John Rieder, Roundtable talk, Creating Futures Rooted in Wonder closing session

Kamu gave us a couple of questions to respond to. The first was what reflections do we have after several days of fellowship, conversation, shared practice, and learning; the second was what vision do you feel this event has given birth to and what can we do to bring it to fruition.

So I want to begin with my reflections, and there’s a great deal to reflect on. At the workshop I was at this morning, conducted by Walidah Imarisha and Gabriel Teodros, they talked about “visionary fiction,” and one of the principles of visionary fiction was centering those who have been marginalized. I noticed that Alohalani used exactly the same locution towards the end of her talk. I think of that moment in “The Pa Boys” when City Boy jumps up and turns the map upside down and says, “No, you’ve got it all wrong, they turned our map upside down when one set of your ancestors colonized the other set.” So I am thinking about this turning upside down and centering the marginalized and challenging the center: one of the ways that happens is that you listen to people speak in other ways and in fact even in other languages. And we’ve heard a lot of people speak in several different languages during the symposium. I’m going to introduce a language that no one else has spoken here: “cogito ergo sum.” Rene Descartes said that a few hundred years ago, and a chorus of a few million other people should have jumped up and said, “Yes, Rene, you think and therefore exist, but the fact that you can say so means that we exist too.” Language is rooted in, or is a property of, communities. In fact it is the fundamental thing that makes human communities exist. We are language creatures. Ants have a community where they tell one another where they have been and where they are going by laying down pheromone trails. We’re not that different from ants except that our trails are semiologically a great deal more sophisticated and complex than pheromone trails. Our language and sign-making and understanding abilities bind us together. This is the fundamental thing that makes storytelling central. There is a tendency sometimes to say, well, stories are just stories, you guys off in the academy that think about stories are not in the real world, where we manipulate money and machines. My response to that is to say that storytelling is really the center of community; and community is what it’s all about, not profits or progress.

I want to come back to a couple of other things I’ve heard during the symposium. Solomon Enos said during his workshop, “We need to give things away so we can learn how to hold them again.” I love that, I thought that was such a great way to put it. That’s really very much in the spirit of what we’ve been trying to build here. It’s not about owning it, it’s about giving it away so that we can hold it. It is in sharing, it is in listening to one another, that we hold onto tradition.

And I think genres are very much about listening. The title of the symposium is “Building Bridges between Indigenous Studies, Science Fiction Studies, and Fairy Tale Studies.” These are not exactly the centers of power within the academic community. -- That’s what we’re trying to overturn too, right? -- These genres, fairy tales and science fiction, are very much not just ways of telling stories but also ways of listening, attitudes. Situations of address always include addressees, and narrators always have to have
narratees. Even Rene Descartes, who was his own narrator and narratee at the same time, had those two parts to his discourse. So the vision I have about continuing what we’ve started into the future is about sustaining a conversation that’s been begun here. The “bridges” are metaphors for conversations. it’s really about keeping those conversations going, and realizing—trying to make real, make effective—the centrality of storytelling and communication.

I’m going to quote Solomon one more time. He used the Hawaiian proverb, “I ka wā mua, ka wā ma hope.” In the past lies the future. What lies in front of your face is what is behind your back, is another way to say that. What’s at your back is the future in the Hawaiian way of thinking. That’s another turning upside down or reversal of the Western way of thinking about it, an illuminating way I think. The point is that progress, the Western notion that everything has got to keep getting bigger and bigger and better, may not be a very good way to think about temporality and the world. This attitude of making the past your instructor and leader is very much a way of looking into the future, and maybe of finding a way to make our future’s direction not lead to universal death and destruction, as contemporary capitalism seems so determined to do.