

“Bridging Gaps: Exploration of the Themes of Gender and Sexuality  
by Cochiti Pueblo Artist Virgil Ortiz”

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## **Personal Piece**

*"The Pueblo Revolt – the First American Revolution - had never been taught in American schools nor is it in our history books. My mission is, and has been for nearly two decades, to continue to create a narrative of the revolt by utilizing the various mediums I work with, and make it more interesting and relevant to the next generation. It reflects the impact I want to have on the world around me through art and education."- Virgil Ortiz*

This quote from Virgil is one of my favorites because I believe it represents two dominant themes we see being portrayed throughout his work time and time again: Strength and Resistance, which are critical to an Indigenous way of being and they are certainly represented within Virgil's art and Virgil himself. I was attracted to Virgil's work for a variety of reasons. I first met Virgil at a reception for Native American/Indigenous Students and Faculty. At this reception we were all given the time to get to know Virgil and to learn about his artwork. Virgil was amazingly kind and generous with his time making sure to give each person at the event his attention. When he came to meet the students, he notified us about his open studio hours and invited us into the home where he was staying during his residency for a home-cooked meal. I and several other students were able to attend and have one on one time with Virgil and Rob, another artist who was helping Virgil. During that dinner I learned a lot about Virgil and his background. He showed us his unique brand of hospitality while simultaneously giving us the opportunity to be vulnerable and connect with him as individuals. I knew then that Virgil was one of the most kind-hearted people I had ever met and that by knowing him I would learn and grow as a person.

After speaking to Virgil, I realized that another way to get to know him would be getting to know his art, and the story of his connection to the art. In a presentation Virgil gave for a Southwest Studies class, he explained his background as an artist: his family is one of the few left at Cochiti Pueblo that still practices the traditional pottery making. Virgil learned the practice

at a young age. Virgil's female relatives were a big part of his education teaching him more than the art of crafting clay. They taught him respect for his people's traditions, an Indigenous worldview, respect for all creations, and perhaps most importantly, the value of continuing these teachings and making them more accessible to the next generations. Learning all of this about Virgil made me respect him more and it gave me a deeper understanding of how beautiful and meaningful his artwork truly is. It is not something that should be admired for its purely aesthetic beauty, but rather for the story it tells, and the ways in which art is able to build bridges in an accessible format for all people.

For example, as an Indigenous/Chicana woman I was able to find many connections and inspirations in Virgil, and his artwork. During one of Virgil's open studio sessions, I was able to do some painting on his character Translator. When I first started painting, I had no idea what the final image would look like - I was simply following Virgil's directions. I could feel the power radiating from the image even though it was unfinished. This feeling let me know that Translator was much more than a painting. They have their own power and influence. After a bit of painting, Virgil showed me a picture of what the finished product would look like. I was simply in awe. Virgil explained that the reason we were working on Translator first was that it is was crucial for Translator to be the first part of the exhibit that was finished. My understanding of Translator in this moment was huge because I realized the impact that taking part in his studio hours had on me. Translator was a gender queer omniscient being tasked with telling the story of the Pueblo Revolt. In that moment I realized that I was now a part of and invested in that story as well. As a woman who identifies as Gay, I found power in the knowledge that the story teller was also queer. I had the rare opportunity of finding not only a character that reflected part of my racial identity, but also a character that represented aspects of my queer personality. Seeing this

representation motivated and encouraged me to learn more about sexuality and gender representations within pre-colonial Native America and the ways in which their stories have been shared and told. I believe that by sharing the knowledge of these stories and the ways in which they connect to Virgil's work will help general audiences and experts alike understand the full impact and breadth of Virgil's work. Further, his work reveals the amazing hope and revitalization Virgil has brought to past, present, and future Indigenous peoples.

### **Story of the Revolution**

Virgil Ortiz's exhibition *Revolution — Rise Against the Invasion*, was on view at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College through January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and is part of the artist's epic story arc, *Revolt 1680/2180*, a mash-up of Puebloan history interpreted with sci-fi fantasy iconography which is relatable to Native and non-Native youth alike (See Fig.1.). According to Ortiz's website, the storyline begins more than 300 years ago when the Spanish colonized the American Southwest. Ortiz transports the viewer forward in time to 2180 and envisions a resolution of the troubling history that restores balance to the multiple cultures that now call New Mexico home. The lead characters are Po'Pay, the real-life leader of the Pueblo Revolt, and Tahu, the imagined female leader. There's also the Spirit World Army, comprised of groups of warriors representing the pueblos involved in the revolt.

The beautiful, evocative Tahu reflects the strength, power, and resilience of the Pueblo women. "Tahu is purposely blinded by the oppressors for her combat prowess. She recruits a 'spirit army' and relentlessly battles the enemy [the colonial oppressors]. Tahu is a Pueblo superhero. Her example leads young people to seek the truth and defeat their fear. Tahu is inspired by and honors Pueblo women, including my late mother. Women keep the stories of our people, our traditions, and ceremonies alive. Our mothers teach us to face adversity with a

positive outlook. We have endured because we face our fears, both real and imagined.” Ortiz writes this description for Tahu on his website.

*Revolution’s* theme is one of justice and reversing the oppression of the Puebloan world by the Spanish occupation. Ortiz’s spirit warriors are rendered in stark black-and-white, sparingly punctuated with vivid color. An AI automaton army of animals representing the mule deer, antelope, and ram recalls Cochiti ceremonies and dance. The denouement of the story arc is seen in Tahu, who clenches a deep red rose between her crimson lips, symbolizing the beauty of living in peace. “Learning to coexist is how we move forward,” Ortiz says. “It represents getting color back in our lives.”<sup>1</sup>I believe that Virgil is showing us that Tahu is going to be a part of the bridge he is building, and she is going to be the one who the story depends on. We see in Virgil’s own words that Tahu is life, life in a balanced and harmonious way. Without Tahu the story would be incomplete.

### **Bridging Gaps**

Virgil Ortiz is an amazingly talented artist, man, and story teller. Through the different mediums of Virgil’s art, we see the story of the Pueblo people and the Pueblo revolt of 1680 start to unfold. We see that the story is being told through many lenses, but I argue that the most important thing that Virgil does with his artwork is building a bridge. Virgil Ortiz's retelling of the Pueblo Revolt serves as a bridge through which he uses characters like Translator to center

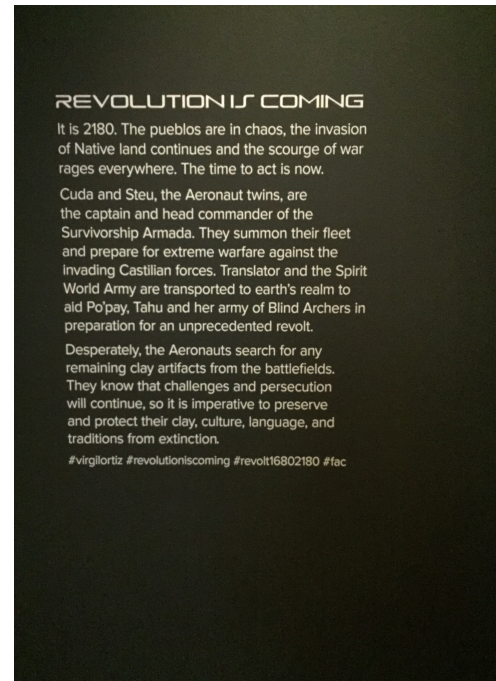


Figure 1: Description of ReVOLUTION Exhibition

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<sup>1</sup> Story of The Exhibit Revolution copied from Virgil Ortiz’s Website: Welcome to the Revolt 1680/2180.

on Indigenous histories, methods, and knowledge. Virgil's artwork pushes back against the story that America's first revolution happened in 1775, and instead shows us that American revolution has gone on long before American collective memory. We are forced to ask ourselves what it means to be American and does identifying as an American mean that you have to be separate from all other identities? Virgil's bridge is representative of this liminal space where viewers of the exhibit are prompted to answer these questions, and where they are prompted to realize that so called "historical facts" aren't as objective as they seem to be. Virgil's work not only questions the dominant framework of American history, but further reconceptualizes what American history is, and gives us a whole new framework that is based off Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous methods, and Indigenous practices. As viewers of this exhibit we are forced to broaden our minds and to consider from which viewpoint American history is being told from. The exhibit is so important because it teaches people to question the knowledge they have been given, and hopefully it teaches people to be more mindful of their own biases when they are interacting with people outside of their own culture or the dominant culture.

### **Translator**

One piece of Virgil's artwork that I believe is representative of the bridge that Virgil is building between Indigenous traditions of storytelling and the white dominant narrative of history is the artwork titled Translator. Translator is omnipotent and omniscient<sup>2</sup> androgynous being who is telling the story of the revolt of 1680 and connecting it with the future of 2180. The painting is positioned as the first artwork you see when you walk into the exhibit and it is the

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<sup>2</sup> All knowing being. A being that is all powerful and able to use their knowledge. They are not limited to narrating the story. Translator is able to guide Tahu and other characters in Revolt 1680/2180.

only 2D piece that is located in the first room of the exhibit (See Fig.2.). Translator is composed of various lines and shapes that make a face with a rather serious expression. When I saw the painting for the first time as a whole, I found it really difficult to pick out specific details about the painting because of how real the image is.

Translator seems to be looking at and watching you just as much as you are examining them. That lifelike quality and ability for the painting to speak for themselves is what made me want to examine



Figure 2: Translator, First Room, ReVolution Exhibition

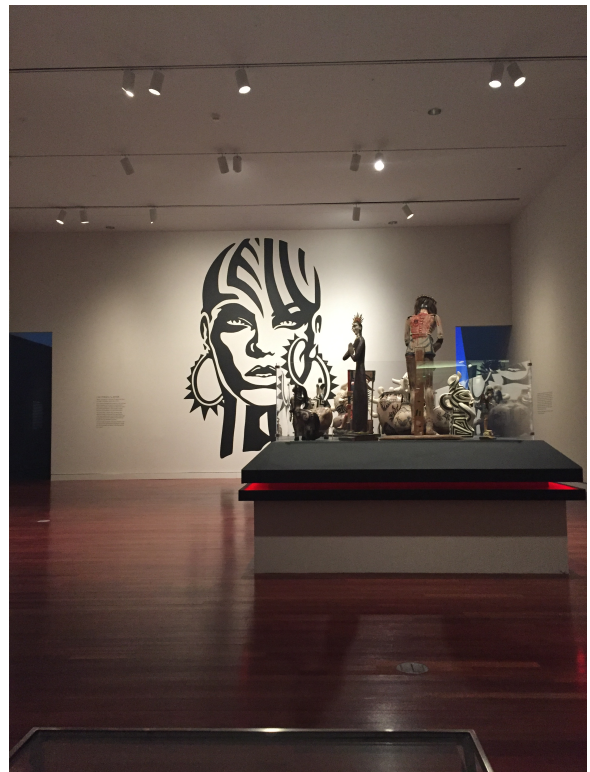
it more. The expression on Translator's face gives you an idea about the feelings one might experience while walking through the exhibition. To me the expression on Translator's face is one of resistance and strength, representative of some of the overarching themes of the exhibit. We know that the revolt was a painful experience for Indigenous people, so it makes sense that the being who is telling this story would need strength and resistance in order to tell their audience that story. I also interpret this expression as a way of notifying the audience of the emotions they might feel during this exhibit. It prepares them for the harshness of a history they may not know and shows the courage and strength Indigenous people needed in order to survive the tragedies that brought on the Pueblo Revolt. The positionality of Translator in the exhibit, Translator's androgynous identity, and Translator's role as the main storyteller in the exhibit are

all important points that are representative of the bridge that Virgil is building between Indigenous traditions and the white dominant narrative of history.

The first component of Translator that I believe is most crucial in emphasizing the bridge that Virgil is building is the positionality of the piece itself (See Fig.3.). When I say positionality, I am referencing not only Translator's physical positionality within the exhibit, but also the non-physical aspects of Translator's positionality.

Translator is the first thing your eye is drawn to when you enter the exhibit. When Virgil started working on the exhibit Translator was the first piece that he

finished prior to putting anything else up. This fact is representative of Translator being an omniscient and omnipotent being. This means Translator is not only narrating the story, but also has the ability to be an active character as well. They have influence on how the whole story will turn out, and they contain the knowledge that enables them to do what they need to do in order to create the necessary future. Thus, putting Translator up first is significant because it gives Translator the opportunity to begin and create the setup of Revolt 1680/2180. Translator's role is to narrate the story, while simultaneously protecting and preserving the power of the story that they are telling. Translator is then positioned in a way that they see the whole room come together and complete the role Virgil has assigned to them. Translator watches the whole story unfold as it is being told through the exhibit and is able to see the story clearly with all of its



*Figure 3: Translator as positioned in first room of ReVOLUTION Exhibition*



intricacies. Translator therefore is the only being with the power and knowledge to tell the story accurately because they see all of the catalysts for the Pueblo Revolt, and they have all of the knowledge about what will happen after the revolt. Translator's positionality as holder of power and knowledge is demonstrated by the fact that they are the only character that appears throughout every room in the exhibit. When I think about Translator being the first piece that goes up in the exhibit, I think about the power Virgil is emphasizing on storytelling. Some of the first pieces of art Virgil learned how to make were story tellers. Traditional story tellers often depict a woman surrounded by many children. By being a male artist who is bringing a story to many different generations he is flipping the paradigm of who is able to tell stories on its head. He brings in this traditional knowledge of Pueblo culture and turns Translator into a modern version of a story teller. Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor tells us that "Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy."<sup>3</sup> By bringing the past traditions into the present Virgil is assuring the survivance of the traditions and showing us that these traditions have a continuity that escapes the boundaries of time. Virgil is able to redefine what we think of as historical and bring these pieces and traditions into the contemporary world. We see how these objects (Pottery, sculptures, paintings, and traditional indigenous forms of gathering materials needed for the clay) from the past are still relevant to today's society and through them we are able to see how these kinds of objects can be reconceptualized and brought into any framework. His creativity in including

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<sup>3</sup> Vizenor, Gerald Robert. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2009, 23.

objects or traditions that are conceived of as historical allow us to broaden the border surrounding what it means to live in the past and allows for new creativity and ideas to expand upon what we think of as being traditional. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that

In a decolonizing framework, deconstruction is part of a much larger intent. Taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often intuitively known does not help the people to improve their current conditions. It provides words, perhaps, an insight that explains certain experiences but it does not prevent someone from dying.<sup>4</sup>

We can see that by positioning Translator as the one with the knowledge to tell the story of the Revolt Virgil deconstructs the dominant narrative that tells us Indigenous identity, history, and collective memory has no place in American history. By giving Translator this power, Virgil is doing more than simply deconstructing history. He is ensuring that the Pueblo people will always retain their tradition of storytelling and making sure that the knowledge these stories carry will always be a part of Pueblo history and Pueblo futures. He is giving the power of the story back to the Pueblos, and he is telling the story in a way that ensures it will be understood no matter how one might categorize themselves based on nationality, race, or ethnicity.

Translator and their power bridge the gaps these identities reinforce in our mind and encourages the viewer to escape these boundaries and create a new story.

The next point that I would like to argue that is representative of the bridge Virgil is building is the gender identity of Translator. Translator is painted on a pure white wall with nothing else next to or close to it except its description. The deep thick black lines make up

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books, 2012, 4.

Translator's skull, and then smaller lines make up Translator's features. The way that it is painted, it almost seems that there is a shadow being cast over their face. Their eyes stand out due to the thick black lines surrounding them, and the lips stand out due to all the white space that surrounds them. These thick lines are representative of the strength and resilience of the Translator. When we are looking at Translator it is difficult to guess their gender identity. Some of the features like the lips and eyes come off as very feminine at first. The thicker lines that compose Translator's face, however, are reminiscent of masculine features.

The first thing that Virgil pointed out about Translator when we walked through the exhibit with him is that Translator is androgynous. By painting this figure as androgynous I believe Virgil is able to accomplish several points that serve to dismantle traditional historical methods and to build a bridge between identities often ignored in our society and identities often valued within dominant white patriarchal heterosexual societies. History is always depicted within the subjectivity of the victor, and the victor is often a white heterosexual male with little to no variation. They are the ones given the power and authenticity to tell history through the dominant American society. In the story, Virgil gives power to an Indigenous androgynous figure, which is reminiscent of the fact that androgynous or two-spirited beings have had this power within their communities since time immemorial. The decentering of power that Virgil shows through his artwork is again an act of survivance because we see power being redistributed to those who had special roles and positions within the community. Colonial practices and genocide took these people that were special and important away from their community and left the community with homophobic and violent actions against two-spirited beings. Since two-spirited beings were often thought of as healers and shamans, it makes sense to assume that when the two-spirit beings were lost to their community, their ways of knowledge

and healing were also lost. By giving power to this figure Virgil is giving back the powers of storytelling and authenticity to the marginalized peoples within our society. Gloria Anzaldúa's position as a preeminent Borderlands theorist and Chicana feminist, has placed her work as one of the most widely recognized for its contributions to queer feminism and Chicanisma. A major part of her theoretical framework is about the ways in which Chicano people can decolonize themselves by returning to their Queer Indigenous roots and fighting against the violence that colonialism has brought to all Indigenous peoples. Anzaldúa states that in order for our traditional balance and ways of being to be restored, our society must recognize our queer citizens and men must help to undo the violence that has been enacted upon women and queer communities. Anzaldúa states,

Though we understand the root causes of male hatred and fear, and the subsequent wounding of women, we do not excuse, we do not condone, and we will no longer put up with it. From the men of our race, we demand the admission/acknowledgement/disclosure/testimony that they wound us, violate us, are afraid of us and of our power. We need them to say that they will begin to eliminate their hurtful put-down ways. But more than the words, we demand acts. We say to them: We will develop equal power with you and those who have shamed us.<sup>5</sup>

Virgil's work is exemplary of the call to action that Anzaldúa makes of men in this world. Virgil actively dismantles the power imbalance of men and women and who has the authenticity to tell the story.

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<sup>5</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012, 17.

It is also possible to conclude that by making the figure telling the story androgynous, viewers of the exhibit can connect Translator with the concept of two-spirited people. Being Two-spirit has always been an honored and respected identity within many different Native peoples. Two-spirit people have the gift of being able to experience multiple ways of being within the world and are often thought of as the people who are given the most insight in the world. Lang states,

The fact that two-spirit females and males are seen as a mixture of the masculine and the feminine, and not something completely different from both, does not imply that they are not seen as separate genders different from both man and woman. On the contrary, two-spirit males and females are seen as genders of their own regardless of whether their status and roles may be largely a combination of the culturally defined women's and men's and, in some cases, special roles appropriate to them because of their dual nature.<sup>6</sup>

As has it has been emphasized in other parts of the paper, I think it is important to reiterate the power of the role that Translator plays. Translator is the only character we see appear in all three rooms of the exhibit. To me this highlights the importance of this figure. The story cannot be told without Translator. This fact reinforces the idea that in order to understand both sides of the Pueblo Revolt we need many components to read it, so it is not reflective of Western society's understanding of the Pueblo Revolt. Translator gives us the most subjective reading possible because they are an omniscient and omnipotent being. This means that Translator knows what has happened and what is yet to come. It also gives Translator the power to be an actor in their own story. They have the power to tell the story from a Pueblo perspective and from a non-

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<sup>6</sup> Jacobs, Sue-Ellen. *Two-spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005, 17.

normative gendered position; they have the power to pass on this knowledge to the Pueblo people for generations to come. Translator is then able to act a method of resistance to the white dominant narrative that is often portrayed within American society and is able to have sovereign determination over their own destiny and the destiny of their people.

Each person is shaped by their experiences in the world and that makes them unique because no two people have the same experiences and outcomes in the world. If we as individuals can understand our own unique subjectivities and biases that we bring to each situation we can understand something overall about why we see things the way that we do and what influences makes up those opinions. Having this deeper understanding of our actions and humanity will help us learn how to access and make use of the bridge Virgil is building. Virgil uses these subjectivities to tell the story of the Pueblo Revolt the way it should be told—through the eyes of the Pueblo people. He depicts the Pueblo Revolt in a way that is accessible to all audiences, but most importantly to the indigenous people it represents. Throughout ReVOlution, we see the story of the Pueblo people’s humanity unfold. We see how the dehumanization of a people led to tragic consequences, and that this very dehumanization of a people is what allowed history to ignore the plight faced by the Pueblo people. The ReVOlution exhibition acknowledges the people and the history for what they are. It does not have to fit within the framework of American values, but it does have to be valued for the story it tells and the people it represents.

## Tahu

In contrast to Translator we see another character named Tahu. Tahu is the female main character of the story. She is also positioned in all three rooms of the exhibit. We first see Tahu mentioned in the description of Revolution. That is her only appearance in the first room. In the second room Tahu is one of the main characters to which we are drawn. She is presented as a beautiful figure leading the army of Aeronauts, who face off against the Spanish Castilians (See Fig.4.).

When you enter the second room in the exhibit your senses are automatically drawn to the figures in the

middle of the room. The room has no lights except for the light that is coming from the video being played in front of the sculptures and the two designs behind the sculptures. There is a feeling of tenseness that surrounds the sculptures. The first time I walked into the room I felt a little creeped out, and I felt a lot of anxiety. I felt a ton of energy radiating from the room, and it felt like I was about to run into someone. The figures are so lifelike that you almost expect them to move when you approach them.

Tahu stands out from the rest of the figures because she is the only one that has a mask made out of clay. Her dress is black and flowy with thousands of little sequins that glow when the video is playing. The only color that pops out from the black is the brown leather that is used to secure the bow and arrow quiver on her back. A collar of what appears to be raven or crow feathers surrounds her neck. These feathers present a beautiful contrast to the black headpiece



*Figure 4: Tahu*

surrounding Tahu's face. When you take a closer look at Tahu's face you can see that all of her features are even and symmetrical. Her lips are painted back against the pale paint of her face. The only hint of color that is added to Tahu's mask are the bright orange earrings hanging from each earlobe. Each ear is painted with a swirl that connects to the swirls on her face and her facial features. Her facial features seem similar to Translator's in the way that they each seem to know important information about what is about to happen and that they are anticipating what is next. Her posture is one of power and grace. One foot is placed in front of the other giving the figure the appearance of being able to move at any moment. She is placed in front of the other Blind Archers and Aeronauts facing the Castilian army. Another important thing to note is that this standing version is the only version of Tahu that is not blinded. Throughout the rest of the exhibit we see Tahu blinded. I believe that Virgil turns Tahu being blinded into an irony because Tahu is the character that was chosen to lead the other blind archers. They are not blind in the sense of not being able to see, but rather blind to the dangers and fears that beseech them. Tahu and all of her warriors fearlessly fight their enemies regardless of challenges. Tahu's blindness can be read as an analogy of lady justice as blind—a conceptualization to which the broader American public can relate. She is blind to all but the truth. Understanding Tahu's blindness in this way positions the viewer to be able to assume her role as leader because she is the only one enabled with the wisdom of Translator and her own sense of justice to fight no matter what, because she is empowered with the light of truth.

Tahu is the only female identifying character that will be analyzed in this paper. Much of the discourse surrounding female and male dynamics within Cochiti Pueblo culture is complicated and is essential to understanding why Virgil's creation of Tahu as a main character is so important. At Cochiti male and female are inseparable and inexplicably intertwined. As



Laguna author Leslie Marmon Silko reminds us, “Whether one looks at Pueblo worldview and its dynamics of cultural survival from the perspective of religion, kinship, pottery making, or narrative traditions, one finds that Pueblo identity and individual and social integration are conceived in terms of fertility and regeneration: “one story is the beginning of many stories”<sup>7</sup> In his work, Virgil is able to combine all of the perspectives above and in his screenplay, pottery, and other artistic work, he is able to continue the cycle of fertility and regeneration. In thinking



Figure 5: Tahu and the Blind Archers, Clay Pot, Taboo Series

about his pottery work in particular, in many ways Virgil’s style and methods are an ever-growing addition to the work that has been done by Pueblo potters for centuries. He often says that his work is nothing new, but rather an expansion of the work that was done before him (See Fig.5.). This connection between past and present can help us understand the methods in which Pueblo pottery was produced and marketed and help us to further understand what role each gender had in production and marketing.

When we are examining Virgil’s work, we must realize that there are deeper messages and histories embedded within the pieces themselves and the techniques he utilizes. To me one thing that stands out is the way in which knowledge is disseminated in Pueblo culture. Both men and women have an equal part in maintaining and revitalizing Pueblo history, culture, and

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<sup>7</sup> Silko, Leslie Marmon. 1986. *Ceremony*. New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 31.

narrative. The women were traditionally the ones who would make all the pottery. To me this can be interpreted as continuously giving birth or having the first opportunity to shape something into what it could be. The men were the ones who would hold the knowledge of these sacred stories and help to promote the pottery if it was to be sold. This story helps us understand that women are the ones with the initial control of the pottery. Men may have the knowledge of the stories, but it is the woman's job to give these stories life. This puts women on par with men in the terms of balance and equity. To me this is by far one of the most important points because many societies neglect to give women the respect they deserve. For instance, in the story of Iyatiku, the corn goddess of the Keresan Pueblos, we can see why women are so important to the continual survival and renewal of a people. Iyatiku is someone who is honored for giving people life, but also the sustenance needed in order to survive. She is a mother to all people.

“As Parsons and many other Pueblo scholars have pointed out, men and women have differential access to sacred discourse. Origin myths and legends as well as songs and drums and kachinas and kivas and all the other aspects of sacred discourse, including the ceremonial Keresan in which it is spoken, are controlled by men.”<sup>8</sup> An example of a religious act that was crucial to Cochiti Pueblo that involved gender in multiple ways was the way in which the Cacique or religious leader impersonates a female. This Cacique is an important role in the village because his chief functions concern rain and fertility and the well-being of his children. This impersonation is sometimes a serious and at other times comic. After being officially installed in office he is symbolically viewed as a woman and referred to in female terms. He is representative of Iyatiku, the corn mother. Iyatiku (bringing life) is one of figures associated with

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<sup>8</sup> Parsons, Elsie Clews. "Nativity Myth at Laguna and Zuni." *Journal of American Folklore* 31 (1918): 120.

the creation of humans. She and her sister were charged with the important task of bringing baskets filled with seeds, little clay images, and sacred corn meal to earth and praying into being all forms of life. “The continued association of clay figures with the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of Pueblo life is this practice of collectively representing Keresan townspeople in male and female clay images which are kept and cared for by the cacique.”<sup>9</sup> These clay images are an important part of the discussion because women were traditionally the ones who occupied the role of making the clay figures. Men were the ones who had knowledge of the stories, stories like Iyatiku. To me the role of the cacique and the story of Iyatiku are important for two reasons. The first is that the role of the cacique illustrates that the masculine and feminine are always intertwined and that aspects of both are needed in order to maintain balance. Secondly, the story of Iyatiku helps explain the traditional roles each gender had. From this knowledge we can ascertain some deeper insights about Virgil’s work and why it is so important that he is a male potter promoting strong female and gender non-conforming characters. By promoting a strong woman character like Tahu, Virgil expands the possibilities each gender has open to them and allow multiple genders access to all spaces. Allowing all genders to have equal access to all roles ensures that multiple voices are represented and that a true model of inclusivity is being recognized. Indigenous peoples have always recognized that everyone has something to contribute to our society, and that our differences make the community diverse and strong.

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<sup>9</sup> Babcock, Barbara A. "At Home, No Women Are Storytellers: Ceramic Creativity and the Politics of Discourse in Cochiti Pueblo." In *Creativity/Anthropology*, edited by Lavie Smadar, Narayan Kirin, and Rosaldo Renato, 70-99. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1993, 77.

The power in Tahu's role cannot be underestimated. When Virgil spoke about Tahu there was a reverence and respect in his voice that made it clear how special Tahu is to him. He says that he created Tahu because he wanted to honor women everywhere, but that he also wanted to honor the women with whom he grew up. One of the first pictures Virgil showed our class when we met with him, was from a photo shoot that had been set up prior to ReVOlution opening.

Tahu and her Blind Archers were the focus of this particular picture (See Fig.6.). Virgil told us that all of the people in the picture were different women in his family. I think this is an important detail for two reasons. The first is that Virgil is striving to represent Native Women in a more accurate way by using members of his own



*Figure 6: Tahu and the Blind Archers (as depicted by Virgil's family members)*

family, which counters stereotypical Hollywood representations of women that are often unrealistic and skewed in order to cater to a male heteronormative society. In particular, representations of Native women in Hollywood have been insufficient, at best, and downright dismissive at worst. We often see native women portrayed as an object of her husband, a damsel in distress, or an exotic woman that is a temptation to all white men. This line of thinking is super problematic and continues to reinforce ideas rooted in settler colonialism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. “Consider the way indigenous people have (and are) considered to be ‘savage – – men often portrayed as violent, women as hyper-sexualized, and both in need of care from the ‘civilized’ settler state. The narrative dehumanization of indigenous peoples supports parallel narratives of peaceful, adventurous and virtuous settlement and expansion, as ‘brave pioneers’

are held up as paragons of new settler nations carved out of frontier spaces.”<sup>10</sup> Understanding the foundation and dynamics of settler colonialism is crucial because we are able to see how colonial interpretations of what it means to be a man and woman. The Spanish colonizers needed to use tactics that highlighted their acts of violence and associated them with this idea of a strong masculinity. Anything other than violence was associated with ideas of something weaker and feminine. By putting these labels of what is meant to be strong and masculine Europeans were able to create toxic masculinity, a concept that called for the diminishment of the power and respect women were usually afforded within Indigenous societies. Women were a critical part of the structure that allowed Indigenous peoples to thrive, and by taking this power away from women society was no longer able to function with the diversity and inclusion of all voices. Instead of everyone having their voices heard and a critical role to play, the society is left without its most critical voices. It loses the many solutions and problem-solving capabilities a diverse society is able to offer; therefore, it loses a form of its own agency and survivance. By placing women at the forefront of power Virgil is able to rewrite the colonized perspective and return to tradition.

### **Fetuses**

One of the most surprising things to me about Virgil as an artist is his mastery of different mediums of art. Even though Virgil’s initial success was as a potter, he is also a talented fashion designer, writer, movie maker, painter, and most recently glass blower. ReVOLution is the first exhibition in which Virgil has shown his own glass work. The fetuses on display in the third room of the exhibition were more than eye catching (currently the exhibition

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<sup>10</sup> Bhambra, Gurinder. "Settler Colonialism." *Global Social Theory*. August 04, 2015. Accessed May 07, 2019. <https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/settler-colonialism/>.

is consolidated into one room and the fetuses are no longer displayed). Even though there were many beautiful pieces in the third room, the fetuses required the most space. This section of the exhibition took up at least a quarter of the space in the room and was somewhat physically separated from the other pieces in the room. I thought this choice of spacing was interesting because it told me to pay attention to it as its own unique and separate artwork. My focus automatically went to the display on the floor where black tendrils of glass seemed to flow out of a vessel resembling a vase. The light reflected off of the black glass making it shine brightly. That reflection seemed to bounce off the glass surrounding the fetuses that were hung in the air. This arrangement of lighting made me think that the light bouncing back and forth off the fetuses and tendrils on the floor were connected, but still separate from each other. I got the impression even though the two parts were connected, they were still separate beings whose purpose was to help each other. The fetuses hanging from the ceiling were in different stages of growth. Some of the fetuses that were older had many details added to them, and the younger fetuses were less detailed. What I found interesting about the fetuses was the fact that they weren't actually encased within the glass, but rather they had the mobility to twirl and move around which Virgil explained was his way of making them more life-like and more like the vision he has for what they would resemble if they were living. Each fetus and encasing were hung at various levels indicating that they were in different stages of the birthing process. Virgil let us know that ideally there would be hundreds of fetuses and incubators because his story explains that the fetuses are able to replicate and birth soldiers quickly due to the way that they are created. Their potential for repopulation is impressive; it is connected to the reproduction processes and

capability of women. The incubator resembles a plant-like life force with the ability to catch the fetuses as they hatch and surround them in their tentacle like appendages (See Fig.7).



Figure 7: Incubators

When we think about the horror and terror that forced sterilization caused, we also think about women's reproductive rights. This leads me to think about the ways in which the fetuses in Virgil's exhibit are born. Virgil explained that the fetuses have no mother. Rather they are hatched and incubated by a plant-like substance. This leads us to question the framework of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be an indigenous mother specifically. If we aren't viewing women as mothers how are we viewing them? I feel that this question is one of the most important ones in the exhibit because it forces us to value women for more than their bodies or reproductive rights. We have to learn that no matter what a life is a life and it has value simply because it is alive. There doesn't need to be any kind of validation in order for a woman's life to have meaning. On top of that the U.S. decided that they could further stop the growth of Native people by forcibly sterilizing women. This practice was as recent as the 1970's. Doctors at his (Indian Health Services) used a variety of tactics to trick native women into giving their consent, or not being up front with the woman about what sterilization is and how it works. The policing of indigenous genders and sexualities as a means to further the larger settler-colonial project led to the development of a "settler sexuality." Scott Morgensen (settler scholar) defines settler sexuality as

"a white national heteronormativity that regulates Indigenous sexuality and gender by supplanting them with the sexual modernity of settler subjects." In non-academic speak, settler sexuality can be described as an "exceptional" form of sexual expression enforced by the settler-state. The settler-state deems heterosexual monogamy as "exceptional" and "normal," and anything beyond those confines as "primitive" and "unexceptional."<sup>11</sup> Native women and their children did not fit into this paradigm of settler sexuality and were forced to assimilate to the white idea of reproduction through the means of forced sterilization.



Figure 8: Fetuses in ReVOLUTION Exhibition

The fetuses are representative of creating a space for Indigenous people in the future (See Fig.8.). These fetuses represent a hope of a new people, a new future. The fetuses can be read as a counter-colonial symbol to the genocide experienced by Native Peoples. They represent a future where Indigenous people exist outside of the white colonial framework, and instead exist within their own Native framework of decolonization and resistance (See Fig.9.). Virgil's entire storyline in ReVOLUTION is based on how the Pueblos responded to the genocide they and

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<sup>11</sup> "Settler Sexuality." SETTLER SEXUALITY - K'É INFOSHOP. Accessed May 07, 2019. [http://keinfoshop.org/zines/settler-sexuality.htm?fbclid=IwAR1SoUF5K8RR1plp6t-7gWHB\\_vE\\_MgJ1wBjv3cjCNwKFD\\_1rAbQNZc5oLI4](http://keinfoshop.org/zines/settler-sexuality.htm?fbclid=IwAR1SoUF5K8RR1plp6t-7gWHB_vE_MgJ1wBjv3cjCNwKFD_1rAbQNZc5oLI4).



other Indigenous peoples experienced at the hands of the settler colonizers. The future of Indigenous people cannot be thought of without acknowledging the acts of violence that have been committed against them in the past and in the present. Genocide is the most violent tool of settler colonialism, and the Spanish used it to justify their actions in the name of religious conversion. We know, however, that this system of colonization allowed the Spanish to position Native people as inferior, which continued to reinforce the idea that Natives' lives don't



*Figure 9: Fetus closeup*

retain any value and have no place within a settler colonial world. Those spared from genocidal practices were colonized in other ways, namely through assimilation. Assimilation allows for Native people to keep their lives, but it takes away all of their autonomy, traditions, culture, language, and future. In a settler colonial framework, the government is allowed to take children from their families and place them within the care of the government. This systematic oppression serves to sever the ties between children, family, and their tribes. Boarding schools were created in the early 1870s to strip native children of their identities and effectively assimilate them into a society where white people would be more accepting of them. This is an effective way to rob a people of everything that is important to them. A whole generation that is lost, knowledge that can never be regained. These children were future leaders. How can any people expect to survive and retain all that is sacred to them when there is no one left to pass everything on to?

Virgil did not assign gender identities to the fetuses. I see this as Virgil leaving the choice up to fate and showing the potential that each being has. It is a crucial thing that Virgil does not assign them a gender identity because we as observers of the exhibit are allowed to give this character the potential of being whatever it is we want them to be. When we look at the fetuses, we are allowed to use our imagination and dream up different possibilities for each character. As a representation of hope for the future, the fetuses represent a future in which one can self-identify. One of the best parts about Virgil's exhibit is that there is something for everyone in the exhibit, and if you look close enough there is sure to be a story behind an art piece that absolutely inspires you. People that identify as Indigenous are able to see that someone is honoring our survivance while simultaneously seeing that there is abundant hope for the future—one in which the old ways and knowledge will continue into the coming generations. Indigenous womxn, "queer," transgender, and non-binary people endure unspeakable violence at the hands of non-native settlers and even their own community members, however they continue to resist and pave a path toward brighter tomorrows. Indigenous womxn, trans folk, and queers stand at the forefront of the larger decolonial movement to reclaim previous subjectivities and to build bright collective futures.

Decolonization is often mistaken as an effort to "go back" to precolonial ways, but the active process of such carries much more gravity than that. Indigenous people not only demand the total repatriation of land, but we continually envision and push for a world void of structures such as settler-colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, racism, fascism, and heteropatriarchy. Decolonization involves reclaiming previous ways of living - horizontal leadership, collectivism, and recognition of universal relations -- and pushing such lifeways into practice and action in order to develop a sustainable future. It's not all about the past, it's about what we want for our

communities in the years to come. Indigenous womxn and queers lead the larger movement for such futures despite the violence they experience under settler-colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy.<sup>12</sup>

Under the lens of Indigenous Futurism, we are able to see all of these possibilities represented. Indigenous Futurism allows all Indigenous people to reimagine a future where they have an active role in its creation. Society has often silenced Indigenous voices in a variety of ways. The boarding schools and forced sterilization of women reinforced the silencing of Indigenous voices and left in its place a hatred for all things that are or related to Indigenous. In a world where procreation is possible without a mother figure we see a potential for a number of unlimited voices. In the scenario Virgil has created, no force can silence or keep Indigenous voices from being heard and from continuing. The historical chains of settler colonialism are no longer able to keep Indigenous people down because they are able to exist outside of those arbitrary boundaries. Women and their role in a society are again able to be reconceptualized and allowed to grow and contradict the idea of gender enforced by Euro-American values. The Euro-American values become obsolete in this society and past Indigenous traditions are able to thrive and be expanded upon advancing the prosperity and potential each community is able to attain.

## **Conclusion**

When we see Native Peoples portrayed in Hollywood, we often see the overused Indian vs Cowboy narrative being repeated time and time again with little to no variation. This tired trope continues to portray Native Peoples as figures of a past gone by. Something that we should remember as a part of our past. Virgil's work offers us a fresh perspective of what Native film

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<sup>12</sup> "Settler Sexuality." SETTLER SEXUALITY - K'É INFOSHOP. Accessed May 07, 2019. [http://keinfoshop.org/zines/settler-sexuality.htm?fbclid=IwAR1SoUF5K8RR1plp6t-7gWHB\\_vE\\_MgJ1wBjv3cjCNwKFD\\_1rAbQNZc5oLI4](http://keinfoshop.org/zines/settler-sexuality.htm?fbclid=IwAR1SoUF5K8RR1plp6t-7gWHB_vE_MgJ1wBjv3cjCNwKFD_1rAbQNZc5oLI4).

and representation could look like in Hollywood. In recent years there has been a surge of Native American representation in areas such as film, music, art, and various forms of media. Virgil is one of the artists paving the way for other natives who have similar aspirations. This aspect of Virgil's work is so important because it continues the cycle of regeneration and revitalization that is crucial to Cochiti Pueblo life. Virgil continues to weave traditional Cochiti ideals into his work, while simultaneously creating future spaces that allow for Native creativity and traditions to continue. When these spaces are created Native people are given hope. This form of decolonization allows Native peoples to tell their stories in their own way, a way that centers their understanding of the world and centers them outside of the common white dominant narrative.

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