

Elaine diFalco
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Professor Melinda Levin
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The Earth, its Peoples, and Developing Digital Cultures

Thomas Hayden was working as a videographer for Google's 360 StreetView project in 2007 when he decided to take the cameras to the Grand Canyon for the Skywalk Opening Media Day. A former rafting guide in the wildernesses of Alaska, Colorado, and Utah, he knew the ultimate place to bring a 360 camera was to the bottom of the canyon. It would take seven years before the technology would progress enough to make that dream feasible, but when he returned in 2014 to finally produce such spectacular imagery, he discovered the threat of a proposed development project called The Escalade, a commercial enterprise positioned at the Eastern Rim on Navajo Nation land. It would entail a tram that could taxi thousands of tourists every day all the way down to the Confluence, a sacred Navajo site where the Little Colorado River meets the Colorado River. Many people were fighting against it, inspiring Hayden to get involved and produce a documentary.¹

With support from Google, a Kickstarter campaign, and the team at 360 Labs, a production company Hayden co-founded, "*as it is*" is a 17-minute 360-cinema film that

¹ 360 Labs, "The Making of "*as it is*," (360 Labs, March 19, 2018), accessed December 8th, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gK7naJliTw>.

features not only breath-taking footage from the bottom of the Grand Canyon, but the stories of indigenous (and non-indigenous) peoples fighting to protect the Earth. By the nature of its serendipitous occurrence, this film is itself a confluence of humanity's relationship to the planet, the ethnographic features it captures, and how these elements manifest as a digital materiality on a frontier of technological innovation. This paper will explore the way these components combine and how they might suggest possible future directions for environmentalism, ethnography, and digital cultures.

Michael Wesch points out that anthropological inquiries into the significance of storytelling across cultures in the twenty-first century indicate that “[m]ovies have become modern myths,” and that if we are to extract valuable meaning from them, we might “adopt the core anthropological tools of communication, empathy, and thoughtfulness to open [...] up to the stories of others.”² Conventional approaches to anthropological field studies have sought to capture cultural phenomena using the scientific method. Early anthropologists and ethnographers were unconscious of how questions of reflexivity and authorship might affect the data until the field matured a little.³ Becoming aware of the nature of our own perception is not always a straightforward experience. Though some cultural differences may be easily recognized

² Michael Wesch, *The Art of Being Human: A Textbook for Cultural Anthropology*, (Manhattan, Kansas: New Prairie Press, 2018), 330 – 333.

³ Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film & Anthropology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 167-169.

such as aesthetic style or language, others are more difficult to identify until they illuminate the fact that some of our core beliefs and outlooks are the result of enculturation, and not universal principles that govern all human behavior.⁴ This is the sort of subtle but critical reflexive vigilance that is now required for any serious ethnographer.

Yet Hayden's film is not intended to serve as a reflexive ethnographic work though it captures an important moment in the ongoing story of the indigenous peoples of the American Southwest, as well as highlights the need for all of humanity to value not just the beauty, but the intrinsic sacredness of the Earth. While exhibiting the mutual interest in an important environmental cause, he is also respectful of the cultural significance and distinction of indigenous people. For example, in *The Making of "as it is"*, he stands at the confluence in the bottom of the canyon and explains, "This place is sacred to a number of people, to the Navajo, to the Hopi, but to all Americans as well. I can't wait to come back here with my grown two daughters and still have this place look just like this."⁵ In the documentary, it is the indigenous people who define how the canyon is sacred, but both Hayden and the indigenous peoples wish for the Grand Canyon to be preserved for future generations.

⁴ Michael Wesch, *The Art of Being Human: A Textbook for Cultural Anthropology*, (Manhattan, Kansas: New Prairie Press, 2018), 31-32.

⁵ 360 Labs, "The Making of "as it is"," (360 Labs, March 19, 2018), accessed December 8th, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gK7naJliTw>.

Featured in the film are not just Navajo community members, but Hopi and Zuni as well to represent the indigenous perspective as all have cultural connections to the confluence. Darrell Tso, President of the Nahata Dziil Commission Governance spoke not in favor of the Grand Canyon Escalade Project, but for the dire need to create jobs and an economy to address the extreme poverty of the Navajo due to the Bennett Freeze, a federal ban on any development - including basic maintenance to existing structures - that lasted over forty years and caused severe economic crisis for the Navajo population.

Elaboration on this counterpoint argument was not provided by former Navajo Nation President, Albert Hale, who initially was in negotiations with the Scottsdale developer, R. Lamar Whitmer, and other members of the Confluence Partners, LLC. The Grand Canyon Escalade Project promised to generate 3,500 jobs which would have helped to address the poverty of the Navajo in the wake of the Bennett Freeze.⁶ Rather, the film told the story from the perspective of protectors while not purporting to speak from an indigenous standpoint. Non-indigenous contributors in the film (all supporting the defense of the Grand Canyon and the sacred site of the confluence) are critical components of the story, and their testimonies bolster the film's positioning that the continued protection of the Grand Canyon is to honor the planet and respect the

⁶ Krista Allen, "B&F Rejects Legislation; on to Naabik'iyáti' Bodaway-Gap, Ariz.," (*Navajo Times*, December 10, 2020), accessed December 9th, 2020), <https://navajotimes.com/reznews/uphill-battle-escalade/>.

wisdom of those who have called it home since time out of mind. Their support ensures the film's focus is not one of ethnography, but of a cause that is of critical interest to anyone who values nature in its pristine state. However, it is the Hopi and Zuni who explain that their families meet at the confluence to pray together and give offerings, and it is the Navajo who explain that the confluence is made sacred because it is where their ancestors' spirits returned to the Mother Earth. Furthermore, it is Renae Yellowhorse, Navajo and spokesperson for Save the Confluence, a grassroots organization who explains that only eight percent of the profits would be shared across the entire Navajo Nation of 350,000 members. "That's like asking your whole household to share eight pennies," she states. Though not trained as an ethnographer or anthropologist, Hayden manages to provide a platform for a culturally sensitive cause. Wesch's suggestion to implement "anthropological tools of communication, empathy, and thoughtfulness to open [...] up to the stories of others" was seemingly employed instinctively, possibly as a result of his human predisposition to honor nature as it is.⁷

The representation of distinctive cultural identities was coincidental to this project and was not because they lack the ability or means to represent themselves. Though underrepresented in media, indigenous peoples are self-propelled and

⁷ Michael Wesch, *The Art of Being Human: A Textbook for Cultural Anthropology*, (Manhattan, Kansas: New Prairie Press, 2018), 330 – 333.

empowered visual storytellers, albeit without the powerful monetized platforms of mainstream media outlets. In 1976, ten years after Sol Worth and John Adair provided camera equipment to a group of Navajo students, giving them agency to generate their own images,⁸ Vision Maker Media was established as an organization that supports all indigenous filmmakers across the country with the mission to “empower and engage Native people to share stories [...e]nvisioning a world changed and healed by understanding Native stories and the public conversations they generate.”^{9 10}

Nonetheless, it is notable that “*as it is*” is a 360-cinematic depiction of an indigenous story as it foreshadows the incorporation of such technology into the purview of indigenous storytelling. In February of 2019, it was announced that virtual reality and coding courses will be a part of the Whitehorse High School curricula on the Navajo Nation reservation as a result of a partnership between a Colorado-based non-profit for at-risk youth and a couple of high-tech companies.¹¹ Such a program will empower Navajo youth with potentially lucrative, creative, and technologically

⁸ “Navajo Film Themselves: Giving Background to the 1966 Film Series,” Penn University Archives & Records Center, accessed December 9th, 2020, <https://www.penn.museum/sites/navajofilmthemselves/>.

⁹ “About,” Vision Maker Media, accessed December 10th, 2020, <https://visionmakermedia.org/about/>

¹⁰ [Note: *Vision Media Maker* is not a result of Adair and Worth.]

¹¹ Native Business Staff, “Virtual Reality & Coding Academy Coming to High School on Navajo Nation,” *Native Business*, February 1st, 2019, accessed December 10th, 2020, <https://www.nativebusinessmag.com/virtual-reality-coding-academy-coming-to-high-school-on-navajo-nation/>

advanced skills. However, the virtual reality industry is not just an industry existing in the digital domain; there has been a plethora of manufactured physical hardware, most notably in the form of expensive head-mounted displays that, due to the nascence of this tech-industry, are quickly rendered obsolete. This contributes to the wasteful generation of dangerous chemicals, metals, and plastics that will eventually make their way into landfills, which is antithetical to Navajo Earth-protecting values. Nonetheless, the possibilities of 360-cinema to innovate storytelling practices, the usefulness of virtual reality systems and haptics for military or industrial training simulations, as well as the profitable popularity of the gaming industry signifies the likelihood that immersive media will perpetuate the technology to continue to develop. Therefore, addressing the potential ecological impact of obsolete debris and creating appropriate applications of such digital material technologies are ethical necessities.

Today, ethnographers, designers, computer scientists, and anthropologists are instigating discussions about novel approaches to research, intervention, and design to work toward more sustainable solutions while much of the world's population evolves toward an increasingly digital culture mitigated by smart technologies. Joachim Halse, a Danish design anthropologist is interested in design that carefully considers how "people's dreams, hopes, and aspirations as well as [...] their fears and concerns is usually tightly linked with practical struggles to influence the world in ways that comply with these imaginings," and suggests "that the exploration of how imaginative horizons

can be given articulate but tentative form could be a welcome challenge for an anthropology that takes the imagination seriously.” In other words, he is interested in how human desires, fears, and ambitions provide insight to help anticipate and imagine potential designs. Importantly, his work also examines waste handling and how design anthropology can address issues of recycling and e waste.¹²

If anthropological design is to account for indigenous populations with values that differ from those who are designing and manufacturing both the physical and digital consumer products and services, then the work of Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall will be useful to the process. Building off of Faye Harrison’s *Decolonizing Anthropology* which identifies the hegemonic factors of traditional anthropology, Tunstall asserts that “design anthropology has great potential to become a decolonized methodology for engaging with social issues” and proposes principles stemming from specified human value systems, processes and products of those values, and how experiences reflect desired values.¹³

Surely, a desire to disconnect from digital materialities and plug into the direct energy of the Earth and the water at places like the confluence will be an imperative

¹² Joachim Halse, “Ethnographies of the Possible,” in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, edited by Wendy Gunn, Ton Otto, and Rachel Charlotte Smith, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Kindle Edition, downloaded from Amazon.com.

¹³ Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall, “Decolonizing Design Innovation: Design Anthropology, Critical Anthropology, and Indigenous Knowledge,” in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, edited by Wendy Gunn, Ton Otto, and Rachel Charlotte Smith, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Kindle Edition, downloaded from Amazon.com.

value that must be passed down through generations. Future designs will need to negotiate this as no head-mounted display can convey the experience of actually standing lightly and reverently on sacred ground. This process will not be easily navigated, and it would be naïve to believe it can reach stasis. It is a messy and complex venture.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it will be an enterprise in which humanity will collectively benefit from wisely choosing every step.

In summary, *“as it is”* is a film where humanity’s connection to the Earth, visual ethnography, and developing digital materialities meet. It facilitates discussions on where and how these three seemingly disparate subjects intersect and point to potential directions they may take, as the Earth steadily continues moving us all through space and time.

¹⁴ Sarah Pink, et al, *Digital Materialities: Design and Anthropology*, edited by Sarah Pink, Elisenda Ardèval, and Débora Lanzeni, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 14.

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