

Reinterpretations of ‘*ka mua, ka muri*’¹ through the Poetics of Virtual Production

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Abstract

This paper explores interpretations of the Māori whakatauki (proverb) *ka mua ka muri* drawing from two tangata tiriti (non-Māori treaty partners) cultural understandings while living in partnership with tangata whenua (Indigenous Māori) in Aotearoa New Zealand . One interpretation draws upon ngatu (Tongan bark cloth) making as a filmmaking process, positioning the ngatu itself as film, where ancestral patterning, movement and oratory guide the narrative form. The second approaches virtual production reflexively, exploring the VPV (Virtual Production Volume) as a threshold between temporal worlds and treating the screen surface not as a backdrop for efficient production but as a boundary between the present and what the Welsh tradition calls *Annwfyn*, a realm of ancestral connection that exists alongside our own. Together, these experiments position the VPV as a space where tangata tiriti artists can engage with the provocation of *ka mua, ka muri* through their own specific cultural practices.

Keywords: Virtual Production, Ngatu, Reflexivity, Māori Temporality, Tangata Tiriti

Link to accompanying Video Work:

<https://vimeo.com/1128079905/e796081350?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Introduction

In the work *Time Memory Presence*, we explore the Māori whakatauki, “*ka mua, ka muri*”, from two perspectives. One, of a mixed Tongan woman living away from her ancestral homeland making meaning for herself and for others in similar situations. The other, of a Pākehā filmmaker of Welsh descent exploring an eternalist reading of the proverb: that past, present and future are co-present, and the subject rotates within time rather than travelling through it. He does this through reflexive engagement with his own prior cinematic work (Janman, 2026) inside the VPV space. We position ourselves as tangata tiriti who engage actively with our particular source cultural practices and identities as well

¹ The past in front happens, just as what will happen is at the rear.

as with critical relations to Māori cultural practice. Both of us thus approach ka mua, ka muri not as outsiders borrowing a concept, but as tangata tiriti whose own ancestral practices resonate with and are illuminated by it.

As Māori linguist Patu Hohepa (1980) has observed, the terms mua and muri indicate a fluidity of 'in front of' and 'behind' that is spatial as much as temporal. Hohepa gives the example of a piece of paper pinned to a wall: the paper is simultaneously 'in front' and 'behind' depending on the positionality of the viewer in relation to the wall. This spatio-temporal ambivalence is central to both of our approaches. It is in Cecelia's layered ngatu structure, where the kupesi (raised stencil) presses through from behind while the surface faces forward, and in the VPV screen surface, whose 'front' and 'behind' shift depending on the position of the performer, the camera, or the image-world displayed on the LED wall.

Part One — Ngatu as Faiva in a Virtual Production Space (Cecilia)

I am a New Zealand born and raised Tongan, Samoan woman with Chinese ancestry also. I am privileged to be exposed to Māori culture which has helped me re-connect to my own heritage as someone who is displaced in the vā. Te Hiringa Mahara – Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission (2024) states that Pacific peoples face greater mental health and wellbeing challenges than the general population. My input into Time Memory Presence is positioned in relation to Siliga David Setoga's (2010) concept of the Pacific Island home in New Zealand being a "decolonised zone" and is a response to the sense of confusion that young Pacific people face "feeling neither here nor there and always wondering, questioning and searching for a place of belonging". It proposes that perhaps past, present and future all exist in one space, encouraging all people to just be.

Part one of Time Memory Presence explores the use of the VPV space as contemporary faiva (Tongan performance) inspired by ngatu (Tongan, patterned bark cloth) that tells stories in the present, drawing from the past to inspire thinking and interpretation for future contemporary Moana Oceanic audiences. This process is itself an expression of ka mua, ka muri: ancestral knowledge (past) is carried into the present act of making (faiva), which in turn generates new cycles of creativity in the audience as they carry what they receive forward and back again — from past to future and from future to past. The temporality is not linear but cyclical, each reception becoming a new origin.

Traditionally, ngatu is made from two layers of beaten inner bark of the paper Mulberry tree, the two layers of tutu (beaten bark) are adhered together using a root vegetable called mahoa'a (arrowroot). A pattern is transferred through the layers from beneath using a kupesi which is frottaged onto the top surface and then refined by hand. Once viewed by an audience, it is the hope that they will appreciate the harmony and beauty while making meaning from the final artefact (Figure 1).

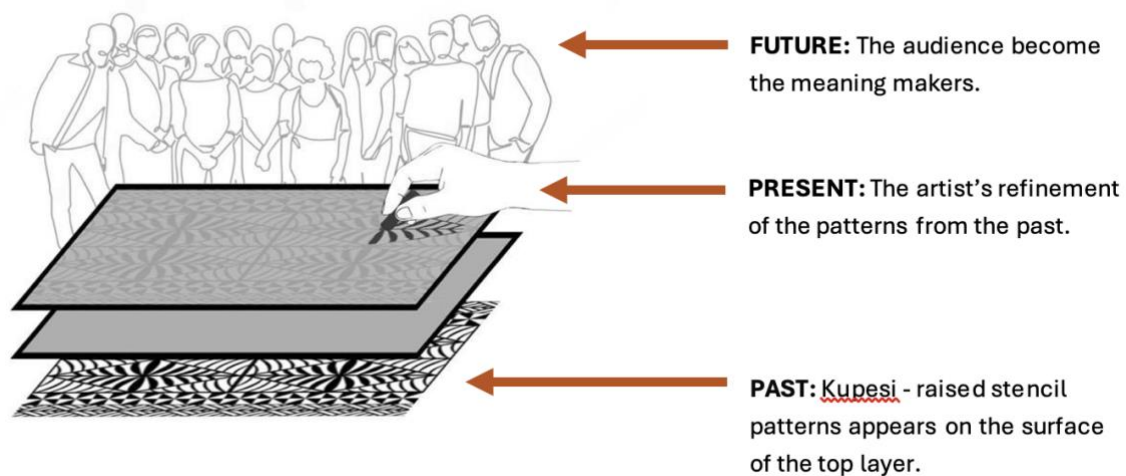


Figure 1: Structure of Traditional Tongan ngatu.

Ngatu in Diaspora: Continuity and Adaptation

For Tongans living away from their ancestral homeland, ngatu continues to play an important role by helping communities remember who they are, where they come from and how they are connected to one another. Contemporary Moana Oceanic creative practitioners in diaspora continue to create, adapt and reimagine ngatu, such as Adrienne Māhanga Lear from Australia, who captures birdsong as pattern onto ngatu; Sione Faletau from New Zealand who explores how people talanoa (converse) with each other and how this could be visually represented by kupesi patterns produced through digital waves; and Talita Toluta'u (Fifita), also from New Zealand, who considers new ways of portraying Tongan women in diaspora by producing large portraits printed on ngatu combined with complementing filmic projections.

In my own creative practice, I have explored ngatu as illustration, film and as faiva by including the layers of ngatu into the layers of my creative works. The completed illustration includes a base that reveals traditional patterns in the background of the image, as would come through from kupesi, digital photography in the mid layer and colour from

a mix of natural and synthetic pigments and hand drawing on the surface layer. The illustration idea was trialled in film - conveying the ability to reimagine ngatu as film utilising the VPV room to do so (Figure. 2).



Figure 2: Museum - Illustration inspired by the layers in ngatu vs screen grab of Time Memory Presence where ngatu as film is being explored.

Below, I have translated the layers of activity that occurs in the ngatu making process into the layers of making in the VPV environment (Figure. 3).

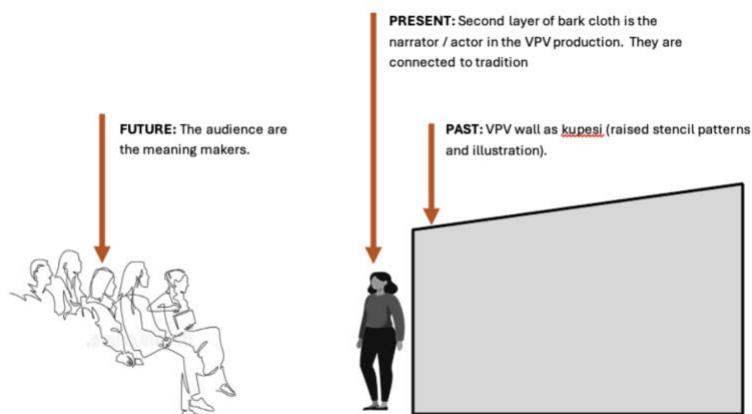


Figure 3: Structure of Contemporary Tongan faiva (performance) inspired

by ngatu structure.

Both the ngatu structure and its temporal logic of ancestral pattern pressing through into present making, generating future reception, raise a question that Part Two takes up from a different direction: what happens when the VPV apparatus itself is treated not as a neutral container for these layers but as a surface whose front and behind are themselves unstable?

Part Two — The VPV as Threshold (Paul)

Virtual production literature is dominated by discussion of efficiencies: cost reduction, collapsed timelines, and the replacement of location shooting with controlled environments (Swords & Willment, 2024; Kavakli & Cremona, 2022). Swords and Willment's research agenda, for instance, identifies efficiency as the most commonly cited reason for adopting virtual production among industry participants. Even where scholars have engaged with questions of space and embodiment in LED volume production (Ilmaranta, 2020), the emphasis remains on phenomenological immersion rather than on temporal or cultural dimensions. Largely absent from this discourse is any consideration of what the VPV might mean as a space for engaging with unconventional temporalities or for the reflexive exploration of the cinematic apparatus itself.

My approach to ka mua, ka muri differs from Cecelia's in emphasis, though not in spirit. Where she reads the proverb through the layered materiality of ngatu in which past practices are carried into present making, generating new cycles of reception and creation, I read it as implying something closer to what we might call eternalism: the view that past, present and future are equally real and co-present, and that the subject's orientation within time, rather than time's passage, is what changes (Janman, 2026). In this reading, ka mua, ka muri describes not a journey but a rotation: one turns within the field of time to face what is before and what is behind (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Screen grab of Time Memory Presence in which the performer turns toward the 'backdrop' of the past.

Annwfn and the Reflexive Surface

In Time Memory Presence, I placed myself as a performer inside a previously created shot of a Welsh ancestral mountain from which I am displaced as an immigrant to Aotearoa. The mountain is now behind and around me. Unlike conventional post-production compositing, where layers are assembled invisibly after the fact, and unlike greenscreen, where the performer acts against an absent world, the VPV places the performer bodily within a prior temporal reality that they can see, respond to, and physically approach. The apparatus makes the layering visible and present rather than concealed and deferred. During the shoot, the effect was immediate and unplanned: facing the LED wall displaying footage of Carningli, I found that the mountain's presence in the room altered my movement and orientation in ways that no greenscreen backdrop could have prompted. The technology was not illustrating a concept; it was producing one.

As I moved toward the LED wall and toward the image of my Welsh ancestral landscape, the screen surface began to function not as a backdrop but as a threshold (Figure 5). In my previous cinema work, I have explored the Welsh concept of Annwfn: a realm understood not as a separate afterlife but as an otherworld that exists alongside this one, a space of ancestral spatio-temporal connection and creative abundance.



Figure 5: The performer approaches the threshold of the LED screen.

In conversation with my mentor Gwylim Morus-Baird, I have learned the importance of restraint in depicting this world/otherworld relation in terms of literal portals or devices of transportation. Instead, I recognise the immanence of the otherworld, its presence beside

us rather than beyond a gate. And yet the VPV, with its luminous wall of images from another time, enabled a metaphorical understanding of this threshold that felt neither literal nor merely symbolic. As the camera moved with me toward the screen surface, and as I contacted the boundary between the physical set and the image-world, the mechanics of the apparatus - camera tracking and the transition from three-dimensional space to flat luminous surface made visible the very moment of crossing. This was also a fundamentally reflexive act.

The technology did not transport me to another world; it revealed my contact with the threshold itself (Figure 6). Here, Hohepa's observation about positional fluidity finds its technological expression: the LED surface is simultaneously *mua* and *muri*, in front and behind, depending on whether one considers the performer's body, the camera's eye, or the image-world that presses through from the other side.



Figure 6: Inversions of screen direction and performer orientation in Time Memory Presence.

In this sequence, inversions of screen direction and the performer's shifting orientation enact the principle of *ka mua*, *ka muri* through the reflexivity of the apparatus itself. Cecelia's metaphorical framework resonates at precisely this point. In the *ngatu* process, the *mahoa'a* (arrowroot glue) binds two layers of *tutu*, and the *kupesi* pattern presses through from behind to emerge on the surface that faces outward. The performer who enters this structure occupies a threshold — a membrane between worlds. In the VPV, both of us discovered this threshold condition from different directions: Cecelia through the material logic of Tongan practice, I through the reflexive mechanics of camera movement across the screen surface and the eternalist implications of *ka mua*, *ka muri* as a formal encounter with the co-presence of times.

Conclusion

Ngatu and ngatu making is significant to Tongan people in Tonga and in diaspora. It is a site of meaning that carries the stories and values of people and memory through its manufacture and cultural regeneration — not only in its daily use but also in its reimagining and contemporising to make meaning for people away from their ancestral homelands. Through virtual production, creative practitioners can engage with ngatu not only as cultural practice but as a living storyboard, where the virtual production space might further shape the language of screen-based media.

The VPV also revealed itself as something other than a simulation tool. Where the existing virtual production literature treats the LED wall as a means of seamless illusion, our experiments suggest that the seams themselves are where meaning resides. When the camera crosses the screen surface and the performer contacts the boundary between physical space and image-world, the technology ceases to conceal its own workings and instead exposes the positional logic that Hohepa identified in mua and muri: that front and behind are not fixed but relational, determined by where one stands and which way one faces.

Together, our experiments in Time Memory Presence suggest that the poetics of virtual production extend well beyond the efficiencies that dominate the current literature. For tangata tiriti artists engaging with the provocation of ka mua, ka muri, the VPV becomes a space where distinct cultural practices — Tongan ngatu-making and Welsh conceptions of Annwfn — each discover in the technology a capacity to hold multiple temporalities in a single moment of capture. There are plans to push these ideas further as interactive performative spaces, but the work already points toward a different understanding of what the LED wall is: not merely a screen but a threshold, where the performer occupies the boundary between worlds that are, in the logic of the proverb, already here.

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