used on all kinds of mobile devices, rather than build a mobile application tailored to meet the specifications of various and constantly fluctuating mobile operating systems. Balancing the budget entailed making decisions

⁷¹ This is an additional insight provided by Jennifer González in relation to independent artist-produced designs.

⁷² “Smartphone user penetration as percentage of total global population from 2011 to 2018,” *Statista*, accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/203734/global-smartphone-penetration-per-capita-since-2005>. “Smartphone Penetration, Rising in All Age and Income Demos, Hits 75% of the US Mobile Market,” *Marketing-Charts*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.marketingcharts.com/online/smartphone-penetration-rising-in-all-age-and-income-demos-hits-75-of-us-mobile-market-51585>.

regarding infrastructure, hardware and software in conjunction with the work required for the identity and the look of the platform.

In establishing the identity of the web platform, I took to task a critical design practice that would strike a balance between an aesthetic universality that also allowed for the unique expressions of users. My work with the Otherwise design team began with naming, which required several stages. The first was establishing the platform's single essential message, which became: Tongues of Heaven Interactive is a culturally relevant experience that engages deeply with those who seek meaningful dialogue surrounding the subject of language revitalization. The next stage was setting the tone words for the naming that would describe an online space that was provocative and interrogative and that would solicit honest and earnest responses. The final tone words were: provocative, soulful, forward. As a team, we worked closely together to negotiate and actively decode and recode visual symbols and representations. While "Spoken Heritage" was initially the favored name, we decided that "heritage" may imply what is staid, or had its place, and does not necessarily leave room for growth, change and newness. The naming needed to be snappy, catchy, and prioritizes the process of seeking and discovery. Given that it was important for "culture" to breathe, the key was to make the design less about culture than about cultural reception. After several brainstorm sessions with Otherwise and friends, we decided on "Root Tongue," which we thought had the most potential, as it is curious, concise, new, and fun as a form of word play.

In a post-screening discussion of *Tongues of Heaven*, anthropologist James Clifford made an off-the-cuff suggestion that perhaps “land tongue” is a more accurate term than “mother tongue” in that it does not essentialize or foreground gender as necessarily connected to one’s heritage language.⁷³ Additionally, most people understand “root” as connected to one’s background or heritage, but also activates one to position oneself, and not only geographically. For example, one may ask: What are my roots? Do I have roots somewhere? During the naming process I had discussions with my team about the concepts of “rhizome” versus “root” as applied to cultural studies. While Deleuze and Guattari mobilized the term “rhizome” in *A Thousand Plateaus* to describe a non-hierarchical model for cultural behavior, Clifford discussed how the pairing of living organisms to social activities like culture risks obscuring their differences.⁷⁴ For example during the post-screening event of *Tongues of Heaven* he explained, “If language or religion are crucial things in the life of a culture—if it were thought of like a body, it would be like tearing the lungs out. Okay, the body is dead. But in fact, virtually all Native Pacific societies are Christian.”⁷⁵ In a (post)colonial and decolonizing context, “root” also refers to the tangible and intangible values of mobilization resulting from the often violent uprootings of people and communities as a result of globalization’s effects. Stam writes, “While postcolonial thought stresses de-territorialization, the artificial,

⁷³ Anita Chang, “Tongues of Heaven Screening and Discussion with Professor Emeritus James Clifford” (screening, Santa Cruz, CA, April 16, 2014).

⁷⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). 21.

⁷⁵ Chang, “Tongues of Heaven Screening.”

constructed nature of nationalism and national borders, and the obsolescence of anti-colonialist discourse, Fourth World indigenous peoples emphasize a discourse of territorial claims, symbiotic links to nature, and active resistance to colonial incursions.”⁷⁶ The “Root Tongue” name points to this very tension. The final naming of the web platform then became “*Root Tongue: Sharing Stories of Language Identity and Revival*,” again, with “identity” and “revival” also being contested processes, but ones that can also be soulful, playful and inventive. The aim is that this name would also draw curiosity across generations.

The design team and I then moved onto the logo design. The first approach was “classical” in font and graphic design, which in the end seemed too unidirectional (figure 5.3). The second approach was “raw,” which was hand-drawn and rough on the edges but the design was too sparse (figure 5.4). The “modern” approach was playful, working with the “O” font to indicate orality or the passing down of a language (figure 5.5). The “plant” motif combined the fonts with literal roots behind letters, adding texture and an organic element to the logo. The option of using different root systems throughout the graphic user interface was initially appealing. However, the root design took the meaning of the “root” in “*Root Tongue*” too literally (figure 5.6). Finally, we chose the “system” approach where the character-sharing between the letters “T” and design flowed together and echoed the intention of the project, which is sharing how identity is tied to language and provoking thought around the subject (figure 5.7). It was also a modern font with a design

⁷⁶ Stam, *Film Theory*, 298.

pattern that could potentially stimulate the imagination of today, especially relevant in language revitalization efforts. The final touches involved a line of minimalist cross-hatching, a common design motif in Austronesian-speaking territories. It was a subtle nod to the film's setting in both Taiwan and Hawai'i.

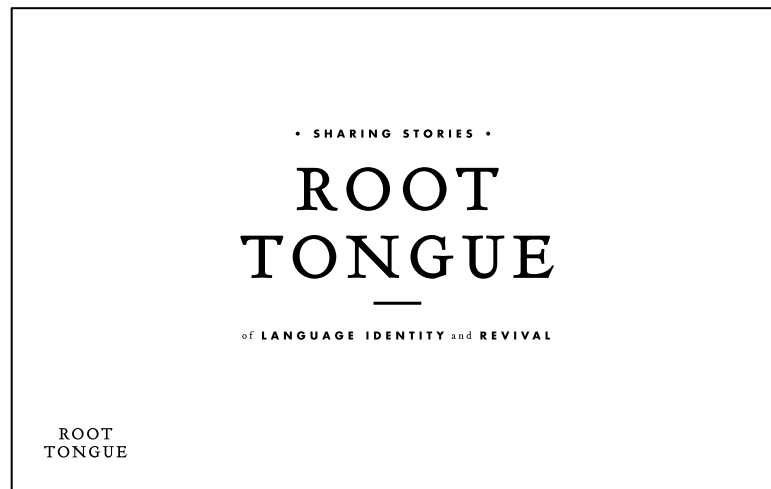


Figure 5.3. Classical Logo



Figure 5.4. Raw Logo



Figure 5.5. Modern Logo

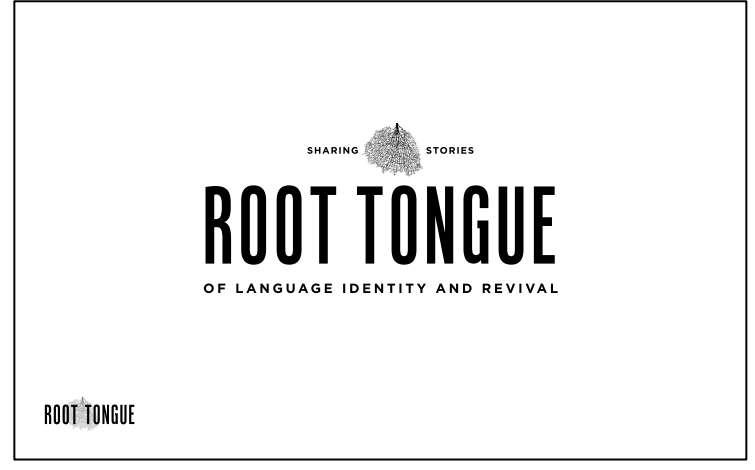


Figure 5.6. Plant Logo

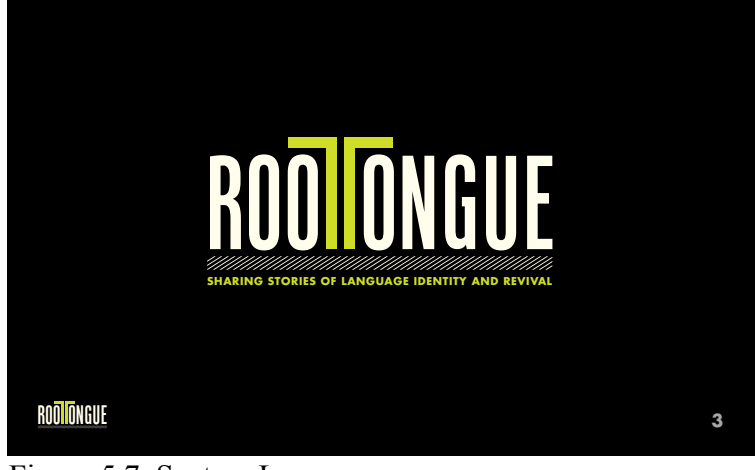


Figure 5.7. System Logo

Designing an Interactive Documentary Dialectic

The user interface design was created to allow for flexibility in function in order to accommodate additional assets when funding is made available. At the heart of the *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia project is my effort to experiment with what digital expansion of the documentary means. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, creating a dialectic between the linear and nonlinear documentary retains certain aspects of the linear documentary such as authorial perspective(s); sustained development of an idea; story or argument; and audience expectations. This juxtaposition allows for reflexive spectatorship that can differentiate between a completed linear documentary and fragments from the same documentary. My role in *Root Tongue* is both as a context-provider and a documentary producer. I do not give up my co-authorship with An-Chi, Shin-Lan, Hau'oli and Kainoa. Nor does *Root Tongue* relinquish the linear documentary form as evidenced by the linear sequence of the thematically-based prompts. The original logic to the work is implied in the design. However, the fragments of the larger work can be accessed at any point depending upon user interest. And with the movement back and forth between fragments, the construction or discourse of the linear documentary becomes more pronounced, potentially fostering a dialectic of ongoing interpretation and dialogue of the issues at hand given the surrounding intertexts (figure 5.8).

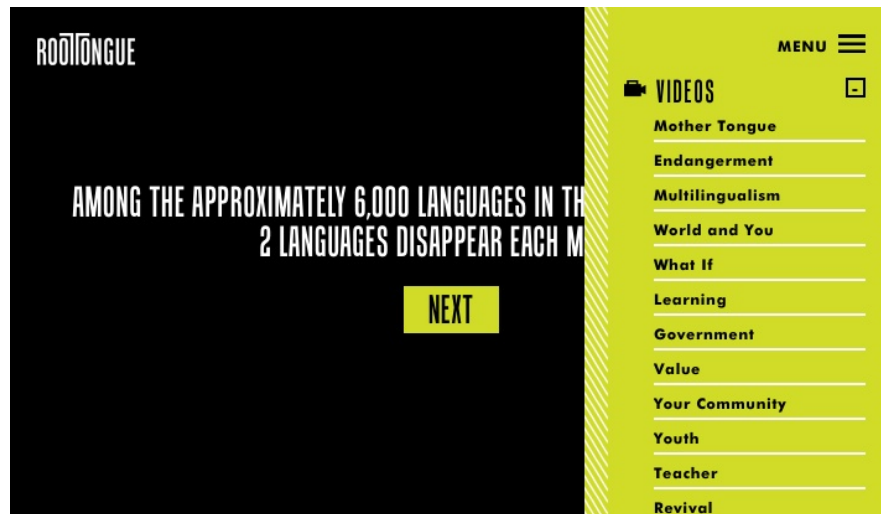


Figure 5.8. Video Clip Topics

Our goal in the user interface design was to sustain and ensure engagement through a user experience that had an easy flow, was enticing, and maintained attention. We chose *YouTube* as our video hosting site due to the platform’s robustness, to another set of publics to engage, and to its archival potential. As I had mentioned in my last chapter, since Web 2.0, the Internet has become increasingly visual and animated with audio-visual imagery. Furthermore, recent studies have shown an increase in uninterrupted viewing of *YouTube* programs on mobile devices, whereas previously, the average viewing time was five minutes.⁷⁷ The “Watch Film” button in the sliding menu links to Vimeo On Demand streaming of *Tongues of Heaven*. These monetary options, including the “Donate” page, assist in sustaining the cost of the platform over time. Third World Newsreel publicized its educational

⁷⁷ Christopher de Looer, “People Now Spend An Average Of 40 Minutes On YouTube Per Viewing Session,” *Tech Times*, July 17, 2015, <http://www.techtimes.com/articles/69850/20150717/people-now-spend-average-40-minutes-YouTube-per-viewing-session.htm>.

distribution of *Tongues of Heaven* shortly after the launch of *Root Tongue* all in an effort to increase mutual visibility. Future broadcast opportunities will be pursued, further embellishing the transmedia experience and bringing exposure to the platform.

Root Tongue is designed to be an interactive, participatory and dialogic experience. Users interact with the interface, with the original creators of the documentary, and with other users. The structure is “semi-open” in that users can add material but not change the structure.⁷⁸ Some key questions were posed to soliciting user participation. What makes the interactivity worth the time and attention of users? What is the relationship that we are creating with the participant in terms of how they expect to engage with the various media? What are the terms of exchange? How can we adhere to these terms while also pushing users to new territories? Therefore it is important to consider how the invitation of participation and dialogue is framed. Further, where do in-depth public conversations happen online in public? In order to receive honest, earnest responses and to drive the conversation forward, a community manager is often the person tasked with this role, much like a moderator or facilitator in the offline context.

One model that inspired me is the web platform *Learning to Love you More* (2002-2009) by social practice artists Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher (figure 5.9).

⁷⁸ Aufderheide, *Interactive Documentaries*, 70.



Figure 5.9. *Learning to Love You More* Web Archive

It is currently archived by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.⁷⁹ In order to solicit public participation, they would give assignments. As their statement reads, “Like a recipe, meditation practice, or familiar song, the prescriptive nature of these assignments was intended to guide people towards their own experience.” Over a span of seven years, 8,000 people participated in their online call for creative submissions. The technique of asking a question made sense as a prompting device for visitor response. Keeping it open-ended but constrained enough is the challenge. For example, Te Papa museum’s *The Wall* exhibit solicits participation based on a simple notion of *The Wall* as being a place “where you create the action.” The website reads, “The Wall—a constantly changing window/Te Pakitara—he ao huri

⁷⁹ See <http://www.learningtoloveyoumore.com/hello/index.php>.

noa. Nau te rourou, naki te rourou, ke ora ai te iwi/With your contribution and my contribution, the people will thrive.” The public is asked to upload still and moving images in response to how they might contribute to a thriving people in New Zealand. The prompt is both open and specific enough to keep users focused. In *Root Tongue*'s case, the issue of language endangerment and revival is complex and multi-faceted, and requires multiple prompts. To draw visitors into the platform, *Root Tongue* begins with four individual frames:

- 1) Among the approximately 6,000 languages in the world, an average of 2 languages disappear each month.
- 2) Based on the documentary *Tongues of Heaven*, *Root Tongue* introduces you to the four filmmakers as they record their struggle to cultivate their mother tongue in Taiwan and Hawai'i.
- 3) *Root Tongue* enables you to explore the challenges of language endangerment and preservation by experiencing and sharing stories of language loss and revival.
- 4) How it works: watch the videos (1 – 4 minutes in length); after each video plays you will be asked a question; respond with your stories in text, image, audio or video; visit the community gallery to see and comment on other responses.⁸⁰

In the About page, *Root Tongue* provides background information and states, “We hope you will join us in sharing your challenges, promises and successes, and that you will find meaningful connections here.” The prompts were created from issues and topics that repeatedly surfaced during the post-screening discussions of *Tongues of Heaven*, indicating the mutual importance of online and offline dynamics in soliciting participation (figures 5.11, 5.12, 5.13, 5.14 and 5.15). The *Learning to Love*

⁸⁰ See <http://beta.root-tongue.com/about>.

You More web platform incorporated public gatherings and opportunities for offline invitations to populate its site.⁸¹



Figure 5.10. *Root Tongue* Video Clip

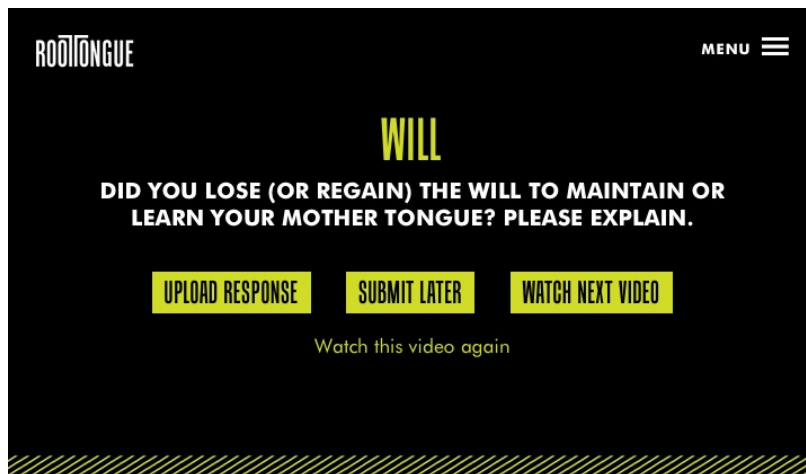


Figure 5.11. *Root Tongue* Prompt

⁸¹ Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, “Participative Systems,” *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 122.

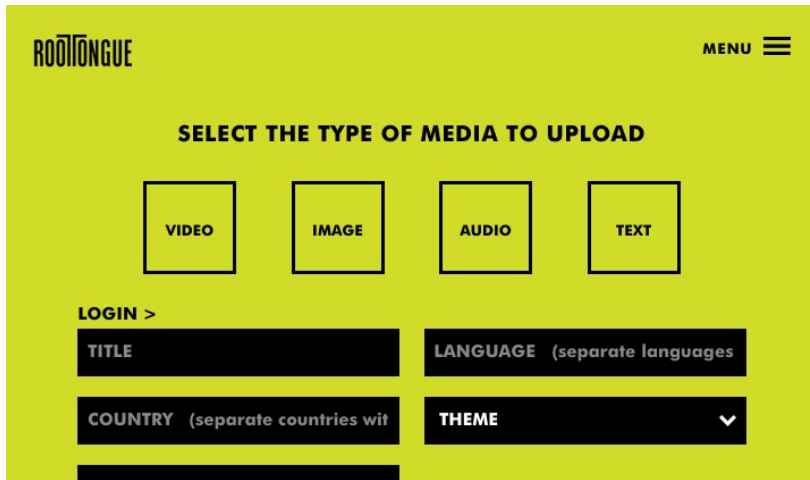


Figure 5.12. *Root Tongue* Upload Interface

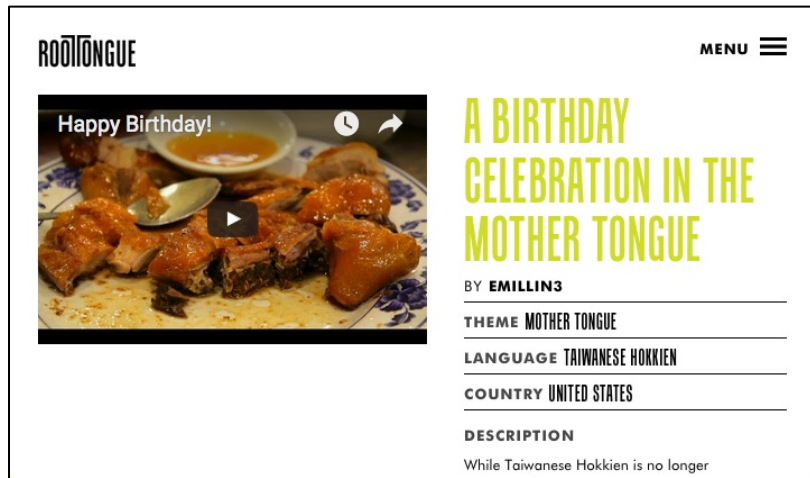


Figure 5.13. *Root Tongue* Community Gallery Page

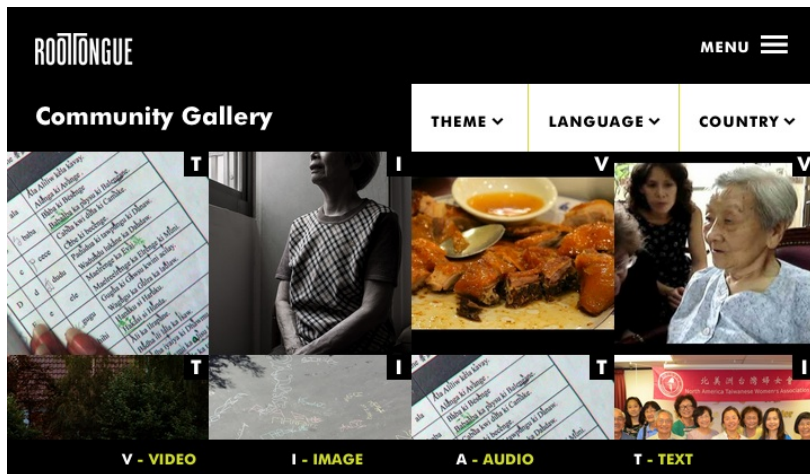


Figure 5.14. *Root Tongue* Community Gallery

Public Disclosure on the Wild Wild Web

No doubt, with the advent of the Internet, contemporary human interactions have been characterized as increasingly networked, ultimately “ensuring power and power sharing.”⁸² At the very least, *Root Tongue* offers a space for those who do feel revitalization is important and a platform that could allow them a space to make their case and to make connections, potentially across the globe. Certainly user types are assessed, such as are they creators, likers or lurkers? Interestingly, young users are the largest demographic of those creating on the web, perhaps due to fewer inhibitions in being public online.⁸³ However, in thinking about *Root Tongue*’s user profile or stories (that is, who would most be using the web application) we began by avoiding cultural and ethnic categories, while still allowing for them. Instead we based user profiles on their stance regarding language revitalization. One example of a user story is someone who is convinced that language revitalization is important. She is from indigenous ancestry or a minority language-speaking background and is identified as such. She is involved in varying degrees of language activism, may be a speaker or non-speaker, has creative tendencies or appreciates creativity, understands the complexities of the issues, has the will to learn her heritage, and is living in or in proximity to a speaker community and the land, or she may be in Diaspora. What

⁸² Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 42.

⁸³ Marc von Brockdorff, “The 6 Different Types of Social Media Users—Which one are you?” *webgeekly*, accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.webgeekly.com/lessons/social-media/the-6-different-types-of-social-media-users-which-one-are-you>.

kind of community *Root Tongue* builds is yet to come. Current supporters are comprised of core followers of my films, audience members from the *Tongues of Heaven* screenings, our Indiegogo crowdsource campaign, and our *Facebook* followers. With the wild, wild web, the possibility for inauthentic users participating on *Root Tongue* is a fact.⁸⁴ We addressed this issue through what the platform requests of users, and its terms of use and privacy guidelines. These terms and guidelines are often sober reminders of the daunting reality of the wild wild web, and that despite these risks, one hopes users will be inspired enough to participate. Periodic monitoring of the platform and building trust would hopefully lead to more honest or authentic participation, outweighing the disingenuous ones.

The disclosure of something once held in private into the public realm is certainly one possible facet of the *Root Tongue* experience—a kind of performance of the private self in public. What kinds of participation are really happening that are different than offline activities? Is the participation a fueling of affect? Is it more honest? Or more reflective? Daniel Bogre Udell of *Wikitungues* remarks that since the lines between public and private spheres are blurred on the Internet, it can create a comfortable space for speakers of marginalized languages to use their languages, especially if they do not have secure and safe public spaces to do so.⁸⁵ Again, the design of the platform can help to a certain extent set the tone in framing the kinds of

⁸⁴ The phrase “wild wild web” is often used to refer to the challenges of nation-states in regulating the electronic frontier that is the Internet.

⁸⁵ Kristine Deveza, “International Mother Language Day: How Digital Tools Can Empower Marginalized Voices,” *Center for International Media Assistance*, February 20, 2015, <http://www.cima.ned.org/international-mother-language-day-digital-tools-can-empower-marginalized-voices>.

participation solicited. The *Root Tongue* community gallery space provides participants a page for each of their uploads that includes individual fields for the title, credit, theme, language, country and description. While *Root Tongue* does ask visitors to share their stories of language loss and revival, its focus is on the creative dimension of uploads. The platform certainly does not intend to be what Freund calls the “fast food” production and consumption of stories, in referring to the *StoryCorps* platform.⁸⁶ In part, *Root Tongue* revolves around a set of specific issues, where many of the *StoryCorps* recordings are about overcoming individual struggles in a variety of situations. However, Freund’s study does not include *StoryCorps*’ short animations produced from oral testimonies. These short animations have been hosted on *YouTube* since 2011 and the video archive is extremely small compared to the audio-only recordings accompanied by a photo mainly taken in their StoryBooths. The comment field to the *YouTube* videos is enabled, whereas the audio recordings available on *StoryCorps*’ own site has no place for public comment or dialogue. One of the top videos *Traffic Stop* directed by Gina Kamensky and Julie Zammarchi in 2015 has received over 188,982 views just within seven months of its upload, which is high given the short amount of time it has been online. Some videos reached the same number of viewers but have been on the site for over two years. In *Traffic Stop*, a young African American man recounts his story to his white adoptive mother of being pulled over by the Denver police in 2009 and severely beaten. The top two comments contain the commentators’ sentiments and analysis of the system—one

⁸⁶ Freund, “Under Storytelling’s Spell?,” 109.

being the need to face the racial divide in the U.S., and the other on policy recommendations to delink the district attorney's office and the Denver police force.⁸⁷ That is, *YouTube* continues to provide a forum or outlet for the dialogue that is missing in Freund's analysis of *StoryCorps*' "fast food" style of "oral history." It engages another set of publics willing to participate through commentary and/or response. For sites like *StoryCorps*, *YouTube* can be a repository for public comment and dialogue, however unruly it may sometimes be (although abusive commentaries are usually moderated by *YouTube* and/or the host). For the commenting public, it can also function as another outlet for dialogue in addition to comments on the original site in which the video is embedded. Furthermore, in terms of archival considerations, when the website on which *YouTube* videos are embedded can no longer exist, the videos can technically still remain on *YouTube*.

Public, Subpublic, Counterpublic

Undoubtedly, corporate platforms like *YouTube*, *Facebook* and others provide a low-to-no cost platform for interactive, informational and archival purposes. Social media platforms can also be easily incorporated into other websites and platforms as they are free, customizable, easy to use, well-maintained, and have social currency. In fact, many websites utilize social media platforms like *Facebook* or *Twitter* to enhance their value; even if visitors do not click into the site, their logos alone secure

⁸⁷ "Traffic Stop," *YouTube*, accessed on February 26, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3P9-BjYxTu8>.

their standing. In the Taiwan context, *Facebook* continues to rise in popularity as a medium of communication, especially among young users. At least 84 percent of Internet users are using *Facebook* there, the second highest in Asia, just after Japan.⁸⁸

At this juncture we ask whether a corporate media structure affects the kinds of public that can be created? *Root Tongue* aims to be a “counterpublic” space, one that Warner defines as creating “spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative not replicative merely” of dominant publics.⁸⁹ While dominant publics take their discourse and lifeworlds for granted, counterpublics risk estrangement “registered in its ethical-political imagination,” and at the same time recognizes the infinity of its address.⁹⁰ If, however, multiple or subpublics continue to converge onto social media sites like *YouTube* or *Facebook*, do they not produce these social media platforms as a dominant public entity, thereby diffusing the nature and likelihood of counterpublic spaces on its platform? As new media scholar Lev Manovich asks: “[D]oes this mean that people’s identities and imagination are now even more firmly colonized by commercial media than in the twentieth century? Is the replacement of the mass consumption of commercial culture by users’ mass production of cultural objects a progressive development?”⁹¹ Some questions then for such a counter digital public enterprise is: How counter does the

⁸⁸ “Asia Internet Use, Population Data and Facebook Statistics,” *Internet World Stats*, last modified November 15, 2015, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>.

⁸⁹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 122.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Lev Manovich, “Art after Web 2.0,” *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Frieling, Rudolf (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 71.

enterprise want to be? How counter does it need to be? That is, what is its relationship to the state? Warner notes that when

alternative publics are said to be social movements: they acquire agency in relation to the state. They enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. For many counterpublics, to do so is to cede the original final hope for transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself.⁹²

Being undergirded by corporate structures, can *Root Tongue* live up to its aim as a space for counterpublic activity? How does this affect the kinds of participation it solicits? “Counterpublics are counter to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics, they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects.”⁹³ How can this kind of counterpublic interaction be different and transformative from the dominant discourses of the state? Engaging with networked mediated communication is the projection of our desire for freedom and connectivity, and this projection is the commodity that is exchanged for personal data to further feed corporate conglomerates. Its value increases with each subpublic’s free affective labor and uploaded content. Thus, social media entities become “virtual corporate” public entities with agency.⁹⁴ Will such entities supplant and consume the counterpublic being created by *Root Tongue*? Or can artistic expressivity and performativity, which are not “organized by the hierarchy of

⁹² Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 124.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

faculties that elevates rational-critical reflection as the self-image of humanity,” be themselves the very things of digital counterpublics?⁹⁵

Returning to Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s emancipatory use of media, *Root Tongue* to varying degrees fulfills most of the aspects he outlined: collaborative use; each receiver a potential transmitter; mobilization of the masses; interaction of those involved; feedback; a political learning process; and social control by self-organization.⁹⁶ However, the lack of a “de-centralized program” and in this case, the infrastructure undergirding *Root Tongue* is what makes the platform, and the Internet in general, the least emancipatory. Therefore, it is important to examine *Root Tongue*’s other aspects in the face of the corporatized Internet’s formidable presence. Other than hacking the system, what other forms of cultural hacking can occur? Since social media platforms like *YouTube* and *Facebook* are corporate and dominant public entities, they, in and of themselves, can never be the interventionist and oppositional counterpublics as defined by Warner. They may produce counter- and sub- public-like effects because of users’ behaviors. And this brings me to how the function of the Internet and its various digital publics produce critical affect in the viewer. For example, the *Root Tongue* platform supports art creation, dialogue, and resource tools, and sees itself as a supplement to dealing with the lived realities of language endangerment. Moreover, its display of activities fans and fuels affect critical to the issue of language endangerment, especially in the areas of will and

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga, “The Work of Artists,” 9.

motivation to learn minority and indigenous languages. However, the offline work is still key to social activist work dealing with linguistic and language revitalization.

The *Root Tongue* experience will involve the blurring of online and offline affect, as in Coleman's X-reality where being connected to the network means existing along a continuum of virtual and real worlds. For example, we eventually plan to enable the live uploads of video and audio content. These experiments in online and offline activities may prove to offer new ways of being together in play and in cooperation to produce social and political change. Given the emergence of augmented media or "pervasive media," defined by Coleman as "new practices of everyday engagement around a set of real-time, highly visual, and cooperatively shared technologies," and that networked individuals exist within a continuum of exchange between online and off that traverses the virtual and the real, what kinds of new offline presences and copresences can be imagined and enacted? Following the platform launch and documentary broadcast, I will hold an exhibition of the completed *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* transmedia platform in order to expand and enhance public engagement. The documentary, web platform and multimedia exhibit are distinct mediated spaces that produce knowledge, encourage reflection, and gather the public, or strangers, into new relationships with one another. How can we bring the at times, abstract, unrealized expressions of personal experiences into the offline public zone that may facilitate sharing and discussion? A multimedia exhibit would allow the opportunity to survey the discursive and technological interventions into the notions of "public" and "participation" with particular attention

paid to how ideas of offline and online spheres of publics, counterpublics, and community operate, intersect, and interact to create multiple ways of being together in community, as a public and with oneself. Currently, the plan is to include a public screening of *Tongues of Heaven* with panel discussions that may include community educators, linguists, and minority and indigenous language activists, speakers and learners; live production and uploading of creative material onto the *Root Tongue* platform; live music, dance and storytelling performances from local artists whose works foreground language issues. Potential community partners located in the San Francisco Bay Area include the Long Now Foundation, Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, Kearny Street Workshop, Kularts, Academy of Hawaiian Arts, The Center for Asian American Media and Taiwaneseamerican.org. I see the exhibit as also creating opportunities for local connections to be made, and the sharing of challenges and successes in the difficult endeavor of language revitalization and maintenance.

These on/offline engagements can reduce what often occurs online, what I call: affect, at a risk. Engaging online with affective responses always runs a risk that we tacitly accept to a certain degree because we are unaware of the kinds of stranger relationality our affect may solicit. Like the iterative process in design, the *Root Tongue* platform will continue to perform its publicness over time depending on the persons and the publics that engage, and on how the issues evolve. It can push the limits of Internet control, and stay in tune and in synch with affinity groups. Any online platform, particularly the third digital documentary, that seeks to create

subpublic and counterpublic activities inevitably must strike a strategic balance between control and freedom—on the part of users and hosts—whereby unruly and counterpublic sentiments can continue to individually emerge, and when collectively summoned.

Conclusion

A cross-boundary practice is central to my theoretical and methodological approach as the dissertation brings together three media components: the documentary *Tongues of Heaven*; the web application *Root Tongue*; and the text “Transmedia Arts Activism and Language Revitalization: Critical Design, Ethics and Participation in Third Digital Documentary.” These mediums produce different forms of epistemological experiences to the phenomena being studied: language endangerment and revival. This research involved more than just traversing between mediums of knowledge but academic disciplines, land territories and ethnicities, to name just a few. In these boundary crossings, the primary challenge for me is navigating the risk of leaving something behind, which is the essence of collaboration in the physical and intellectual sense. However, in place of what is left behind, something is gained. Such gain energizes both the places from and to which one moves. The prismatic perspectives of academic and vernacular expertise, artistic vision, and personal experiences can best illuminate the issue of language endangerment and the criticality needed to engage with its complexities. These perspectives guided and shaped the interventions occurring at various junctions within the study’s discursive fields, such as documentary, web-based art activism, and indigeneity. Working and thinking across mediums, disciplines and territories meant utilizing the conceptual and technological tools, and human resources available to us to tackle such social issues by instigating awareness, care and action.

Thoughts about my first language, my mother tongue and my heritage language drift in and out of my consciousness each day. Working on this transmedia activist art project perhaps is my own personal calling out to others who are in similar predicaments. When I began this project, the crisis was deeply felt and articulated by young people in Taiwan, particularly young indigenous peoples, who reached out to participate and commit their time and energy to make the documentary *Tongues of Heaven*. Their motivations translate to the kinds of biopolitical acts that Hokowhitu argues is the essence of Fourth Cinema or Fourth Media efforts. I position myself as someone who has lived as a non-indigenous person and who acknowledges my privileges (and sadness) in not doing so due to the circumstances of my birth and to the violence of colonialism that compelled my parents into an assimilationist survival mode both in Taiwan and the U.S. Many Taiwanese, like my parents, are currently rediscovering their ethnic and indigenous heritages. It is an act of decolonization, but one that I myself pursue with caution and hesitation. If anything, these historical connections brought another dimension to my desire to ally with my collaborators from a place of acknowledging my insidedness and outsidedness in relation to them. I am not a native to anywhere in the geographical sense. Yet, I feel emotionally connected to what I consider the native land of Taiwan and my native language Minnanese. Working with my collaborators in a context where the notion of native is highly operative, energetic, vulnerable, problematic, yet critical to survival, is a stark reminder of whose material realities are most at stake. Whereas my filmmaking practice has been one of representation at the level of bodily sovereignty, my

collaborators' filmmaking practices are one of bodily *and* land sovereignties. As a cross-boundary practice, *Tongues of Heaven* constructs, proposes and materializes through the moving image medium a way for us women of different indigenous and minority sensibilities to nuance how we visualize, hear and imagine past, current and future affinities.

As a deterritorialized intervention in documentary collaboration, such intercultural and intracultural work on issues of language endangerment and reclamation can be situated within the discourse of image sovereignty, and as a critical strand of radical documentary praxis. While the question of what you lose when you lose your native language initiates the creative gestures, the documentary production, and its presentation online, the answers seem to lead in fact to a search for the very "ethical substance" that is causing continued language loss. Because linguicide is generally a slow death and sometimes not apparent until the last speaker is remaining, the dialogue and actions around language endangerment must be ongoing. As a third digital documentary new media form, both the *Tongues of Heaven* documentary and *Root Tongue* web application are conversation pieces and a space to share the kinds of challenges, and most importantly, the successes, facing language revitalization work across the globe.

As an iterative process, the production of digital publics, like *Root Tongue*, can be revised to accommodate fluctuations in user interest and participation, and the issues at hand. What is certain is that the interface design is important for setting the tone of the online art platform, thereby influencing the possible forms and kinds of

participation addressing a complex social issue. Its existence in the virtual realm provides a space that showcases the processes of real world enmeshments, producing dynamic flows between, what Appadurai calls, “lived neighborhoods” and “virtual neighborhoods.”¹

However, advocating for the value of indigenous and minority languages and justifying the expenditure of resources or energy toward addressing language endangerment and revival is challenging in the midst of other pressing life and death matters, like displacement due to climate change. In Saskia Sassen’s recent book *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, she argues that current global capitalist practices, techniques and instrumentalities have not only expelled bits and pieces of our biosphere, but widened and sharpened the wealth gap so deeply that the reach of human-induced calamities such as foreclosures, landgrabs, water shortages and advanced mining like hydraulic fracturing have expanded to all social classes of individuals, with indigenous peoples being some of the most vulnerable and some of the most active in their resistance work.² Activist online platforms such as *Idle No More*, *Cultural Survival* and *Amazon Watch* are testaments to the online insurgency of indigenous peoples harnessing their digital visual capital as a biopolitical act of image sovereignty.

Yet as communities disperse due to such calamities across the globe, language maintenance often becomes a casualty of the fragmentation these expulsive forces

¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 194.

² Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

produce. Furthermore, languages spoken in pre-capitalist societies often contain the value system of the speaker communities for a proper way of living and conducting oneself in relation to others and the earth. Shin-Lan Yu's mother Hedy explains this at the end of *Tongues of Heaven* in her Truku language:

If you let the Truku language slip away, we will lose our *gaya*, our cultural norms, and lose the language and culture because they are all contained in *gaya*. If you do not forget it, and when you walk on the land, you will not be reckless, and the land will not fall. You will not get lost, not get tripped over, you will squarely pass through.

More than ever, humanity can begin by taking heed of Spivak's call to re-imagine planetarity or planet-thought by inscribing responsibility as a right. She advises that cultural workers and educators from capitalist societies and those from pre-capitalist ones need to come together to learn from each other in order to make their shared practice flourish.³ This kind of practice of planetarity is a "mode of intending" when faced with aiding or caring for one another⁴

Activist art platforms, like *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue*, project an utopic aesthetics, as digital technologies offer promises of freedom, exploration and creativity. The *Tongues of Heaven/Root Tongue* platform is configured to foster the mutually catalyzing effects of creativity and socio-political change around language shift, loss, endangerment, maintenance, and reclamation.⁵ A community gallery allows users to post comments on the creative uploads, and discuss language and

³ Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, 347.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁵ For a nuanced discussion on language shift and reclamation in youth see Emerson Lopez Odango, "Unravelling Language Shift and Youth Perspectives," *Unravel*, February 12, 2015, <http://unravellingmag.com/articles/youth-language-shift/>.

related issues. The moving image-focused interface enhances visibility and aspires to draw younger people, thereby fostering early pride in one's native language. Thus, *Root Tongue* aims to contribute provocative and forward steps toward the planetary path of supporting language diversity.

On *Root Tongue*, clips from *Tongues of Heaven* are accompanied by one of the following themes along with detailed prompts: mother tongue, endangerment, multilingualism, world and you, what if, learning, government, value, your community, youth, teacher, revival, speakers, identity, will, alone, motivation, and importance. These online "film acts" enact a Third Cinema praxis, hence a third digital documentary aspect, for emergent new publics in the era of decolonization. With each personal and creative upload, and commentary, *Root Tongue* aims for amplification not only of its aesthetic force as an art platform, but as a live collection of articulated struggles arising out of the issues of language endangerment and reclamation in order to highlight the importance of will and visibility in language revitalization efforts.⁶

As a platform for online dialogue through user-generated content and commentary *Root Tongue* is a durational art form, as well as one that deepens what Kester refers to as a dimension of dialogical aesthetics, a critical time sense. Because of its aliveness, this critical time sense considers the cumulative effects, for example,

⁶ As Goriunova argues, aesthetic amplification is a key feature of the art platform, leading to its aesthetic brilliance as a collection of creative yield. See Goriunova, *Art Platforms*, 111.

of the attention and neglect of minority and indigenous languages at the time of engagement with the platform, and its repercussions for the future.

As Michael Warner explains, many efforts are made to give agency to the public but this only removes its key function, that of discursivity. And further, an emergent public struggles over the conditions that bring them together as a public in the first place. Only time will tell if *Root Tongue* becomes a digital counterpublic, a showcase of artistic expressivity and performativity that continually discloses the processes of real world enfleshments. It may provide an answer as to whether naming and knowing the world, which is the role of language, could be considered an ethical substance—what Povinelli poses via Foucault as the material of moral reflection, conduct and evaluation. The Internet and its various digital publics continue to produce critical affect in the viewer. Whether or not users are dispersed and far from their speaker communities, *Root Tongue* fans and fuels affect critical to the will and motivation to learn minority and indigenous languages. My father, in expressing his daily thoughts and interests directed at Taiwan's politics, mediated by satellite television, says he cares because he is "rooted from there." Despite having been uprooted, he has taken his roots with him—and they are still with him. Whether dormant or alive, one's roots appear in expected and unexpected ways. May *Root Tongue* be one such place.

SUPPLEMENTAL FILE

Chang, Anita, An-Chi Chen, Kainoa Kaupu, Hau'oli Waiiau, and Shin-Lan Yu.
Tongues of Heaven. New York: Third World Newsreel, 2013. Video.

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