

panel discussant

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A Thread That Never Breaks: Digitizing Ancestral and Literal Threads

Discussant: Siviwe James

Logline

Siviwe James, an independent fashion practitioner, thinker, and archivist who discusses the panel A Thread That Never Breaks: Digitizing Ancestral and Literal Threads featuring Lisa Myers and artist Meghann O'Brien. James looks at the positives and negatives of digitizing ancestral practices and teachings.

A Thread That Never Breaks, co-curated by Sage Paul (Executive and Artistic Director of Indigenous Fashion Arts) and Lisa Myers (curator and artist), was a digital exhibition produced by Indigenous Fashion Arts & AbTeC in 2020 that hosted a selection of Indigenous artists in a virtual gallery created in Second life. To view the exhibition, attendees had to “join” by creating avatars to immersively experience the show. The exhibition built itself on the artists’ interdisciplinary approaches to design and their deep knowing of ancestral modes of practice and teachings around skills such as beadwork, weaving, or through fashion, whilst exploring the intersections that exist within these approaches. The reflective panel discussion was hosted with co-curators Sage Paul and Lisa Myers and weaver Meghann O’Brien who works under the artist name Jaad Kuujus.

The dialogue that ensued expanded on Meghann’s words around her woven textiles and baskets as “threads that connect to ancestral knowledge ... visualizing the strong connections between generations.” The digital installation considered the material and matrilineal origins of artistic practices like beadwork and weaving as a contrast to commercially made garments and products, insisting we examine our relationship with objects and their making, and their relationship with our descendants.

I write this article as a Xhosa woman from the Eastern Cape, South Africa. My paternal clan-ship is of amaXaba; OoNonkosi, OoNobenyuka, bakwaVongo, Mdini, Mvelase, Nombombozinde, Linda, Abantu abawela amanzi, Amdak’oThukela ngoqhiza, OoNonxas’iyakhathala. They are a part of the Hlubi nation but are also said to be amaMfengu. ooJames, being my father’s family name, form a part of the larger Xaba clan with our smaller subset of the clan currently living Emdeni, Qumbu in the Transkei. My maternal

clan is ooMiya; Gwanini, Sibewu, Sijekula, Salakulandelwa, Mali ebomvu, Unyok’ emnyam’ ecandi iziziba, Nkonjan’ emnyam’ ecand’ iziziba. They are said to be amaMfengu. As ooNgumla (mother’s maiden surname) this smaller group of the larger Miya clan is currently located eGcibala location in Tsomo in the Transkei.

When I speak of “our” and “our communities” I speak to Indigenous groups/people with genealogical roots in tribes that are considered a part of the originating inhabitants of the land. As a creative practitioner who is impacted by the writings of Decolonial Thinker Rolando Vazquez, I note the “our” to also speak to an interconnect-edness, a relational quality that all of Us (makers/thinkers of Indigenous decent) are implicated in. The “we” speaks to a set of consciousness-es, knowledges and experiences of Indigenous communities in settler/post-colonial spaces.

Meghann’s words will likely ring true for Indigenous creators from around the globe. The Indigenous creative work referenced in this panel acts as a mediation of ancestral knowledge in the present:

The threads that do not break are the ones we cannot see. There are those that we carry within us, they are the ones that are passed silently from generation to generation and often go unnoticed. These are the threads that even though at times they may be dormant are always present. It’s only us who can connect with and see them, and if we feel it is necessary, find ways to keep pulling them forward with us. I believe that our ability to connect with these ancestral threads requires a shift in our thinking, a shift in our way of seeing ourselves in the world around us in any way. (Meghann O’Brien, “A Thread That Never Breaks: Digitizing Ancestral and Literal Threads”)

The exhibition's digital environment troubles and invites a rethinking of what it might mean to exhibit Indigenous design in a sacred and possibly protected way within the digital sphere. By transmediating the works from physical threads into pixels, polygons, and lines of code that can be experienced through an avatar, the animated versions of the original can be experienced in a way that confronts the limits of technologies and media to represent material belongings. The deeper fibers of Indigenous livelihoods, knowledge, and histories are interwoven in the physical garments and products; and yet, can technology truly reflect the sacred nature of the knowledge that is being shared through the finished product?

Past and present knowledge sharing processes are brought to a place of intersection and potential discomfort with each other, as possible merging points would need to be reconsidered to build on areas of divergence that can transform the way in which present and future generations engage with ancestral knowledge. The material and signified threads of this exhibition open us up to questions that examine, "How do we translate ancestral knowledge in the present as a form of education? What knowledges should be opened up to large communities for experiencing? How will these be archived and accessed, and by whom?"

For Indigenous artists who have been called to translate these sacred practices, values, and knowledges to our communities, there is a need to share them in ways that reflect the rich value of our ontologies. Through our creative explorations we endeavor to reconnect our people with their threads of life by rethinking ways of knowledge creation, its accessibility, and sites of archiving, as well as finding ways of knowledge sharing. Meghann's own experience of her transmediation processing of the work reveals to us the still fragile nature of transforming the physical

into the digital. In light of the "technical glitches" and physical changes that the process brought on, she was challenged to a place of humbling her ways of production.

We are invited through her experience to expand on ways of knowledge sharing that grapple with the sacredness of both physical and digital forms. Through interdisciplinary co-creation processes, we are invited to reconsider how we "make place" to carry on, and share, ancestral techniques and stories. Indigenous communities, too, are important participants in the programming of what the digital world can be. We too must engage in "re-educating" virtual worlds should we wish to see ourselves reflected there, in a way that allows our future generations to know and expand on the work that has been left for them. Where many creatives fear technology, it also holds the potential for world-building, allowing us to code the digital with distinct markers only accessible to our own. To expand our practices and knowledges and for us to grow, we must consider the cultural ecologies of our works and their abilities for adaptation via technologies that enable us to normalize and insert our identities into these future environments.

How do we bring artworks from one medium to another while acknowledging their sacredness? For Indigenous creatives, *transmediation as translation* allows us to take our physical works and their embedded knowledges into the digital, and give them space for healing. This healing process, Meghann describes, is necessary for the relationship between Indigenous artists and modern technologies. Her own experience required her to embrace the delicate nature of the physical, which was mediated by the digital, as her works were reconfigured for the metaverse.

Curator and beader Myers considers how these transitions of physical forms into the digital employ coding as a sort of language that trans-

lates these objects. Once digitized, these virtual objects afford creatives and viewers the ability to experience an object in “more endless ways”, as there is both breadth and longevity to the knowledge, craft, and experiences of making, with seemingly endless capabilities of interdisciplinary co-creation. However, the digital still faces its own experiences of mortality, which require us to enter this realm of co-creation with caution and constant re-evaluation as it grows.

As the exhibition *A Thread That Never Breaks* unfolded, a key concern that curator Paul considered is an awareness of the potential for things (for example concepts, designs, and knowledges) to get lost in translation. When removed from context, use, or redistribution, these sacred materials and meanings that draw on and relate to Indigenous fashion can be lost, or misused. What sort of coding tools could create more secure forms of access and engagement? Could we co-create with technological developers (who share in the sacred creation of the materials) forms of Indigenous knowledge that are both responsible, and accessible to future generations? We must practice care in thinking the possibilities of the virtual in relation to the ethics of creation in this digital world.

In my own work, my most recent co-creation proposal with co-creator and thinker Sihle Sogaula, entitled *Chos'chosi*; is an AR storytelling, place-finding experiment that explores the abilities and the limits of virtual technologies

in communicating sustainable fashion practices through immersive digital technologies. This collaborative project taps into augmented technology to realize the “everyday” as a site of (re) existence, archiving and exploring the liminal space between western materiality and Xhosa sensibilities. *Chos'chosi* becomes a storytelling tool that allows users to engage with a 3D animated model that can be placed in any environment through the AR app. The figure mimics a seated person, umama omdala (an old lady) smoking her pipe while gesturing at storytelling. This scene presents users with the experience of disrupting modern spaces in a binary code that begins to create a sense of cultural, social, and political (re) existence. We must continue to challenge these spaces and transmediations with hope and courage so that interventions of this sort become windows of possibility and redress. As Indigenous creators and researchers, we take up important roles in humanizing these virtual worlds, shifting the perception that these worlds are divided. We are also reminded to consider the importance of safeguarding our practices and knowledges to bring both benefit and protection to our communities. May *A Thread That Never Breaks* become a clarion call to all of us to expand on who we are and what we create. A reminder to expand on how transmediative and reflective responses, adaptations and transformations of Indigenous knowledges make room for present and future generations to explore.

References

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I am a fashion researcher, fashion practitioner, and archivist whose work seeks to elevate the stories, knowledges and experiences of Xhosa people.

Through montage works I experiment with ideas of compassionate listening, finding ways to fill the joins of overlooked histories, at times locating new sites of thinking, being and seeing. Each filmic/audio work finds ways to make our histories more prominent, more everyday in “foreign” spaces in a way that retains the authentic legibility of our heritage, our thinking. From still image, audio, text to film I suture stories like that of my mother’s, spoken by her, through her own understanding of time and place. My work is careful to not overwrite the voices of the co-authoring contributors who lend me their stories to assist my work in its evolutions. My public work presentations and talks include Stanford Humanities Centre Workshop - [Sensing Between Histories & Archives: AFRI’s Refashioning & Remaking Memory Projects](#), being a co-creator for the [State of Fashion 2022 biennale: Ways of Caring](#), partaking in the [Design Future Labs 2022](#) with my co-thinker and curatorial partner Sihle Sogaula, as well as being a part of the collaborative interdisciplinary enquiry by the AFRI-Collective for [PARSE Journal](#).

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