EDWARD HANFLING AND SCOTT KLENNER

EDITORIAL: 'NETWORK'

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The theme, 'network,' speaks to the idea that relationships between phenomena are more important than—and indeed produce or perform—things and beings themselves. Some such things and beings might typically be regarded as relatively proximate, the connections well-known and reiterated; others more distant and the act of connecting them daring, difficult or speculative. These latter relationships often depend on a willingness to traverse multiple areas of knowledge or disciplines, which is precisely what this journal, *The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, encourages. In recent decades, there has been much 'thematic dialogue' about the place of human beings in the greater scheme of things. Contrary to dominant tendencies in Western thought since the Enlightenment, a 'networked' perspective suggests that the putative intelligence of people does not make them separate from everything else on the planet; but, at the same time, this same intelligence, or an assumption of its distinctiveness and superiority, has succeeded in having an exceptional—to the point of catastrophic—impact on the planet's ecosystem. If there is any way out of this pickle, or at least of surviving in the midst of it a little while longer, it would seem propitious to regard human beings merely as constituent factors in a much vaster and multitudinous assemblage, constellation or ecology, not as the centre around which everything else revolves, while, at the same time, recognising that this puts us in a place of responsibility—to care for everything else we connect with, for the sake of sustaining the wider network and by extension our place within it.

Much recent thematic dialogue—actor-network theory, post-humanism, object-oriented ontology, new materialism—construes this dual action as a turn away from the binary oppositions of post-Enlightenment thought, which serve only to divide and to perpetuate unequal power relationships, and as an attempt to open up new relationships, which identify paths between seemingly distant points in the network. Notions of distance or proximity are, however, relative. What seems new or surprising, or even beyond comprehension, for one group of people may well have been common knowledge for another group. Indigenous cultures have, as anthropologist Zoe Todd (Métis) describes, "millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and *all relations*."[1] Within *te ao Māori* (Māori world view), the concept of *mātauraka* or *mātauranga* encompasses forms of knowledge

that within Western educational and societal frameworks have been routinely channelled into oppositions and disciplines that distinguish the scientific from the spiritual, while *whakapapa* is a genealogy of ancestors who are variously human and non-human. Rangihiroa Panoho, in forming a model of *toi tahuhu* (Māori art history) that establishes powerful connections between artists and artworks across time and space, has illuminated the notion of *whakawhānaukataka* or *whakawhānaukatanga* in terms of "embracing that which is different, or distant, or conflicting and including it as more comfortably local."[2]

Four decades ago, Donna Haraway's essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," intimated the potential for a world of post-gender hybrid beings-things that would break down the patriarchal "antagonistic dualisms" (human/non-human, culture/nature, man/woman, self/other) of Western post-Enlightenment societies.[3] In their article "Hyphae Networks of Queer Love," Ishita Bajpai, Jayatee Bhattacharya and Hampamma Gongadi write about a similar vision captured in a recent Danmei novel—a genre of Chinese fiction in which romance between men is a staple theme and heterosexual women make up the main readership. In *Little Mushroom*, the two main characters are a mushroom who takes on human attributes and a man; their relationship becomes exemplary in a sci-fi world where queer love is normalised rather than demonised or rendered deviant. Bajpai et al. describe a transition that takes place over the course of the narrative from a widespread fear of interspecies connection and mutation from the "natural" state of humanity to seeing the diverse agencies of "nature" as intertwined with the human. They ask us to reconsider qualities stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine, arguing that love and care are both central to the story and to the achievements of its male-identifying characters or identities. Interestingly, Bajpai et al. describe the conclusion of *Little Mushroom* in terms of a situation that is "happy" and "stable," whereas instability and flux accompany the characters in the narrative's earlier moments. One wonders if the happy ending should be seen as an objective, an ideal or indeed a conceit, keeping in mind too that what power or strength or critical purchase there is in queerness in the present moment still resides in embracing its non-normative or 'deviant' status. The authors see the character of An Zhe as *both* a stabilising and chaotic influence, while maintaining, in the spirit of Haraway, that the figure of the cyborg "destabilises all traditional boundaries."

An ethos of care rather than competition is also at the heart of the notion of whakawhānaukataka advocated by Marcus Campbell, Nick Parata, Connor Eastwood and Jeremy Hapeta, in this case in the context of physical education. The crux of their study is a shift in mindset from seeing games or physical activity as a means to wellbeing and enjoyment to instead seeing wellbeing and enjoyment as prerequisites for participating in such games or activities. This insight could in fact be extended to learning in general, in any field or discipline, where the capacity to learn depends on one's existing wellbeing. Currently, New Zealand's right-wing coalition government is turning back the clock, compartmentalising learning in schools by emphasising traditional Western disciplines and skills and prioritising test results—arbitrary measurements of 'achievement' or 'success.' It seems timely, then, that Campbell et al. have outlined a holistic approach that integrates learning and wellbeing, rather than construing learning as a mechanistic process of obtaining and possessing knowledge. They are eager for everybody to be involved in healthy forms of physical activity that are mentally and spiritually rewarding, as opposed to specific Western sporting codes with a basis in competition. In this respect, based on surveys that gauge student wellbeing and spiritual awareness, they claim some success with their Teaching Games for Whakawhānaukataka model. But perhaps the larger achievement of their research lies in its offering a path towards decolonising

the New Zealand education system or at least creating room within it for Māori ways of being and knowing. Given the isolating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic—and indeed of Western capitalism and the culture that it engrains in young people—it is also important to note that the research is based on a sense of relationality that encourages social connection, rather than individualistic measures of achievement, including relationships with whānau, hapū, iwi, whenua and whakapapa.

Kat Wehrheim also draws attention to the interwoven, networked nature of knowledge and reality in Indigenous cultures—but perhaps too in pre-Enlightenment Western cultures and in any situation where one finds a way beyond the prevailing paradigm. The catalyst for the article is the United nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) ratified in 2007. The principles of that document, well-intentioned and worthy as they might be, covertly or tacitly render invisible the very act (of making invisible the world views of Indigenous cultures) they were scripted to counteract—the heavy hand of colonisation they were designed to atone for. Particularly striking, Wehrheim demonstrates, are sections 12 and 20. On their own, they make perfect sense, recognising, respectively, the right to protection of spiritual beliefs and the right to subsistence. What happens, however, when both are invoked by the same matter, such as Indigenous whaling practices that are underpinned by spiritual connection (a reciprocal process whereby whales 'call' to people to be hunted and people 'call' to whales through dance and drumming)? Do such practices meet the criteria for 'subsistence'? Similarly, do the UNDRIP principles operate sufficiently holistically to accommodate the right of Indigenous people to have a relationship with land even when they are not in legal ownership of it? Wehrheim's point is that we should always be thinking through issues in relation; the compartmentalised principles of UNDRIP reflect a constraining Western framework. Wehrheim maintains that Western institutions need to meet Indigenous paradigms (notably Leroy Little Bear's philosophical principles) 'halfway' (channelling Karen Barad)—indeed, to go beyond mere "stepping stones" towards taking indigenous belief systems "on their own terms." In light of this, the call for 'decency' and 'neighbourliness' (terms used to drive the article's argument) could be considered both diffident and provocative, particularly in places where the colonisers are now the dominant landowners and the colonised have been dispossessed.

Tarunna Sebastian and Angela Giovanangeli highlight precisely how land is inseparable from the broader network of factors that sustain the ongoing vitality of Aboriginal cultures and resistance to colonial injustices in Australia. Consistent with the critique of Western disciplinary knowledge that underpins other contributions to this issue, Sebastian and Giovanangeli emphasise a relational structure to Indigenous identity and knowledge, which cannot be broken down or the constituent parts separated out or compartmentalised—a structure captured by the concept of Kinship: "Aboriginal Kinship systems represent a complex and interconnected web of relationships that not only connect individuals, families and communities, but also include deep ties to place, to Country (Land, water and sky), to the inanimate and to the more-than-human world including animals, plants and spirits." It is significant that the article represents the lived experiences and spoken words of Aboriginal activists, from three different Aboriginal nations, who continue to resist the ways in which they have been represented by colonial narratives—the epistemic violence of a Eurocentric world view. Perhaps an especially salient point here is that Kinship remains vital, has never been lost; that Aboriginal Australians remain determinedly plugged into that network; and that a contemporary non-Indigenous refrain of lament that colonisation has produced a disconnection of Indigenous peoples from their Kinship networks is as false and damaging as historical forms of colonial oppression.

Oral language is an even more prominent feature of the final article in this issue, a conversation between Joe Citizen, Toni Herangi and Hollie Tawhiao that, in its form as much as its content, challenges Eurocentric academic convention. The authors—or protagonists—are vehement in their resistance to the absorption of Māori knowledge and taonga (treasures) into the global network of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which they see as a perpetuation of colonisation and capitalism. What is especially striking is Toni Herangi's assertion towards the end of the conversation that Māori already have the mental capacity—and have demonstrated this capacity for countless generations—to hold vast amounts of 'data' or knowledge and to disseminate it, judiciously rather than profligately. It may nevertheless be worth considering whether the perspective on AI discussed here is overly pessimistic or, indeed, generalised—comparable to a blanket dismissal of the World Wide Web in its earliest manifestation. Of course, arguably, the internet has not turned out altogether well, but it cannot be categorically deemed 'bad' either. It just is. And AI too will be—no criticism will change that and Māori, along with everyone else, will find ways of both working with and resisting it. There is already a willing and potentially beneficial Indigenous uptake of the technology, such as Te Hiku Media's 'Papa Reo' platform for fostering learning of te reo (Māori language). AI does, however, present a number of troubling ramifications, including the perpetuation of a system of competing truth-claims, a regime of fragmentation and uncertainty, which disregards the presence of correct *tikaka* or *tikanga* (protocols, lore or custom) and conceals the actual sites of corporate and political power within global capitalism. Joe Citizen maintains that AI, far from democratising knowledge, is a mechanism for control: "It's claiming something which wasn't theirs to claim. During the Enlightenment the belief emerged that knowledge should be universally accessible; for western culture that was emancipatory—there is a cultural assumption that it would be emancipatory for everybody."

When we proposed 'network' as the theme for this issue of *Junctures*, we envisaged multiple avenues of inquiry, some of which have transpired, but we also had at the forefront of our minds (just as it is on many people's minds) the ever-expanding assemblages of online data processes proliferating through AI. AI is a network that affords couplings and combinations that are in some sense predictable, because they already exist and reflect globally calibrated values and conventions, but are also sometimes surprising, because the relationships forged in the almost instantaneous process of producing new data out of the old stem from knowledge fragments that may be disparate in space and time. The relationships, however, are fleeting and invisible and to all intents and purposes meaningless, because AI is based on input and output rather than the significance of what happens in between, in the process of getting from one to the other. This is one reason for feeling uncertain about the value of AI. There is evidence to suggest it may be useful, because it can so promptly spit out something that an individual human being does not have the capacity to produce themselves (at least, not without considerably more time and effort). But it is the usefulness of things, or the tendency of Western post-enlightenment thought and capitalism, to make things useful and to conceive of them primarily in terms of what they can materially produce for us (instrumentalism), that has got us into a good deal of trouble that threatens not only ourselves but other beings and the larger ecosystem. We might look upon AI beneficently as a wonderfully expansive and inclusive technology that produces collaboration or sharing, whereby everything that anyone has done gets thrown into the mix and has a role to play in generating or perpetuating a human culture. Or we might reverse the terms and suggest that this assemblage is not attributable to the technology but to the culture—the human dispositions and aspirations—that constituted the conditions for such a technology to be conceived and created. The latter position

would suggest that it is pointless to debate the pros and cons of AI itself; what is at issue is the perpetuation of ideologies of economic and material 'progress' and the ongoing colonisation of diverse cultural traditions by the cultural values of those who own and control the technology and wield the political power. Collaboration and sharing might be in there somewhere, but the arena in which that takes place is by no means flat, nor the social conditions egalitarian. We might look upon AI in the future as we do the internet now. It is extraordinary, it has changed the way we access information and the quantities of information accessed, but it has not changed the world economically or politically, nor should it be expected to do so, given that it is merely a reflection of the profoundly unequal, oppressive and hegemonic culture out of which it arose.

Where, then, does this leave Panoho's understanding of whakawhānaukataka—that desire to embrace the "different, or distant, or conflicting and including it as more comfortably local" —that potential for unexpected connections and surprise? Currently, perhaps, it is difficult to reconcile the confounding fabrications and weirdnesses that AI throws up at the click of a mouse (in the face of which the most eccentric statements or positions or creations arising from non-AI-assisted human endeavour pale in comparison) with its equal propensity for the production of somewhat bland or generic kinds of outputs. It seems possible that whatever we now regard as eccentric will very rapidly *become* bland and generic at the hands of AI—not merely in the way that, say, surrealism became popular and widespread decades after the shock of its avant-garde origins, but in the sense that a sheer excess of eccentricity renders the concept of eccentricity meaningless. There can be no 'outside' a system that is all-encompassing. This is a network within which the relationships are so easily, or indeed arbitrarily or algorithmically, made that ultimately there can be no surprise in them—no frisson of unfamiliarity. It is a very different beast to what the Actor-Network and post-humanist and new materialist theorists have been hankering for in recent decades; there will be no daring and caring leaps that transcend prevailing human systems and ideologies, as long as the entire network is so determinedly human in its biases and so rigorously regulated by the systems of power and wealth that sustain it. Perhaps, though, this bleak overall assessment risks downplaying or undermining the agency—and activism—of those who continue to resist these systems and to assert and maintain distinct enclaves of identity and knowledge. It is worth heeding the words of Monica who, in Sebastian and Giovanangeli's article, debunks the assumption that colonisation has resulted in the disconnection of Aboriginal people from Kinship systems: "No, sorry. And I've said this to all local communities when I go there. But I'm sorry, but the government law and policies need to realise that we've never been disconnected." To construe colonisation— whether by national or corporate entities—only as something that happens *to* a people or culture is to render that group passive and to diminish what they do, say, make or modify. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori continue to assert the right to *tino rangatiratanga* or self-determination, and the 'Papa Reo' project referred to earlier might be taken as representative of how AI technology might be co-opted, harnessed and directed into localised contexts and communities which both maintain control and protection of knowledge and foster new transformations of the network.

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1. Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism (Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwacî)," *Uma (in)certa antropologia/An (un) certain anthropology* (26 October 2014), https://umaincertaantropologia.org/2014/10/26/an-indigenous-feminists-take-on-the-ontological-turn-ontology-is-just-another-word-for-colonialism-urbane-adventurer-amiskwaci/.

2. Rangihiroa Panoho, *Māori Art: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory* (Auckland: Bateman, 2015), 27–29.

3. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism for the 1980s," *Socialist Review* no. 80 (March-April 1985): 65–107; republished as "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.