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Seeking Gender Identity in the Contexts of Atayal: An Art Project

Abstract

This paper examines and seeks to challenge fixed ideas relating to identity, gender, and belonging, which I explore in my art practice. Focusing on a central work, Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*, I explore ways that virtual reality—in a video and a website—can be employed to define and engage with my Indigenous and queer identity. This work uses digital video, performance, and cyberspace to reconstruct a sense of place and space that disengages from the traditional gender(ed) norms of what it means to be Atayal. My disconnected urban context prompts me to question what counts as an authentic pathway to reconnect with* gaga *(Atayal customs and traditional values). The journey of returning to a preconstructed identity needs to be redefined and discussed to embrace a queer sense of belonging. This paper engages with these notions by discussing cyberspace, live performance, and video installation as alternative spaces in which to thread indigeneity, the marginalised body, and queer visibility, and to reclaim screen sovereignty. Three different narratives that feature in my multimedia work—the story of Temahahoi, the story of the brass pots, and a personal story of my quiet queer body—are discussed. Through my work, these narratives engage with storytelling, Atayal worldview, and the Atayal language to re-examine the complexity of identity and the reclaiming of screen space in contemporary times.*

Keywords: *new media art, queer, identity, gender, cyberspace, Atayal heritage, Indigenous Taiwanese, First Nations*

Names are important, as they connect you to where you come from. I have two names: Anchi Lin is my Hō-ló Han name, which comes from my patrilineal ancestors who came to Taiwan in the Qing Dynasty Daoguang period (c. 1820–50); and Ciwas Tahos is my Atayal name, which is taken from my matrilineal grandmother's and great-grandfather's names. They are my ancestors of Nantou, in central Taiwan—specifically, the Atayal people of the Plngawan group. The Atayal are one of the sixteen recognised Indigenous groups in Taiwan. My Indigenous ancestry remained muted for two generations; my reconnection to my

cultural identity has been a slow and recent awakening undertaken through my art practice.[1]

Cultural identity is connected to one's worldview and much of my work explores Atayal worldviews. In particular, I draw upon the Atayal idea of *gaga*, which means traditional customs and values—a way of life and worldview that our Atayal people embody. For example, to be considered a mature Atayal woman, it is said that you must know how to plant, gather, and process traditional materials and know how to weave—all of which embody *gaga.* According to Apang Bway, who is teaching me the Atayal dialect of Squliq, there is an old Squiliq saying, "*ta kinbetunux cinunan na utux qu kneril qani*," which means "a girl who knows how to weave is better in looking."[2] This saying suggests that the practice of weaving is a gendered role suited to girls who will become women. However, Apang Bway explained to me that the word *tnunan* (weave) can also be interpreted as the process and product of weaving, meaning the way that each fine thread is combined with the ones around it to produce a beautiful fabric; thus, the community or tribe metaphorically weaves its individual members together with unity, sustainability, and sharing in mind.[3] In this philosophical interpretation, the concept of "weaving" is not gender-specific; rather, it is a way of being with one's surroundings. This gender-neutral interpretation raises the question: What counts as an authentic pathway to reconnect with Atayal traditional customs and values with *gaga*? Perhaps there is no certain answer.

Figure 1. Anchi Lin, *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*, 2022. Dual-channel video installation, Tainan Art Museum, Tainan, Taiwan, September 8, 2022–January 23, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Tainan Art Museum

Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang is an ongoing work of mine that offers insight into my personal experience of gender identity and Indigenous belonging in an urban context. In the Plngawan dialect of the Atayal language, the dialect of my ancestors, the word *alang* (*or qalang*) means "community" or "tribe." The work's title suggests an uncertainty and questioning, and reflects the ambiguity I feel in terms of my sense of belonging and where I come from—for example, my urban upbringing has disconnected my body from my ancestral land. My intention is to use this project as a pathway to uncover that long-lost space and place, and to reconstruct my hybrid identity. I am carrying out this project through various new media approaches presented primarily in an installation. The larger work consists of the installation's videos, with a voiceover in the Atayal Squliq dialect and a virtual 3D landscape (Fig. 1); a live performance; and cyberspace. In this project, I consider how I can embody our Atayal *gaga* in a future setting with contemporary tools and envision a new way of expressing *gaga* through video installation and performance.

The concept for *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang* grew from my interest in the stories I have heard while learning the Atayal language, a journey that I have been on for two years. The work explores and interweaves three narratives related to *gaga* through video, performance, and cyberspace. In the videos, I create a narrative—presented through moving images and spoken words—stemming from three different stories: the story of Temahahoi, the story of the brass pots, and the story of my queer body. The three stories are interconnected by their marginalized sensibility and inform a new story—my video work—which examines issues of displacement, identity, and gender.

The installation of *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang* has two video projections set side by side.[4] The left screen shows my body lying on the floor in a curled-up position similar to the Atayal traditional burial posture (Fig. 2). With my body facing west and my right hand holding a honey stick, I repeatedly drizzle honey back and forth across my body as well as into a steaming brass pot placed on top of a lit stove. The projection on the right is a virtual landscape.[5] Its changing images include billboards about a bee-cloning project, a mining company, and a missing Elder woman who is my grandmother that I barely know. Other images include rocks, a traditional Atayal necklace, and maple trees—common in my ancestral land—seen in the four seasons. The different views of the trees indicate that there is no specific time or season in this space.

Figure 2. Anchi Lin, video still from *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3. Anchi Lin, video still from *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

It was important for me to incorporate the worldview of *gaga* into this work. The Squliq saying "*cinnunan ni utux kayal qu rhzyal*" means "the land is woven by spirits of the land," which may be understood in philosophical, personal, and cultural terms.[6] The terrain in the virtual landscape recreates my vague memories of my ancestral land in Nantou (Fig. 3). I made it by projecting the image

of a piece of woven fabric that I created during a one-day workshop using the bow-harp technique (Fig. 4). The red dye in the fabric is traditionally extracted from the *shoulang* yam often found in the high-altitude mountainous areas in Taiwan. Once scanned, this tiny piece of fabric extended the idea of the "woven land" and became the texture of the terrain in the virtual landscape.

Figure 4. Sample of material woven by the artist then scanned and inserted into the virtual space as the land for *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist

The Story of Temahahoi

The first story woven into my project is about a place called Temahahoi where only women live.[7] I have encountered this story multiple times, through verbal tellings by Elders and in books of Atayal stories. The versions of the story vary, but the gender(ed) aspect is consistent. The following version resonated with me the most and, subsequently, became the inspiration for the virtual land in *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*.

> Because only women live in Temahahoi, if a woman wished to become impregnated, she would need to lie on a rock with her legs spread wide in order to allow the breeze to blow into her. Thus, the wind would bring life. Additionally, the women in Temahahoi did not get hungry and could stay alive by inhaling steam and smoke. These women were said to have the ability to communicate with bees, whereby they could control bees' behaviour and manoeuvre them at their will. Hunters living outside Temahahoi greatly desired to capture the Temahahoi women. One day, a hunter was walking through the forest with his dog. In his attempt to find the dog after it went out of view, the hunter accidentally entered Temahahoi territory. Suddenly, he was surrounded by a swarm of bees. They

> overwhelmed him, and he couldn't escape. The Temahahoi women captured the hunter, cut off his male organ, and put it on a stick to lay out to dry. As the male organ dried and hardened, it became a tool of pleasure for the women of Temahahoi.[8]

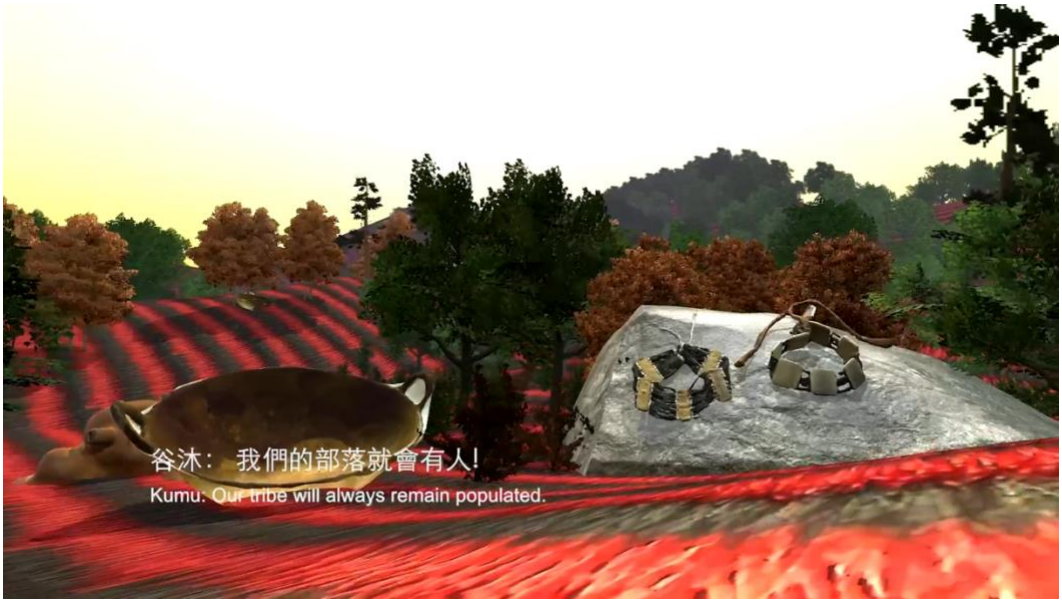

Figure 5. Anchi Lin, video still from *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

Temahahoi is not just a story, it becomes the past, the present, and the future. For example, the voices of two Temahahoi women, who are not seen, are heard through a voice-over in the video expressing concern that the bees that give them strength have disappeared; they fear they will weaken without them. This situation in the story mirrors the importance of bees in our natural ecology and the gravity of the escalating climate crisis. Because the Temahahoi women are part of nature, intertwined with the bees and the natural ecosystem, they are also threatened. A further threat appears in the video: at the end of the conversation between the two women, it is revealed that the brass pot they have been cooking with daily, given to them by an unknown coloniser, has been slowly poisoning them. This relates to the story of the brass pots told below. These underlying threats to Indigenous culture are depicted in the videos through dialogue and in visual references, including the burial-like position of the body in the lefthand video, and two Atayal traditional necklaces floating above the rock on the

righthand video, which symbolise the absence of—and endangerment of—the Temahahoi and Atayal people (Fig. 5).

The Story of the Brass Pots

The second narrative that this project derives from is a story told by Elders who live in qalang Cinsbu (Hsinchu, Taiwan). According to these Elders, many Atayal people in the region were poisoned by heavy metals found in brass pots given to the tribe by Japanese colonisers. The brass pots released toxins into food when used over high heat and, consequently, many people became infertile. Some consider the colonisers' gifts of brass pots—a gesture with the pretence of kindness, as the pots were considered valuable and useful cooking tools—to be a tactic used to weaken the Atayal people's defence.

This story remains largely unknown and unmentioned in contemporary society. For me, this forgotten or hidden history brings up personal connections to queer history and bodies. Both are silenced and hidden by the heteronormativity that permeates society, and this parallels the silencing of Indigenous history by colonial dominance. The story of the brass pot is both a product of colonisation and part of a largely unknown history due to colonial suppression. In the virtual reality video, two Temahahoi women confess their concern over their inability to become impregnated by the wind anymore. One mentions air pollution coming from the lower mainland as a possible cause, and the other mentions a thread she touched that numbed her. This "thread" refers to a hidden, high-voltage, barbed-wire system called "Frontier Defence Lines" that Japanese colonisers used to prevent attacks from the Indigenous people in the Taiwanese mountains. This barrier also allowed the colonisers to extract natural resources from Taiwan such as camphor trees, which were in high demand for use as weapons and plastics. The conversation between the Temahahoi women about their fertility ends with them saying, "Let's use the brass pot the foreigners gifted us to cook." This reinforces the brass pot as the reason the women of Temahahoi are infertile.

The Story of My Queer Body

The third narrative in this project regards my queer body, a quiet body. It is seen in the lefthand video in a conversation between two women in which they discuss

how their friend Ciwas (embodying both my grandmother and me) was captured by a hunter. The kidnapping and disappearance of Ciwas is a metaphor for my queer body's experience in today's heteropatriarchal society (i.e., a society that is unfavourable to queer people), and how one's experience shifts according to place and space. In the lefthand video, the curled-up naked body avoids any gaze while performing a moment in the story of Temahahoi in which the women inhale steam to sustain their lives. This reconstructed Temahahoi space is performative and offers a sense of belonging for queer bodies by renegotiating the embodiment of *gaga.* My reimagining of Temahahoi in a virtual setting offers a place for queer-identifying individuals to come together in cyberspace. This ongoing project embeds a sense of *gaga* that renegotiates the binary gender roles of *gaga* to be more inclusive and accepting of queer individuals.

Figure 6. Anchi Lin, live performance as an extension of *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*, Laboratory Experimental Platform, 2020 Pulima Art Festival, Taitung, Taiwan, November 1, 2020. Courtesy of Iris Lin

During the 2020 Pulima Art Festival, I did a live performance in response to the video component of *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang* (Fig. 6). This

performance was at the Taitung Laboratory Experiment platform, situated beside the Pacific Ocean on the south-east coast of Taiwan. During the performance, a constant wind from the ocean blew over my body, connecting me to the surrounding landscape and allowing me to reconnect to the story of Temahahoi. The live performance used the same brass pot and stove as are featured in the video. I used the brass pot to mould multiple piles of clay from the region. I placed each pile of clay on the ground and dripped honey on it. This dripping gesture reflects both the act of planting and a small burial, connecting to both life that the land provides and the death of the bees in our world today.

Cyberspace

The final part of this project is an interactive online space (https://raxal-mu.glitch.me) created in response to my desire to have a specific *alang* (community) and to connect to my ancestral land.[9] For example, a web domain address serves as my personal land location pin to feel a "sense of place"; it becomes a "cultural landscape," and a place not dominated by heteronormativity. "Glitch.me," the name of the platform, also fits my floating, non-conforming context and permits my queer body a place where my imagined land is purposely glitched. This webspace is a hybrid space that will constantly build content related to social and environmental issues, stories, our knowledge, and future plans to document queer experiences. Its visuals echo those in the videos in *Perhaps She Comes From/To __ Alang*. There are no boundaries, so the space can expand and generate new types of landscapes as my cultural knowledge expands.

Conclusion

The work described in this article is an ongoing art project. By proposing a virtual space of connection, the digital land I built reflects on the loss of Indigenous land in Taiwan and the disconnection to ancestral lands that many communities face. It also proposes a gesture to create a space for a (digital) land of which I desire to reclaim digital sovereignty. However, because Internet spaces are fraught with the possibility of connections beyond geographic limitation, going forth, I will be cognisant of the corporate, capitalist control of internet data and embrace decentralised open-source possibilities for learning coding and ways of securing data of Indigenous knowledge. In the future, I intend to have an alternative way

to connect with *gaga* by weaving in digital imageries and computing language, such as coding, to secure a space and a place in the digital terrain, and, most importantly, to reclaim screen and data sovereignty for marginalized communities such as Indigenous and queer communities in the age of the Internet.

Anchi Lin (Ciwas Tahos) **林安琪** *is a performance and new media artist of Taiwanese Hō-ló and Indigenous Atayal heritage based in Taipei, Taiwan. Lin completed a bachelor of fine arts in visual art at Simon Fraser University in Canada and is currently pursuing a master of fine art in new media art at Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA) in Taiwan. Through her artistic practice, Lin seeks out forms of understanding beyond the hegemonic worldview through the use of video, performance, cyberspace, and installation. Lin won First Prize in the 2021 Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA) Genie Lab Art Competition, a 2021 TNUA postgraduate scholarship, and the Merit Award at the 2021 TNUA Contemporary Art Prize. Her other recent work includes* Pswagi Temahahoi *project with Suaveart in Documenta 15, 2022 and* The Land in the Middle of the Pond, *commissioned by the Green Island Human Rights Art Festival, 2021.*

Notes

[1] My reconnection to my Indigenous identity began during my time spent studying in Canada and when I worked at an art gallery specialising in Northwest Coast First Nations art in Vancouver.
[2] Apang Bway, text message to the author, October 2, 2021.
[3] Bway, 2021.
[4] This work was shown in *Real People Series: Action Intuition*, curated by Akac Orat, at the 2020 Pulima Art Festival, Taitung, Taiwan, October 31–November 28, 2020; and at the *2021 Asian Art Biennial: Phantasmapolis*.
[5] It was created using Unity software, which is software used to create 3D virtual reality (VR) and gaming space.
[6] Apang Bway, text message to the author, October 27, 2021.
[7] The word Temahahoi can be broken down to "*te*" (a locative), "*maha*" ("if" or "quote") and "*hoi,*" which some of our people believe is the ancient pronunciation for the word "*hlahuy*" meaning "deep forest."
[8] This is the conclusion of this version the story. Other versions say that other hunters retaliated and killed all the Temahahoi women and, therefore, Temahahoi doesn't exist anymore.
[9] *Raxal mu* means "my land" in Atayal Plngawan dialect language. This website was built with coding language HTML and A-frame through self-taught, open-source means.