Time and Water

Shannon Te Ao's Ka mua, ka muri in Canada

by Maya Wilson-Sanchez

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In 2018, HUM commissioned Andrew Clifford to write about Shannon Te Ao's project for the Edinburgh Art Festival. In 2020, the Wellington-based artist presents new work in two Canadian locations. Despite the challenges and modifications of schedule caused by the pandemic, we're pleased that Toronto-based Maya Wilson-Sanchez was able to dialogue with Te Ao and respond to this new project. Presented earlier this year at Oakville Galleries (with New Zealand curator Frances Loeffler), Ka mua, ka muri *recently opened at Remai Modern and runs until 3 January 2021.*

Miikaanhs niin da bemaadiziwining gii chigaade,
Taapapa ana taku ara o te ora,
The pathway of my life is laid out,

miinwaa gii komaaksichgaade menji mashkoziim'migak iw niibana,
niibana bemaadizijik
waewae ana te mauri tini tangata, whakaaro ake ki te ia oranga wairua
and traversed by the essential energy of many, many people

Makwend'damaa megwaa etek maadiziwin mni'dowin
Ko manini tua,

ko manini aro,
Thinking about the current of life spirit

Owih aabweganan iw Takitimu, ekoweying tek owih maadiziwn niibi
apii akina ziigsin niigaan nikeyaa mnising'gin
ki te kureitanga o te waiora
e maringi nei ki ngaa moutere
The paddles of Tākitimu, to the end-point of the life water where it all
spills onwards to the islands

daakbijigaade maamwi iw nbiishing iw chi zaagi'iganing,
Herehere ai i ngaa wai o te moana,
Tied together by the waters of the ocean,

binoojiinhyik iw Hinemoana iw Tangaroa wenesh gaa e'zhisdoot da
nakiniigan.
ko ngaa tamariki o Hinemoana, Tangaroa takapau whariki.
the children of Hinemoana, of Tangaroa who spreads his mat.

Biish maandaakshkaak! Biish mijiiw'wan! Mijiiw'wan aapiji-apane!
Tai timu! Tai pari!
Rere noa e iii!
The tide ebbs! The tide flows! It flows on endlessly!

These words are featured in an exhibition of new work by Aotearoa New Zealand-based artist Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa). His exhibition *Ka mua, ka muri*, co-commissioned by Remai Modern and Oakville Galleries in Canada, is currently on view at Remai Modern in Saskatoon until 2021 after having shown in Oakville this past winter.

The poem and song is written in te reo Māori by Kurt Komene (Ngāti Tawhirikura), a longtime collaborator of Te Ao, and translated into English by Krissi Jerram (Pākehā New Zealander) and Anishinaabimowin by Mawla Shawana (Anishinaabe). The poem speaks of the ocean surrounding Aotearoa New Zealand, making references to Tākitimu (a great migration ship) and Māori deities of the ocean, specifically Hinemoana and Tangaroa. Reading it from my home-base in Canada, Toronto, to be exact, reminds me that Remai Modern and Oakville Galleries are located

on the shores of vast bodies of water that were once places of gathering for Indigenous peoples.[01] The South Saskatchewan (kisiskâciwan) River flows past the new minimalist glass building of Remai Modern. The Sixteen Mile Creek (Nanzuhzaugewazog) runs through Oakville and directly behind the Centennial Square location of Oakville Galleries, where *Ka mua, ka muri* was first shown. It cuts through the city of Oakville, winding until it meets Lake Ontario (Niigaani-gichigami/Oniatarí:io). The Greater Toronto Area, which includes Oakville, was an important meeting ground for humans (the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe, including the Mississaugas of the Credit) and other-than-humans. It was a place where numerous creeks and rivers connected with Lake Ontario, one of the largest lakes in the world, which allowed for trade, ceremony, and exchange. During the on-going colonial period, many of these waterways were diverted or covered up in order to facilitate urban development. Some of these creeks still exist, and some run underneath the city and can still be heard on quiet days. When Toronto floods during heavy periods of rain, I am reminded of water's inescapable capacity for memory. After thousands of years of flowing through this land, it always remembers where it has been—gravity welcoming it back to the nooks and cracks where it once passed.



Installation view, Shannon Te Ao, *Ka mua, ka muri*, Remai Modern, Saskatoon, 2020. Photo: Blaine Campbell.



Installation view, Shannon Te Ao, *Ka mua, ka muri*, Remai Modern, Saskatoon, 2020. Photo: Blaine Campbell.

From memory and history, to movement and language—Te Ao's most recent exhibition features artwork where pasts and futures meet. *Ka mua, ka muri* is a two-channel video and sound installation that features two sisters driving in cars while singing. Referencing the road trip genre, Te Ao describes the sisters' journey as localised within "the immediate wake of an unnamed

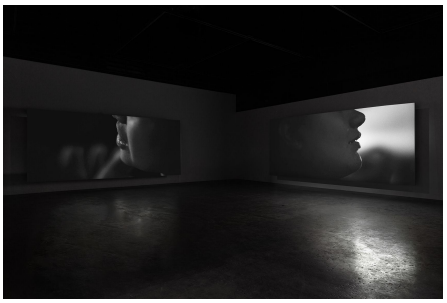
tragic event." The film provides the sense that the sisters, played by Te Awhina Kaiwai-Wanikau and Waimarama Tapiata Bright, are running to or from something, and that they've done this before. Although the "tragic event" might be sudden and unexpected, it is evident the singers are knowledgeable in pain and loss and understand what is required from them in such an instance. As a witness or viewer, I empathise in their loss and longing. It feels raw, but their voices let me know that we will be alright, eventually, somehow.

The screens in the installation are placed beside each other with one sister in each channel. The black and white close-up shots are intimate, and the sisters sing in Māori and face opposite sides. The women sing and drive "in two parts of the same highway," explains Te Ao, as the film "depict[s] two different moments along [a] stretch of road simultaneously."[02] The positioning of the videos in the installation depict the sisters driving away from each other while their singing is registered like a call-and-response that invokes a sense of communication and connection across time and space. This connection feels like a matriarchal link, like holding your grandmother's hand, or hugging your sister, or your mother braiding your hair. It provides a feeling of lament, nostalgia, and longing that is overwhelming and beautiful.

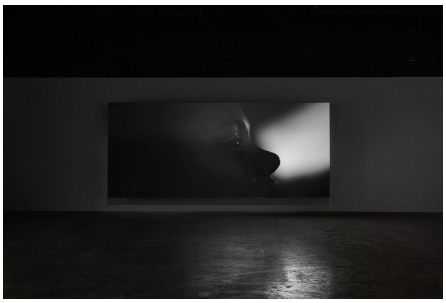
MAYA WILSON-SANCHEZ *Do you think storytelling allows for a sense of travelling through spacetime? I'm thinking here about my own ancestors who spoke Kichwa. It's been observed that when Kichwa speakers discuss the future they look back, while the past is in front.*

SHANNON TE AO *I'm actively trying to access a mode of storytelling that reflects an understanding that is temporal, experiential and spatialised.* Ka mua, ka muri *means: We walk backwards into the future. The filmic works, their installation and the integration of textual material (within the installation) all play into this. The understanding that we exist upon a continuum of past/present/future that is as much a living entity as we are is key. This to me is a simple enough idea to grasp but a reality that is more difficult*

to embed within one's lived experience - or indeed to live by. Similarly, this awareness and responsibility is central to a proposition that holds indigenous knowledge as central within the landscape of Aotearoa and, potentially a more inclusive worldview. I'm interested in how the various vocabularies in my work resonate with these ideas. And also, how these ideas might inform a more expansive creative response in my work.



Shannon Te Ao, *Ka mua, ka muri* (installation view), 2020, two-channel video, 5m 30s. Image courtesy of Oakville Galleries. Photo: Laura Findlay.



Shannon Te Ao, *Ka mua, ka muri* (installation detail), 2020, two-channel video, 5m 30s. Image courtesy of Oakville Galleries. Photo: Laura Findlay.

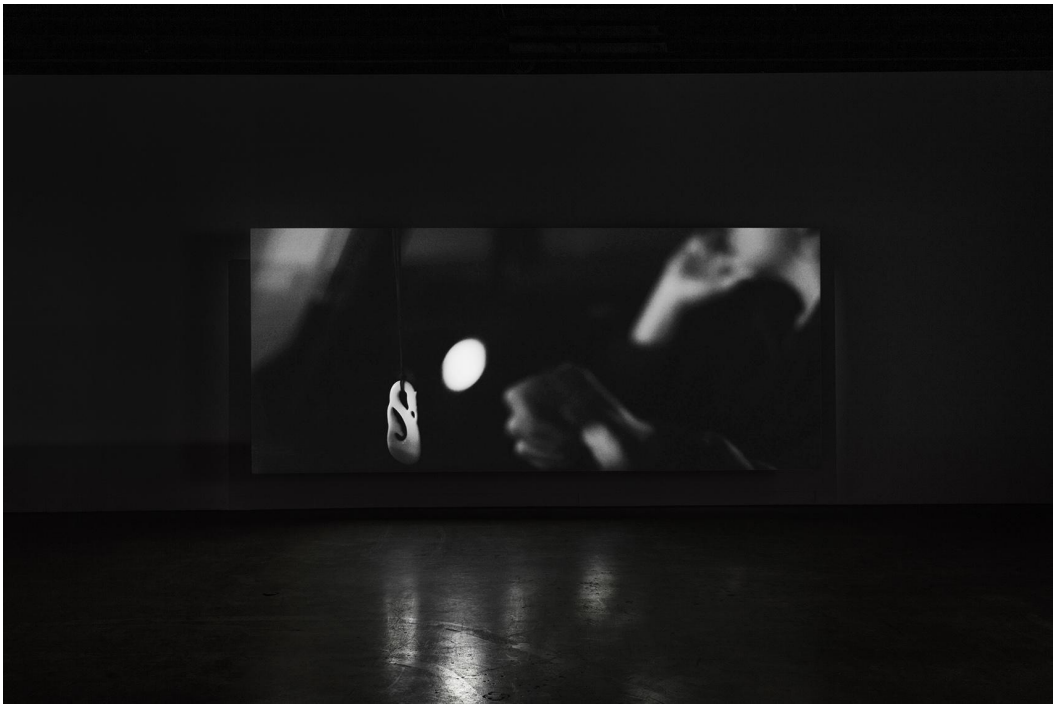
The title, *Ka mua, ka muri*, is a whakataukī (proverb) and a guiding principle within Māori thought. Walking backwards into the future while being able to see the past describes a continuum that is alive —a timespace that allows us to contextualize the present with those that came before us and those who will come after us. I was born and raised in the Andes, where cyclical time encapsulates the past while incorporating the future. In this sense, there is no moving forwards without looking backwards. There is no future that doesn't include the past. Te Ao's film allows for that sense of fluid time, as the sisters call out to one another while travelling in timespace. They're apart, but never alone.

Te Ao describes his practice as both fictional and biographical. Some of his works are abstract, but there are always references or connections to tangible histories. In past films, he's brought together fictional and historical characters for imagined meetings, he's recited in Māori to animals brought to Aotearoa by the British, and he's done a Māori translation of "This Bitter Earth," the classic blues song by Dinah Washington that was featured in the 1978 film *Killer of Sheep*. What stands out in his practice are these

playful, mournful, and touching speculations that always include within them something that is personal or historical. Many of his pieces are also working from or towards an embodied type of thought, exploring connections between thinking, singing, uttering, and reading. Speaking in Māori is a political action for Te Ao, and reclaiming and practicing Māori language and culture is at the heart of his practice.

MWS *I am wondering about the difference between embodied and disembodied language in your work. In the modern Western tradition, language is often equated with writing and reading —a form of language that is disembodied (lives outside of the writer or speaker). This is very different from traditions of oral storytelling and knowledge sharing, which is traced through your use of reciting or singing waiata (songs) or whakataukī (proverbs) in your work. What sort of engagements or experiences are you trying to achieve by including both embodied and disembodied language in this work?*

STA *The tension (or dilemma even) prompted by my own awareness of embodied and disembodied knowledge has informed much of my recent work. For me, trying to grapple with both of these as crucial aspects of our lived experience has been personally profound. This also coincides with a relatable tension posed by our physical intellect and one's use of language. Not to mention the amalgamation of indigenous and western pools of knowledge that are conflated within my personal lived experience. I've invested in the idea that song (as performed) and poetic language (as its content) possess specific potential to attend to such a conflation. More specifically, here in Aotearoa. The bodies of oral tradition (now so valuably captured in books and volumes that I reference at times) found in Māori waiata, whakatukī, karakia etc., attend to this phenomenon in a way that engages political and social commentary, familial histories, tribal narratives, fun! to name a few. Further to this, these traditions are maintained in formal and informal Māori settings, they are everyday, common practice. For me, all this can support a necessarily complex but also empowering understanding of who and where we are.*

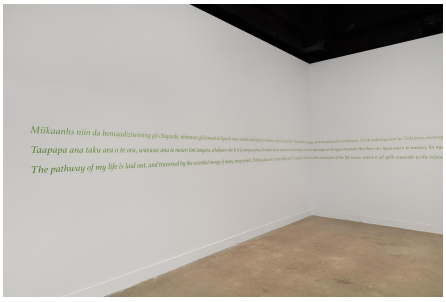


The other part of the *Ka mua, ka muri* exhibition at Oakville features a small space with white walls that shows the poem included at the beginning of this essay in green text. Painted in one line, the reader's sight needs to travel across the entire room in order to read the text. The same text is shown in three languages: first in Anishinaabimowin, one of the Indigenous languages spoken where Oakville Galleries is located, then underneath in Māori, and lastly in English. The translations are shown close together and stacked one on top of the other, almost as if meant to be read one after another, privileging the local language first and then the language of Te Ao as a guest, followed by the imposed colonial word.

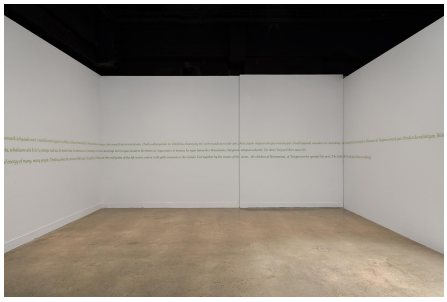
MWS *You mentioned two books,* Ngā Pēpeha a ngā Tipuna: The Sayings of the Ancestors *by Hirini Moko Mead & Neil Grove (2001) and Sir Apirana Ngata & Pei Te Hurinui Jones'* Ngā Mōteatea: The Songs *(2004), that are important to your practice and the development of* Ka mua, ka muri. *These were included in the exhibition, alongside other books about your practice, on a table that visitors could look through. What does it mean that waiata is being shared through a text here rather than through song? What is the meaning or consequences of this translation between embodied and*

disembodied practices of language? How do these questions or issues relate to kōrero (to speak or to talk)?

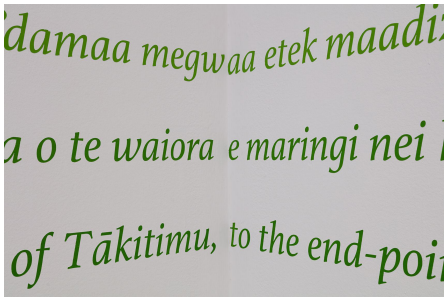
STA *For Māori, oral traditions are still held as paramount. It is rare for speakers to, for example, recite from written material. That said, books like the titles you mention have become invaluable tools for the restoration of language, the sharing of older tribal narratives and the like. Many titles in this vein are now held as taonga (treasures). For me personally, reading has become a vital process within my own journey of language revitalisation and I accept any tools in this vein. Like many Māori, we are still recovering from colonial impact on our language. For a number of generations, it was deemed illegal to speak our language within public school settings (for example). The majority of the current generation of Māori are not native speakers. All this marginalises us from access to indigenous narratives and understanding.*



Shannon Te Ao, *The pathway of my life is laid out, and traversed by the essential energy of many, many people* (installation view), 2020, painted text. Image courtesy of Oakville Galleries. Photo: Laura Findlay.



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Shannon Te Ao, *The pathway of my life is laid out, and traversed by the essential energy of many, many people* (installation detail), 2020, painted text. Image courtesy of Oakville Galleries. Photo: Laura Findlay.

Although I can only read the English version, I wonder what the poem means when read in Māori or Anishinaabimowin. As someone who has done translation work, I know that translation is a balance between accuracy and creativity. In order to translate something, there is always a negotiation between retaining original vocabulary, style, and sentence structure and creating something that makes sense in its new language. At times, it means asking "How can I come to know your thinking, your language, your world, in ways that I can understand in my language, and in my world?"

This exercise can become a colonial endeavour that flattens out other worlds into an imperial language and a colonial ideology, but it also has the potential for the sharing of different perspectives and thought-worlds if we are open, flexible, and patient—that is, if we are more interested in making connections rather than imposing our own perspectives.

I enjoyed hearing Te Ao say that his work is more about transportation rather than translation.[03] The meaning of something is transported from one world to another when it is translated, and it changes its shape and colour in order to survive in a new context. This is why Te Ao is interested in how different languages stretch or portray the Māori image of the poem. However, he still believes the image is more appropriately held in te reo Māori, and thinks that maybe this is "more useful to Māori and non-Māori."[04] I imagine this is because the image is more accurate and truer to form in its own context.

The reason I can have a conversation with Te Ao, and write this essay for an arts publication that focuses on artists from Aotearoa New Zealand, is because of the shared colonial histories between Canada and Aotearoa. They were both colonised by the British, are both mainly English-speaking nations, and they both experienced histories of genocide, displacement, and a prohibition of Indigenous cultures and languages. They still have a majority white-settler population and settler governments that continue this colonial legacy. There is also a long history of artists from Aotearoa working and exhibiting in Canada, which has included prestigious artist residencies, small shows or collaborations, as well as large institutional exhibitions like *Sakah*à*n* in 2013 or the recent À*badakone*, both at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa that featured New Zealand artists Fiona Pardington, Mata Aho Collective, Shigeyuki Kihara, Brett Graham, Michael Parekowhai, Peter Robinson, Rachael Rakena, and Taika Waititi. Although funding through Commonwealth initiatives and a mutual use of English might be helpful in facilitating new relationships between Indigenous artists, thinkers, and curators from Canada and New Zealand, it is shared experiences and a shared solidarity that makes those connections stronger and more significant.

Te Ao's exploration of language in a way that is sensitive to history, space, and time comes together in *Ka mua, ka muri* in a way that carries memory. Transportation and translation both point to movement. In its Latin roots, translation means "carried across." Instead of translating to a common colonial language whose structure demands an ideology of individualism and strict divisions between subjects and objects, we can carry across our worlds through water. Perhaps there is now a growing need to move through creeks, rivers, lakes, and oceans and meet on the shores of each other's worlds and languages.

Footnotes

01. In some ways, the Greater Toronto Area and Saskatoon can still be thought of as gathering places for Indigenous peoples from all over Canada and the world.

02. Podcast recorded on 27th of January 2020 at Oakville Galleries as part of the series *The Artists' Library*. Produced by Oakville Galleries in collaboration with Art Metropole.

03. Matariki Williams, "The Singing Word: On Shannon Te Ao's My Life as a Tunnel," Pantograph Punch, June 21, 2018, www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/singing-word.

04. Podcast. Oakville Galleries in collaboration with Art Metropole.

Biographies



Working predominantly with performance and film, the elegiac installations of Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Ngāti Te Rangiita, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui, b. 1978, Sydney) explore fraught dynamics of indigeneity, language and loss. Te Ao draws on a range of existing literary material, including Māori lyrical sources such as whakataukī and waiata, as well as poetic and lyrical texts from popular culture. Richly layered, Te Ao's works enact a compression wherein past and present co-exist, and daily life is inextricably linked to multifarious social, cultural and philosophical histories.



Maya Wilson-Sanchez is a curator, writer, and researcher based in Toronto. She has published essays, reviews, and exhibition texts in multiple venues including The Senses and Society journal, Canadian Art magazine, and the book Other Places: Reflections on Media Arts in Canada (PUBLIC Books, 2019). Wilson-Sanchez has worked in collections, research, programming, and curatorial research roles at Gallery TPW, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Onsite Gallery, OCAD University, and the Royal Ontario Museum. She curated Living Room (2017) at the Royal Ontario Museum, Intra-Action: Live Performance Art (2016, 2017) at Xpace Cultural Centre, and Grounding (2020) at the Art Gallery of Guelph. In 2019, she was Editorial Resident at Canadian Art and held a curatorial residency award at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. She is the 2020 recipient of the Middlebrook Prize for Young Canadian Curators and a 2021 participant at the Tate Intensive in London.

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