Tranny Tricks: The Blending and Contouring of Raranga Research

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Abstract
Blending and contouring are fundamental tools in a tranny’s bag of tricks. Both empower, because they take for granted that light will create shadows; through blending and contouring makeup, concretized binaries can be infiltrated and analysed. Trans-people are often perceived as tricksters; people who hide parts of their lives away, to fit socially acceptable norms. This research flips perceptions and instead argues that acceptable norms embrace trickstery behaviours; rules of propriety intended to hide difficult social realities. A Trans perspective both blends and contours context; it allows fluid ways to interpret engagements. This research presentation analogises the shape-shifting methods of blending and contouring, to describe the transformative nature of a raranga research methodology. Raranga as a form of research helps to blend and contour; it is a means to reinterpret, reconceptualise and reorganise bound territories. This research applies raranga as intermediary praxis; a theory and practice which enables inbetween realities. This presentation uses raranga to describe three transitional research spaces; the inbetween of creative knowledge and logical knowledge; the inbetween of qualitative data and quantitative data, and; the inbetween of Indigenous theory and Western theory. I present performance as research output and ask participants to engage in a creative exercise. These modes will be used to explore multiple perspectives through trans-lenses and are intended toward data collection. Participation does not infer consent to participate in a research project.

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Tawhanga Mary-Legs Nopera.

The stars fell around me, lighting puddles of potentiality that we each had to wend our ways through. I was with my Native tranny sisters, alive in a dreamscape but floating, like the Jackson 5 in some discoed out dessert of soft wind-song. I hear my own question echo like footsteps:

Where is my Nation, I have forgotten my name. I am nowhere, but I am somewhere... my inbetweeness is my strength

When I was a little kid, I liked to hide away with my sisters’ dresses and dolls, I loved to pretend that I had long hair and that some handsome boy would kiss me, save me and take me away. Then when I was 10, my father caught me dressing up and covered in makeup; ashamedly, I had to go to church the next day, lip-stick stains, eyeliner still smeared around my lids and a sorely bruised behind, a modus that mirrored many drunken Sunday mornings of my future dragged-up self. It took me a long time to learn proper makeup, so that it would stay all day long; blends and contours that decoded my abstracted angles.

The emerging field of Transgender Theory castrates the power binaries entrenched through Western relationships, which ascribe to the powerful and powerless either masculine or feminine forms (Stryker 2004, pp. 212-213). Argued here by University of Toronto, Masters student Evan Vipond, “Gender normativity is enforced through the naturalization of the bigender system, which relies on a set of rules that are accepted as irrefutable and unchangeable” (Vipond 2015, p. 23). This presentation, however, bypasses these in favour of Indigenous theories which intend to reframe colonial encounters and instead present multiple, fluid potentialities. In the globalised mixture of cultural identity, this presentation offers a means to interpret Kaupapa Māori theory, as a tool to shift between spaces of social power engagements, it

“... provides a platform from which Māori are striving to articulate their own reality and experience, their own personal truth as an alternative to the homogenization and silence that is required of them within mainstream New Zealand society. Inherent in this approach is an understanding that Māori have fundamentally different ways of seeing and thinking about the world and simply wish to be able to live in accordance with that specific and unique identity” (Mahuika 2008, p. 4).

In my early and late 20s, I would hear peers talk about ‘trick’ drag-queens and trannies who could convincingly conduit an opposite gender portrayal; those queens, biceps and all, were good at the art of illusion. I used to think about that a lot growing up as a young gay man, because it seemed absurd to feel that tricks should be necessary, as a way to perform fitting in; why should a trick be necessary to feel pretty or be admired? My thirties were spent in Artland, which is where artists go to theorise and ponder, and it was then that I realised I had been tricking myself; sorting through the images of my own practice, unrealised feminine aspects began to reveal themselves, yearning to be expressed, heard and understood. It scared me a lot; I had handled being Māori and gay (with the help of lots of alcohol and A-class drugs), but being a tranny was something I feared. Tricksters have big ol’-tran shoes to fill. As a way to rethink my discomfort, I thought about things from a Māori perspective where
trickster behaviours are usual and necessary for change. Māori stories recount the deeds of ancestors, and their cunning acts that transformed the thoughts of society, however, none transformed more than the ancestor Māui. Throughout Te Moana Nui a Kiwa, which translates as the ‘great ocean of the navigator Kiwa’ (a phrase more empowering than ‘the Pacific’ which implies oppression), Māui emerged as the figure able to stand between primordial narratives of beginning and those that helped to evolve Māori social and political behaviours.

Kaupapa theories offer hidden spaces in contemporary Māori experience and pūrākau are being restated as testimonies toward cultural revitalisation after the destruction experienced through colonisation:

“Pūrākau are a collection of traditional oral narratives that should not only be protected, but also understood as a pedagogical-based anthology of literature that are still relevant today. Furthermore, pūrākau can continue to be constructed in various forms, contexts and media to better understand the experiences of our lives as Māori - including the research context” (Lee 2009, p.1).

In many ways, pūrākau are helping Māori to reveal and reorder hegemonies; the knowledge of the past enables us long-standing strategies toward telling the difficulties of the present and resolving their negative impacts. This is reiterated by Māori historian Nepia Mahuika in his use of a Māui narrative to articulate contemporary Māori realities, where he states; “[t]he revitalization of the stories depends not on how they stand up as critical scrutiny as to their veracity, but how they might be understood beyond those confines” (Mahuika 2009, p.141).

As a trickster, Māui questioned life by theorising beyond the limitations of normal practice; Māui consistently challenged the status quo and bent the rules created by those who lived before him. Through pūrākau, or layers of story, contemporary Māori have learned through Māui how to manage time, find and inhabit new territories, and to deal with the dangers of transgression. In his final journey to seek out eternal life, Māui is said to have been crushed between the thighs of his ancestress Hine-nui-te-pō.

In an attempt to follow Mahuika’s lead, I want to re-story the ‘death’ of Māui with the intent of offering a scenario where he is not attempting to reverse the life-cycle by entering into the womb of his ancestress, Hine-nui-te-pō, or the goddess of darkness. Instead, I theorise the trick of a binarised gender world, and orate the pūrākau of Māui after his masculine body inhabits a feminine space of creative potential. I relay my own Trans perspective, as a means to express what might have happened to Māui after his deadly encounter. I use my own life experiences to narrate being a man, who encounters an inner experience of femininity. My youth was that of a ‘live fast and die young’ encounter, thus the notion of interpreting theory and doing academic research is still very novel in my mind. Within this presentation I talk about my womanly manliness, my family, community, friendships and journeys toward learning and I weave these together as a way to embody Kaupapa methodologies as a means to make theory practical. I have always been a ratbag and am a performance artist who likes to perform in unexpected ways in unexpected places; and so even though this presentation takes the form of an academic production, it is more an improvised work in progress where a person performs as an artist, in the arena of an academic audience. By theorising through a Kaupapa lens, I interpret Trans identity; I narrate Māui pūrākau to consider a gender reality that shifts. To do this, I affirm raranga, or the Māori practice of weaving, as a practical methodology that can trick and shift the rigid boundaries of the academy’s ivoried vault.
I am a creative practice Ph.D. student, studying through the University of Waikato; I investigate raranga as a transformative Kaupapa methodology. The three strands of my research practice explore sexuality, gender and the mediated forms these ideas can take. Embedded in raranga are positive expressions of family wellbeing, generations and vitality, and yet over time through the mechanisms of colonisation raranga has been gendered as a domestic craft; or as work most suitable for women. Contemporary raranga practitioners inherently mediate a sexual and gendered exchange. Raranga is a useful theory and method to promote Trans identities because it helps make sense of inbetween spaces; although the woven form is important, good weaving relies on tension between oppositional strands. Through the use of raranga, I can bind aspects and spaces not normally investigated at once.

This research applies raranga as intermediary praxis; a theory and practice which enables inbetween realities. Within, I describe three transitional research spaces; the inbetween of creative knowledge and logical knowledge, of qualitative data and quantitative data and Indigenous and Western theory. Through pūrākau, I analogue these three distinct research qualities as firstly sexual, secondly gendered and thirdly between Indigenous and Western, ideologies that can either fragment or perhaps harmonise. At the same time I traverse terrains of shifting embodiments, the internally perceived self, the external and the virtual, or as a Trans person, a Man and as my ancestor Māui. “Transgender individuals often lack models of nontraditional gender to aid them in their identity development, and some (e.g., Bornstein 1994; Feinberg 1996) described believing that they were alone in their gender struggles due to the paucity of public acknowledgment” (Levitt and Ippolito 2014, p. 1728). Perhaps in the abstracted nature of stories left by my ancestors, I can find a model of inbetweeness that weaves together my identity, art and research practice. Through my own culture, I can know who I am.

About the author: Tawhanga Mary-Legs Nopera, Te Arawa, Ngati Tuwharetoa, Tainui and Ngapuhi. Tawhanga’s creative practice affirms Indigenous ways of being, to expose both the positive and negative impacts of globalisation. He integrates his knowledge of Te Wharepora o Hineteiwaiwa, the Maori school of artistic weaving, with performance and digital art paradigms. In doing so, Tawhanga aims to create works that critique hegemonic discourses, destabilise pervasive stereotypes and ultimately empower Maori notions of identity. He currently studies toward a Creative Practice PhD through The School of Maori and Pacific Development, at The University of Waikato; to interrogate the ways that taonga can perform tino rangatiratanga.
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