

Some Conditions May Apply: Surnameke and the Adaptation of Pacifica Cultural Practice for the 8th Asian Pacific Triennial (APT8), Brisbane, Australia

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Some Conditions May Apply: Sunameke and the Adaptation of Pacifica Cultural Practice for the 8th Asian Pacific Triennial (APT8), Brisbane, Australia

In November 2015, my good friend and contemporary artist, Numangatini Fraser Mackenzie (Numa) posted a series of photos on Facebook accompanied by the provocative caption: “Sunameke sisters activating... Show[ing] how their culture is [...] censored by institutions and deemed inappropriate for the public. Even though you’re invited you still need to fit in the white box #apt8 #sunameke.”¹

The photos were Numa’s documentation of a performance and intervention called *A’inaisa* (a Mekeo word that roughly translates as “I am responsible for that”) by the Papua New Guinean/Australian performance group Sunameke, under the direction of Julia Mage’au Gray.² Performed in November 2015, at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), *A’inaisa* centred around a young Papua Australian woman, Moale James, who is supported by Julia and seven other women, all members of Sunameke. Moale’s dress and the black geometric tattoos that covered her body and face, distinguished her from the uniform space of the gallery. Vibrant red, white, and black beaded necklaces draped over her chest and an elaborate, multi-coloured grass skirt accentuated her hips, ending just below her knees. Her head was crowned by an intricate string of shells and other natural materials, while her biceps and ankles were adorned with decorative bands. In contrast, Julia and the seven women were minimally ornamented, wearing simple black tank tops and skirts, carrying woven shoulder bags, and two strings of shells, one in each hand.

Singing a Meko song of lament, Moale and the women moved from intimate to transitory spaces in the QAGOMA, until they arrived at the gallery’s spacious foyer. Visitors gathered to watch, perched from balconies and on the ground floor. Standing in the foyer, Julia retrieved a role of yellow and black “caution” tape from a white, masculine-presenting, Australian spectator-turned-participant. The Sunameke women continued singing while Julia began wrapping Moale. Walking wide circles around her, with her head down, Julia enveloped Moale beginning with her feet, moving up to her legs, across her torso, arms, and neck. When she reached Moale’s mouth, Julia became overwhelmed by the gesture she was performing, dropped the tape and moved away. The women continued singing and supporting Moale, until Julia’s children, Keama Aniheta and Salevasa Gray came. Wearing yellow t-shirts with “#caution” printed in black letters on the back, they unravelled Moale, took her by the hand and walked her away from the crowd.

The intervention—programmed for the opening weekend of APT8 Live, a newly initiated series of performances and interventions held during the 8th Asian Pacific Triennial³—was slated to be a celebratory piece involving a large group of performers, including Julia’s children, with elaborate costumes, music, and audience participation. Instead of exhibiting the beauty and dignity of Papua New Guinean culture, *A’inaisa* was a lament for the loss of that opportunity. While planning the original performance, Julia was told that her children could not participate, based on their

status as minors and a (mis)understanding that their costumes would inappropriately expose their bodies. As Julia emphasized in a Skype interview that I conducted with her in March of 2016, it was the institution’s paternalistic approach that was most unsettling. That her children were not “allowed” to perform, reflects an ongoing imposition of Western, European approaches to modesty, and compulsive control over bodies and sexuality. Furthermore, the implicit suggestion that Julia would not be conscientious enough to ensure the safety of her own family violated the core of her values as a Papuan woman.

Having lived in Australia for much of her life, Julia and, by extension the Sunameke crew, are extremely aware of the need to navigate the two cultures, and that this so often involves adaptation of their Indigenous forms of expression. Given the constant pressure to adapt, and the consequences of being embodied in a (non-white) form that will always resist conforming to Eurocentric values, Julia decided to use the space she was given at APT8 Live to address the individual and cultural labour performed by Pacifica Indigenous peoples on a daily basis. In this context *A’inaisa* became a catalyst for expressing the burden of constantly negotiating negative assumptions, based on skin colour, tattoo practices, or dress, and the poor treatment that often results from these.

Several months after the performance, Moale published a blog post, “Stand Strong, Stand Proud—Gini Goada Gini Auka,” reflecting on the intervention and the challenges of being a young Papuan Australian woman navigating



Sunameke Productions

A'inaisa, 2015.

Photo : Pat Morrow,
© Sunameke Productions

both identities in the context of Australian society. On the question of modesty she writes: “Yes, according to Western Colonial society, our backs and our chests are exposed. But within our Papuan culture, it wasn’t once considered ‘exposure’; to be tattooed is to be covered. What may seem immodest in our Australian culture is considered beautiful in Papua New Guinean culture—wearing a grass skirt, bilas, and proudly displaying our *reva reva*.”⁴

Before knowing anything about *A'inaisa*, I was compelled by the visual narrative captured by the photo documentation and by Numa’s textual provocation. I immediately wanted to learn more about the performance and the artist’s experience of unease in a large arts institution like QAGOMA, particularly because I know it is not an isolated occurrence. The cultural censorship that Sunameke confronted in their performance resonated with stories I have heard about the experiences of Indigenous artists in Canada. The affective quality of the photo documentation of *A'inaisa* is not only an archivable reminder of the persistence of white supremacy, but also acknowledges the persistence of Indigenous resistance, and the beauty of their unique and specific cultural expressions.

Examining the limits of inclusion, this performance and its documentation can be situated alongside current political work on recognition, which broadly asks: Who has the authority to recognize? Who decides what cultural expressions are allowed in and what shape that expression takes? Indigenous scholars including Glen Coulthard and Audra Simpson interrogate the

consequences of a politic of inclusion, exhibited by current trends in liberal multicultural policy.⁵ Understanding the dangers of incorporation to Indigenous cultural and political sovereignty, Coulthard and Simpson both posit that settler notions of “recognition”—as that which can be “granted”—means that problematic networks of power remain intact. *A'inaisa* thus reflects on the substantial pain of incorporation, ripe with censorship and compromise.

Exposure to the work of Sunameke and *A'inaisa* through social media and subsequent conversations with Julia reinforced the need for increased attentiveness to the challenges faced by Indigenous and other artists who do not fit Eurocentric, hetero-patriarchal expectations that continue to inform art institutions within settler colonial societies. Although there have been notable increases in institutions which are adapting their approaches to Indigenous art, largely due to the ongoing labour of Indigenous artists, many remain rife with problematic mandates, attitudes and curatorial approaches. In other instances there may be the *appearance* of openness—such as in the case of QAGOMA’s APT8—but it remains contained within the context of institutional authority, which reserves the right to approve or deny the terms of expression. In Julia’s words: “At some point you gotta let go of [our] hand and let us be who we are, stop gatekeeping.”⁶

1 — Numangatini Fraser Mackenzie, Facebook post November 21, 2015, www.facebook.com/numa.mackenzie/posts/788055404651097.

2 — Sunameke is comprised of a tight-knit group of women: performers, vocalists, film-makers, and traditional tattoo artists. The mandate is, “to... actively connect [...] with and express [...] Papua New Guinean heritage in an environment where such cultural appreciation and representation was not [regularly] demonstrated.”, “About Us,” Sunameke Productions, accessed April 1, 2016, www.sunameke.com/#!about/c1enr.

3 — “The 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT8).” QAGOMA. Accessed April 10, 2016. www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/apt8; “APT8 LIVE.”—QAGOMA. Accessed April 10, 2016. www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/apt8/apt8-live.

4 — Moale James, Blog post *Living Mixed*, January 26, 2016. Moale’s blog is no longer available online. The text was however republished on February 6, 2016, on the Facebook Page “Tep Tok: Reading Between Our Lines,” www.facebook.com/TepTokSunameke/posts/1034929446528449.

5 — Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press Books, 2014).

6 — Julia Mage’au Gray, interviewed by Sarah Nesbitt, *Relations Journal* (IARG Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, March 2016): 61–63.