



Shannon Te Ao *Ka mua, ka muri*

In his 1919 essay “Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny),” Sigmund Freud describes the unconscious experience of the uncanny as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.” In a more immediate register, the German word *unheimliche* translates to “unhomely.” There is a feeling of both the uncanny and unhomely in writing this review of Māori artist Shannon Te Ao’s “Ka mua, ka muri” from the psychological space born of the present pandemic, which has rendered all of us, to varying degrees, secluded and stationary. As a settler-colonial subject in relation to my chosen home, Canada, and a diasporic postcolonial subject in relation to my native India, I refer to Western psychoanalysis—my academic expertise—not to impose upon an Indigenous knowledge system, but rather to offer a parallel reading of two traditions that may inform one’s approach to Te Ao’s work. Combining text, sound, and moving image, “Ka mua, ka muri” explored the interplay of and tensions between history, memory, and the ephemeral and traumatic nature of both language and temporality.

In the larger of the two exhibition spaces was Te Ao’s two-channel video *Ka mua, ka muri* (2020), projected onto

two adjacent walls. Borrowing from the genre of the road-trip movie, the enigmatic black-and-white video is set to two songs performed by a pair of Māori sisters as they drive toward an unknown destination. The tone is somber, elegiac, as if the journey is being embarked upon “in the immediate wake of an unnamed tragic event,” Te Ao explained.

The work’s title derives from an important *whakatauki* (proverb) within the Māori belief system meaning “to walk backward into the future.” According to the exhibition pamphlet, the proverb “suggests time exists on a continuum where past, present, and future co-exist and are inherently tethered through ancestry and action.” There is a sense of the unhomeliness of time and space in the work, signified by the simultaneity of two effects: the indeterminate nature of the sisters’ journey, as well as the profound resonance between the implied trauma that informs the film’s timeline and our collective present. One wonders if the unspecified tragedy forced them on their mysterious sojourn. Yet the song lyrics, written by Te Ao in collaboration with artist Kurt Komene, convey a sense of hope and wonder that may be found in the traumatic event’s aftermath. As the sisters drive

through a desolate landscape, the soothing final words of the song—which translate to “It is dawn/It is dawn/Daylight emerges/In this world of life/ Crashing forth/To the large waves/The burgeoning waves which rest here”—lull us out of the feeling of foreboding; this hope in the present is brought to bear on the future to come.

If *Ka mua, ka muri* is about movement toward an unnamed destination, then *The pathway of my life is laid out, and traversed by the essential energy of many, many people* (2020) in the adjoining room appears to be about movement between and across linguistic terrains. The installation’s title—a line extracted from Te Ao’s poem “Taapapa,” co-written with Komene—was painted on adjacent walls, variously translated into English by Krissi Jerram and into Anishinaabimowin by Mawla Shawana; the latter is a nod to the Mississaugas of the New Credit Nation on whose unceded land the gallery sits. The normative understanding of translation is to think of it as a shift from an original (past) to a copy (present or future). Here, however, the past, present, and future of the text coexist in a kind of synchronized simultaneity where none of the versions are given a priori pride of place. The uncanniness here is that in each linguistic terrain, there is a tinge of the intimately familiar, of something both preserved and lost in the very gestural movement made possible by translation. It is as though the variations of the text, as they appear on the wall, literalize the flattening of time that is connoted in what it means to walk backwards into the future.

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SHANNON TE AO, *Ka mua, ka muri*, 2020, still from two-channel video: 5 min 30 sec. Courtesy the artist.

