

The Weapons We Become

By

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Abstract

The Weapons We Become speaks to the disconnect in expressions of identity in between digital space and the real. This series consists of coiled, burnished, and smoke-fired vessels and figures that include fiber aspects to weave an exploration of the identities or personas expressed in spaces that are often hostile to IBPoC and queer peoples. All too often we are subjected to bigotry, hate and exclusion, leading to the expectation that we embody a warrior persona who always is ready and emotionally available to defend our right to occupy space and face off against all antagonism. This unreasonable expectation that marginalized people have an infinite well of emotional fortitude is imposed, unwelcome and yet still somehow almost universally practiced. Many IBPoC, Queer people and allies are choosing to embody the digital warrior by carving out spaces in hopes of existing peacefully, refusing to allow shared spaces to ignore or omit them and thereby asserting their intention to thrive. Others can choose other options. It is here that the perceived anonymity of digital spaces acts as a double-edged blade; in digital space, everyone is the default until they state otherwise. “There are no girls on the internet” is a common meme from the early internet days that clearly reflects the erroneous assumption that everyone online is a cis white male from the US unless they specify otherwise. This defacto assumption simultaneously erases all other ethnicities, genders and sexualities, as well as contributing to an environment where internet users often choose to not disclose, or even invent whole identities, when interacting online for their own safety. Jose Muñoz’s disidentification theory describes this identity/non-identity as a subversionary survival strategy used by non-majority peoples in the real; I am exploring disidentification theory as it can be expressed in the digital world. This digital space was created with the noble intent of an existence beyond and without the baggage of real-world concerns like race, ethnicity, and economic standing. Unfortunately, it has had the unintended consequence having developed a default persona mirroring those of its known creators. The corner stone of digital spaces is built upon this foundation of the status quo, and while efforts continue to retrofit the system to accommodate the variety of human experiences, there continues to be an abundance of spaces where the development of alternate identities has become a safer means of participating. This multiplicity of digital identities goes beyond the ‘code switching’ found in non-digital life where language use changes in relation to those of other cultural norms. Instead, what we find is actors crafting personas that neither agree with or overtly oppose the majority but use majority cultural signifiers to subvert and expose the systemic exclusionary nature of systems, shrouded in costumed identity.

Choose your skins, choose your weapons.

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Chapter 1; Introduction

Throughout my artistic explorations, I have endeavoured to carve out a place for the reclaimed traditions of both my Afro- Caribbean and Indigenous heritage, including the use of low fire ceramics, slips and burnished surfaces instead of glazes, and both African and Indigenous firing traditions. I have explored techniques with elders and practitioners in South Africa and the American Southwest. I have made a point of learning traditions from elders in as similar a manner as they would teach family. This effort of direct learning allows me to bridge the generations of broken traditional knowledge. I can teach people of Indigenous descent or of the African diaspora and honestly say “this is how it was taught to me, and now I pass this knowledge to you,” This intergenerational experience of sharing tradition, and how that tradition is used to interpret and comment on the present, past and future is an aspect of traditional culture for which I am honoured to contribute. The Weapons We Become is no different. This series, whose title references the Novel *The City We Became* by NK Jemisin, bridges my attachment to traditional technologies, my training in western institutions, my interests in speculative fiction, my experiences with digital spaces and lastly, my investigations into the weaponizations of identity. I have chosen to explore these avenues of interest through the lens of reclaimed tradition, Afro/Indigi-futurist aesthetic and the theoretical framework of Disidentification strategies adopted by minority people in overwhelming majority systems designed to homogenize.

Chapter 2: Theory Technology and the other

The contributions of the Other in the creation of the technology we enjoy has somehow been coded as white male technology. Cyberspace itself is built on the work of black women who worked as early computers¹ and software engineers, as well as Navajo women who were the manufacturers of early electronic components. (Nakamura 921) Even though both groups were foundational to the rise of digital culture today, it is generally seen as white male skills and accomplishments. They, like so many other aspects of digital culture, have been coded as white and male. Online identity has always been interwoven with the concept of whiteness, maleness, and privilege to the point that they have become synonymous with the default, the raceless, the genderless digital identity. “... Whiteness is what technology

¹ Computers were people whose job it was to do complex calculations for people in different fields.

does to the Other, not the technology users themselves. The visibility of online Blackness can be partially attributed to the concentration of Black folk in online spaces that are not exclusively our own: we are finally present online in ways that the mainstream is unable to disavow.” (Brock 288)

Brocks’ insight into the perceived whiteness of technology and rise in black visibility in digital spaces is, if anything, too narrow in its scope. Not only are Black people more visible, so too are women, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities. All face the same challenge: how to exist in digital spaces outside the default as the “Other” There are a variety of methods employed to navigate digital spaces. One option is to defy convention and fight for the right to inhabit those spaces authentically. ‘Others’ are often expected to disrupt the default narrative, opening themselves to the vulnerability and hostility of being ‘Other’. Another strategy is to cordon off spaces left over and remake them as our own, quarantined from majority eyes within a majority system. Still another strategy exists liminally, in which the actor exists as a part of the majority while subverting and exposing its limitations. These strategies are not limited to digital spaces; so many aspects of our current capitalistic society, intentional or not, are built on a foundation of exclusionary, heteropatriarchal and hierarchical values endemic of colonized spaces, which includes digital space.

While I can only speak to the questions that apply to my own circumstance, I cannot help but notice what exists beyond my scope as well. I am wondering about the expression of race, gender, sex, and economics in a system that was designed to erase all those formative elements of identity and replace them with the default character. There is a perceived anonymity of the system that simultaneously erases all ethnicities, genders, and sexualities, as well as allows for internet users to not disclose, or to hide behind the default. There are many reasons why one could seek out the cloak of default identity. Jose Muñoz coined the term “disidentification” as a descriptor of the survival strategies minority peoples practice negotiating the public spheres of the majority. In order to cope with their social erasure or persecution for their existence outside the elusive norm, minorities often re-code majority cultural contexts to both expose its exclusionary nature and reframe them in a manner that includes and empowers the minority identities. Disidentification uses the framework for the exclusionary cultural practices to both confront and subvert. (J. E. Munoz 20) This practice exists in a liminal space of resistance that neither opts to assimilate within a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on, yet against, dominant ideology. Muñoz’s work resonates on several levels; by considering the ease and relative safety of being considered the default in digital spaces, there is the ability to confront and disrupt the exclusionary practices of the digital realms without the automatic dismissal or

hostility the 'Other' often receives. As with the characterizations of videogame culture, in digital spaces you can, *choose your skins, choose your weapons.*

The second resonance of Muñoz's theories relates to the role of Afro/Indigenous futurisms found in speculative fiction. Speculative Fiction describes both the aesthetic and the lens through which I have been conducting this exploration. Myth, legend, and magic are often explored, paving the way for the inclusion of different kinds of stories into a broader inquiry into 'what if' than science fiction proper permits. Broadening our conception of things that really could happen, without being beholden to aliens or technology, speculative fiction can speculate upon what could have happened, what might happen, or posits that what happens in one context might also apply to another. With Afro/NDN futurisms, we can see the exclusionary practices and their subversions of majority culture plainly, just as Muñoz describes in his writings.

Chapter 3: Selected Futurisms in Art and Literature.

An example of futurisms in visual art are the sculptural works of Donté Hayes, which explore the African Diaspora of the US, the Caribbean and South America. He considers the relationship between history, sociopolitical-issues, symbols, expression, and science fiction by referencing coded imagery. The pineapple, for example, was a symbol of wealth and prosperity among colonial oppressors; Hayes now uses that same symbol to signify the abuse, broken families and subjugation of those enslaved. Hayes uses one symbol to communicate this disparity of experience and posit the ways in which these symbols have permeated our culture and passed the torch of subjugation from one people to another, while keeping the baggage intact for the viewer to parse out. (Lotenschtein 1)

In another example, Rose B. Simpson subverts concepts of time and causality. Simpson creates work intended to heal or confront post-colonial damage. Her Warriors series arose from the intense protectiveness that manifested after considering the objectification, stereotyping, and disempowerment she has encountered; her fantastical mystical warrior selves act as protector and champion for not only herself but her whole community, past, present and future, existing in all times simultaneously. Her use of Indigenous interpretations of time causality in her work takes the rigidity of the colonially imposed concept of time, acknowledges it and then disregards it as irrelevant. (R. B. Simpson 1) Disidentification here takes the concepts that have been co-opted by the majority, and recontextualizes them in a manner that makes the common alien to majority consumers.

The speculative fiction works of NK Jemisin & Octavia E. Butler exemplify how ‘Othered’ persons have used disidentification to confront, subvert and expose the limitations our society has placed upon itself through its commitment to the importance of the Default character as paramount. Butler’s ‘Parable of the Sower’ series has proved almost prescient, predicting a fascist demagogue’s ascent to the power in the USA using religious beliefs and ethnic scapegoats to further his dangerous rhetoric. Jemisin’s stories examine the interplay of race, sexuality and gender in various fantastic futures or alternate universes, exposing the flaws and limitations of our own. Futurism (Afro, NDN, Indigi, Arab etc.) movements combine underrepresented cultures with technology obliterating the implied Whiteness of tech and most importantly, designs a place in the future for those who have been ‘Othered’, something that has been traditionally neglected within science fiction imaginings. Futurism explores creating a place for oneself in the time, replete with one’s culture, stories, and ideals—these lie at the core and inform the aesthetic for these artists’ explorations. They engage through the sharing of tradition, using that tradition to interpret and comment on the present, past and future history, in a manner that allows for new interpretation of new stories.

Virgil Ortiz’s *Revolution 1680-2180* explores the Pueblo revolts of 1680 CE. The series of works in *Revolution* reinterprets historic events as a continual battle beginning in 1680 and continuing into a post apocalyptic future with repeated versions of historic figures and heroes (King 15). Again, we can see the manipulation of time, but Ortiz goes further still: his heroes exist and battle simultaneously in different times, same altercation, same people, different settings. Additionally, Ortiz series straddles media, existing in ceramic, fashion and film. Same story, same battle, same characters existing beyond western concepts of time and again beyond constraints of media. The entirety of Ortiz’s series exists to share the stories of his people intergenerationally both modifying and adhering to the traditions unique to the Cochiti people and the indigenization of the causality of time.

Rajni Perera explores ancestors, futurism and monsters in a seamless integration of her traditional stories and the instability experienced by immigrants arriving at a new land into their work. They are addressing what is essentially the lack of a space to prosper in their ethnic or cultural skin outside that of the default western, cis, straight, male paradigm. The agenda of default is reassessed exposing the experience of the ‘Other’, combatting oppression through its exposure as monstrous figures referenced through Sri Lankan folklore. This forces us to question what can be accomplished when we include the entirety of human experience into our concept of what is right and good instead of just a miniscule section of one breadth of experience.



Fig 1. *Backlash*- 2022-PJ Anderson- Master thesis exhibition *The Weapons We Become*. Image credit to PJ Anderson

Theorist Lisa Nakamura specializes in explorations of Gender, Sexual, and Racial expression within the digital field. Nakamura explores how these digital spaces; social media, gaming, forums etc. are experienced by people of colour, women and GRSD (gender, romantic and sexually diverse). Her research into those spaces has exposed the racism, sexism, white supremacy, and the ongoing attacks of those who do not fit into the cis/white/male paradigm. In ‘The Unwanted Labour of Social Media: Women of Colour Call Out Culture as Venture Community Management.’ Nakamura presents ‘the moderator’ as another aspect of the white coding of technology and the consequences of breaking the ‘code’. Crucial free labour used by digital platforms to police content is disproportionately allocated by not only women of colour, but members of

the GRSD community, contradicting the perceived ‘cis white maleness’ of those technologies. Those volunteering time as social moderators and social content creators are often exposed to real personal risks, doxing² or death threats among them. The battles for the right to exist in digital spaces, particularly Twitter, YouTube, or any other social media site, are a worryingly common experience, but the real emotional labour and impact of those battles are excessively minimized. ‘They can just go offline’ is one of the most common phrases when discussing the treatment and harassment of women, IBPoC and the GRSD online, without considering the enormity of the impact of the digital on everyday life. “... instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology or attempting to uselessly break free of its inescapable sphere, this working on and against digital default culture there is a strategy that

² The search for and publishing of private and identifying information for malicious purposes.

tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.” (J. E. Munoz 11)

Offline is no longer an option; if you want to exist as a reflection of your actual identity, you will have to deal with the racism, sexism and homo/trans phobia inherent in these spaces. Again, the strategies of Muñoz’s disidentification come to the fore, the everyday struggles of resistance.

Chapter 4: Master Thesis Exhibition

I chose to focus on the weaponization of identity. This series focuses on the role of disguise and obscuration in the navigation of digital spaces. My main figure in this series has the working title of ‘Backlash’. Originally, this figure felt sinister and oppositional. However, now I see ‘Backlash’ as one of the most subversive of identities by taking the concept of the video game hero and making that figure the fulcrum of warrior energy and obscuration. It is constructed of clay and sisal, the antithesis of durability, and yet Backlash is both a cloak to disguise one’s identity, and the weapon used while engaging within digital spaces. It protects the wearer from direct engagement, using the very code of exclusion endemic within the gaming industry as a shield. The addition of wings to the figure reference both a cloak that protects the figure as well as references the Thunderbird. Backlash takes the whiteness and maleness of the gaming industry’s default characters and infuses it with blackness, indigeneity, and femininity. It is here that my adherence to the role of traditional culturally contextualized ceramic production merges with the theory of digital spaces. The perceived primitivism of traditional cultures is here used to comment on the perceived superiority of majority culture. The construction and firing traditions of both my ancestral peoples, are associated with the feminine and primitive. To this day traditional firings are called ‘primitive firings’ in many western institutions. I can’t help but wonder if part of that superiority stems from the technology involved in the practices that are held and transmitted by women in addition to the colonial lens. Refusing to associate these traditions with being less, I instead use them to reframe majority interpretations of themselves.

I am exploring six other aspects of digital identities, other selves, or fragments of selves in digital spaces. Drawing from the writing of Nakamura, Butler, Jemisin and the theoretical insight of Muñoz, I am constructing the physical manifestations of the facets of identity created and expressed in digital spaces in vessel informed pieces. There are seven pieces total, referencing the multiple ways the Indigenous peoples of Manitoba include the number into their cultural beliefs and Sacred teachings, the seven stages of being and the seventh-generation principal, where

the goal of all plans should still positively affect those in seven generations. In Jemisin's 2020 novel "The City We Became", the central characters manifest as the Avatars of the borough of the City of New York, as the pieces of this series manifest the facets of identity expressed as avatars in digital space. Where New York achieves sentience through its Avatars, one of the avatars loses aspects of their former lives through the embodiment of their borough, as New Yorkers often lose aspects of self to acclimatize to the city. In very much the same way, my series is exploring the aspects of self that are lost or compartmentalized in order to safely engage within digital spaces. While each of the five (six) boroughs of New York is represented in the Novel, there is an overarching figure that represents the city as a whole, New York Itself, making seven people to represent one city. I am /was intrigued at the idea where avatars or aspects can exist both individually and as part of a whole that is in itself a fully actualized individual. It is through that concept of each individual piece as a whole and entire self while simultaneously existing as part of the central figure who is also whole and complete. These pieces are placed to radiate from the center, but are facing inwards to reflect upon themselves, interrupted only by the viewers captured gaze in the reflective surfaces of the mirror additions scattered throughout the series.



Fig 2-Past Future Tense-2022-PJ

Anderson. Master thesis exhibition *The Weapons We Become*. Image credit to PJ Anderson

One piece I've named 'Past Future Tense'. It is a traditionally coiled and burnished vessel that follows the model used by many of my peoples in ceramic production in that it was traditionally fired using cow dung, tall grasses, and minimal wood. The form references an exaggerated flared rim often seen in historic examples of both African and North American Indigenous Ceramics. While conforming to neither cannon it references both, so too with the surface. A lightly burnished surface embellished with reflective disk elements bridges the history, the importance of circular imagery in referencing time and the connection between the creator and the viewer. This vessel speaks to history, tradition, and the ongoing process of reclaimed identity through direct cultural learning – a stream of direct knowledge that cannot fully be understood outside a specific cultural context. I am comparing that specific cultural context with the digital sphere, where the imposition of another cultural context, the overarching 'Default Majority' setting, states that you can have your own, but to be here you must also fully enmesh with ours "Disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ of racial, sexual, and

national subjugation. These routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful. Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence.” (J. E. Munoz 161) Small bubbles of cultural property can exist uneasily between the spaces of the overarching and oppressive dominion of the Majority, but the lingua franca is theirs. The choice those of us who are Othered are given is to teach and learn your own culture in their language, using their reference points and values. Then you do, because you have no other choice. Your voice is already gone.



Fig 3-Breathe- 2022- PJ

Anderson. Master thesis exhibition *The Weapons We Become*. Image credit to PJ Anderson

‘Breathe’ is shrouded behind a breathing mask, as so many of us have been over the past two years. The mask refers to the shrouding or hiding of the self, which the pandemic has allowed us to express in the real. We are now able to carry some of that perceived anonymity of digital spaces into the real-world with many of the same consequences to some degree. With ‘Breathe’ the wearer has hidden a major aspect of identity, their face, but revels in the cultural association with the rich hair expression in black communities. The mask brings not only global pandemics, of which we are achingly familiar at this point, but speaks to the type of world in which it was created, there is no possibility the global lockdown and subsequent reliance on pre-existing digital

architecture would not factor into how we perceived and contributed to the events of the past several years. This piece considers the carrying of cultural signifiers into digital spaces, circumventing the anonymity and reveling in the spaces quarantined from the majority. ‘Choose’ a green vessel inspired form, reflects on the multiplicity of online spaces and varying selves that one can express simultaneously through digital interfaces. It is a highly decorative piece, embellished with weaponized jewels and coiled paper. ‘Choose’ explores the adornments or layers one can place as camouflage between the self and the interactions with others through digital media. From the camo-like colouration to the reflective faceplates of each of the four helmeted personas to the weaponized beads that express in no uncertain terms the underlying threat of too closely engaging.

‘Ambit’ a white vessel form, references the compass. The historic importance of the tool in the charting and the partition of already occupied lands acts similarly to the Musk’s and Zuckerberg’s of the digital world; claiming discovery and invention when at best they marketed what was created and nurtured by someone else. Gears and knobs imply a romanticized notion of archaic technology, while the surface is modeled to suggest rusted metal plating reminiscent of the old Ironclad ships of the late 19th century that distinguished themselves during the American Civil war. The Ironclad era spelled the end of the wooden warship as well as a period of technological innovation that led to their being obsolete almost as soon as they were built. The keyboard beads draped around the vessel reference the similarity of the transition from wood to iron with the transition from analogue to digital. The astounding development of change leaves little room for reflection of the advantages and disadvantages of each level of innovation. ‘Ambit’ looks to the concept of *Manifest Destiny*, the 19th century doctrine that intones a justifiable and inevitability of American expansion into the American West can now be seen expanding into the digital. This “Western’ identity that exists as default, lays claim on innovation, concerns itself with the next big thing, ignores the implication of the current thing and brand itself as the only reasonable path forwards.



Fig 4-Choose 2022-PJ Anderson. Master thesis exhibition *The Weapons We Become*. Image credit to PJ Anderson



Fig 5-Ambit 2022-PJ Anderson. Master thesis exhibition *The Weapons We Become*. Image credit to PJ Anderson

While ‘Glyphic’ another vessel, combines keyboards and traditional ceramic practice with weaponized bead embellishments that are referenced throughout the series. The beads, worn by several pieces, reference the value and prevalence of this traditional craft that was deemed acceptable and tradeable by colonial aesthetics. While other aspects of traditional material culture that were not recognized as worthy, fell out of practice or were banned outright. This piece raises the question of what aspects of culture and self are currently respected as worthy and unworthy? And so those aspects follow into our everyday digital lives or are they relegated to the home or expressed in secret. Keep in mind that it was only just in

2021 that Indigenous Canadians were allowed to use Indigenous names, in their own language on legal documents.

'Password' draws deeply from the vessel form, while referencing the ambivalence of the relationship between



Fig 6-Glyphic 2022-PJ

Anderson. Master thesis exhibition *The Weapons We Become*. Image credit to PJ

Anderson

digital culture as experienced by the 'Othered' as well as the traditionally inspired fabrication and surface. The ability to straddle identity is not without its challenges. As Muñoz claims, "sometimes Disidentification is insufficient" (J. E. Munoz 162). Even an expressed 'neutral' identity is coded as acquiescence to majority culture; using that culture to revel in your own is a difficult but often necessary path for those who are Othered. Often there are few if any means to express your own stories without the lexicon of the majority. The 'pass' in

password in this instance is a very loaded term; it includes the loss of the language to describe or engage with your own culture.

I have used reflective imagery that repeats throughout the vessels and the

room, not always in the forefront, but always present. I want viewers to always see and recognize themselves in its face. I am inviting every viewer to see themselves in every piece, as actor, as contributor, as co-conspirator. "Choose your skins and choose your weapons."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

These works consist of snippets of identity not only as expressed in digital spaces but in the real as well. This series has bridged traditional technologies, western academia, science fiction and futurisms and digital expressions of identity including the weaponizations of that identity. Through the works of Munoz and Nakamura we can see documented proof at how differently the experience of Digital spaces are very different for those of us who exist within the minority. Every interaction in digital spaces as well as those in the real need to be considered. How much of my



Fig 7-Password 2022-PJ Anderson. Master thesis exhibition *The Weapons We Become*. Image credit to PJ Anderson

ethnic and cultural self can I include and still be seen as contributing something of value? Digital spaces are not safer for IBPoC or those who identify as queer. The weaponization of identity continues to transcend media. I do not feel that this exploration is finished...in all probability it never will be. This series exists in hybridities, in between ethnicities, cultures, languages, sexualities and media and so affords no shortage of research avenues. Nor am I finished with reclamation, commentary and interpretation that connects me with both Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean parts of my identity. Weaponizations remain an important tool in my arsenal. There are many avenues of exploration into the weapons we become.



Fig 8 Wide View-2022-PJ Anderson- Master Thesis Exhibition; The Weapons We Become Courtesy of Grace Nickel

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