
Radio Healer

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss our performance titled *Radio Healer*. This performance reflects upon the indigenous cultural implications of consumer technologies such as the Internet, mobile handheld devices, and personal computers, and how this relates to the effects of these technologies upon the lived experiences of all people. *Radio Healer* achieves this through the tactical appropriation and adaptive reuse of consumer technologies by indigenous peoples, along with the expression of indigenous media through sustainable cross-cultural partnerships between peoples of diverse backgrounds. The motivation of our collaborative work is to appropriate and express electronic technology in order to recognize the sovereign rights of indigenous peoples.

Keywords

Design, performance, theory, indigenous media, culturally sensible design, indigenous rhetorical sovereignty

ACM Classification Keywords

J.5. Arts and Humanities: Performing arts (e.g., dance, music). K.4.m. Computers and Society: Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design, performance, theory

Introduction

Radio Healer is created and performed through cross-cultural partnerships that include members from Native American nations, Chicano, Ilocano, Euro-American, and European backgrounds. Our work emerges from indigenous narratives for the recognition of the sovereign rights of indigenous peoples. While pulling from practices of indigenous cultural sovereignty (*the exercise of a group way of life or way of knowing*) and rhetorical sovereignty (*the control of meaning that includes law, pedagogy, and aesthetics*), we refer to the expression of our work as “techno-sovereignty” (*exercising indigenous media frameworks through culturally sensible and esoteric interpretations of technology that are consistent with given indigenous cultural perspectives*) [1][2]. Through this, we tell stories and create metaphors describing the dynamics of communities in the Southwestern, United States as diverse groups of people interface with each other on political, academic, and cultural levels. Inspired by indigenous media frameworks, we both innovate and practice culturally sensible electronic technology through ritualized and ceremonial forms of music and movement expression that are based upon connectivity and relationships between people while accounting for cultural and bioregional contexts (figure 1).



figure 1. This image is used to represent and promote indigenous media at the Connected Knowledge Conference by Stillwater, University of Maine.

The following is a quote to clarify the framework that we refer to as indigenous media. This framework is developed by Still Water for Network Art and Culture at the University of Maine and derives from indigenous knowledge systems.

“To study indigenous media is to study what it means to be and become indigenous, and how and why we would reclaim and protect our ecological “commons,” both bioregional and electronic.”

“Indigenous media practitioners explore new political strategies and tools, especially the power of networking like-minded communities for local/global actions and sharing of resources. Yet they also attempt to learn from the social, cultural and ecological practices of indigenous peoples, especially those in our own regions. Conversely, Indigenous media practitioners are often committed to helping indigenous people regain and protect their sovereign rights [3].”

We worked with Still Water for Network Art and Culture to interpret this framework as a study and practice of media technology to express, address, and support:

- Indigenous life
- Decolonization/social justice
- Cultural preservation
- Environmental sustainability
- Cross cultural partnerships
- Social and health issues

We have used this interpretation as a framework for the innovation of technology and expression of our cultural performance work through Radio Healer.

Rasquache as a Framework for Innovation

Part of our performance methodology is to adapt, and hack marketplace technologies through "circuit-bending" practices, and to develop new technologies through art-making traditions. Our context for this tradition is framed through Chicano rasquache forms of design and adaptive reuse by salvaging discarded materials and repurposing objects. The designs of our electronic cultural implements, such as our musical instruments, derive from rasquache cultural traditions that express and celebrate the resourcefulness of Chicano and other indigenous cultures. Indigenous traditions throughout the world demonstrate the adaptive reuse of foreign artifacts and discarded materials through designs based on creative improvisation. These cultural practices are implemented in communities to create functional and culturally sensible objects that demonstrate excellence in cultural sustainability by indigenous peoples.

The designs of these objects do not conform to the aesthetic values proposed by western knowledge systems, nor do their components function according to the original intent for their design. Through this purposeful expression of design, indigenous peoples exercise their cultural and rhetorical sovereignty in order to resist colonial assimilation [1]. This practice results in the design of implements that bear the gifts of difference that emerge through an indigenous cultural aesthetic. In the context of the indigenous knowledge systems that we utilize in *Radio Healer*, we consider our instruments to be living and sacred cultural implements that possess rich culturally symbolic and functional value. The instruments that we use in our performance were built by fostering a respectful synthesis between Western and Indigenous

Knowledge in areas of overlap existing between these knowledge sets. As part of this, we understand the differences between western and indigenous approaches to knowledge, and focus upon the decolonization of ourselves through our belief in the primacy of these systems as equals (figure 2). This is opposed to the historic colonial belief that Western knowledge is superior to indigenous knowledge.



figure 2. This *Radio Healer* musical instrument was created through Chicano Rasquache traditions.

Performance Goal and Description

Our performance goal is to develop an understanding and practice of indigenous knowledge systems through the performance and design of musical cultural implements through sustainable cross-cultural partnerships. This enables us (as ethnically diverse participants) to create negotiation spaces during performance that provide opportunities where we are able to identify the tensions as well as the areas where cross-cultural interface is possible. Within the domain of these negotiation spaces, we focus our knowledge, findings, and experiences upon the development of media and technology theories that are supported by our living Radio Healer examples. We believe that this form of “techno-cultural” understanding contributes to innovations for social justice and social change in communities and education. We believe this is vital to the health and promotion of our Southwestern, United States communities, as well as other communities abroad.

Radio Healer is a performance project that has existed in Metropolitan Phoenix, AZ for 9 years. It is performed by the art collective *Los Humanos*, who are comprised of a large multi-ethnic performance ensemble of musician-dancers and cultural practitioners. At the ACM CHI Media Showcase 2010, we are performing a 6 minute long music piece performed by three of our musicians. During this performance we intend to use an instrument score that includes one rasquache granular synthesizer built in the form of an arrow, an American Indian flute, and a composite instrument constructed of both a granular synthesizer and a double

chamber American Indian flute. For sound synthesis we employed the use of a creative commons Arduino synthesizer based upon granular synthesis techniques presented by *Tinker.it technology and design* [4]. The particular music that we are performing is structured for our performance at CHI and has not been presented before, however we have performed similar works through the project titled *Radio Healer*.

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Citations

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