Race, Gender, and Technology

By Ashlee Bird

The reading and discussion of Nakamura's piece today has raised questions regarding the idea of technology as a mode of forwarding or futuring a gender or a race of people. In her article, Nakamura relays the role that the tribe played in acquiring the Fairchild contract, and the impetus for doing so;

> Though cheap, plentiful workers and tax benefits helped lure electronics companies to the reservation, Navajo leadership helped push the project forward; Raymond Nakai, chairman of the Navajo Nation from 1963 to 1971, and the self-styled first "modern" Navajo leader, was instrumental in bringing Fairchild to Shiprock. He spoke fervently about the necessity of transforming the Navajo as a "modern" Indian tribe, and what better way to do so than to put its members to work making chips, potent signs of futurity that were no bigger than a person's fingernail? The incongruity of this form of labor—the creation of the most advanced devices the world had yet known, tiny bits of matter that could tell a satellite where to point, by women who were conceived of as irredeemably primitive—was not lost on the tribes themselves. 924

The motivations for Fairchild to source their production through the tribe is obvious; tax breaks, numerous workers, and the ability to sidestep U.S. labor regulations and not pay workers minimum wage due to reservation sovereignty. However, the motivation for the Diné (Navajo) to accept the contract from Fairchild is a more questionable, or at least curious, choice. As Nakamura notes above, the tribal chairman Raymond Nakai was openly pro-Fairchild and the perceived modernity that hosting the production for a tech company would provide the reservation and its people. However, not only did the cooperation with Fairchild fail to help dissolve the "people

trapped in time stereotype” for the Diné at that momen, but the establishment of futurity and the struggle between traditionalists and progressives within tribal communities is still a battle that Native communities face across the country, and one that most likely helped contribute to Fairchild’s choice to withdraw from the reservation in 1975.

As Nakamura mentions later in the article, not only did Fairchild fail because of the rift that was formed between Diné women and men when the company disproportionately hired female over male laborers, but that the rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM) also put pressure on the company to unionize which they had never previously done. AIM, an organization perceived as militant and aggressive by the white community, while fighting for pan-indigenous equality and awareness, was also furthering the rift between traditionalists and progressives within Native communities. Progressives, in tribal communities, tend towards working/settling with the U.S. government, lowering or abolishing blood quantums, regulations that generally benefit full blood tribal members and hinder the benefits received by mixed-blood members or their families and spouses, and working for policies in education, healthcare, and land rights that step away from more traditional belief systems. Traditionalists, however, tend towards more historically grounded beliefs and practices, such as the institution of high blood quantums, keeping education on the reservation, traditional forms of healthcare, and the desire to reclaim lost tribal land. The battles between these groups were exemplified by the violence (aided and abetted by the U.S. government) that took place on the Pine Ridge reservation from 1972-1976 under the authoritarian regime of Dick Wilson, a proclaimed progressive, and his henchmen. While AIM claimed to be a pan-indigenous organization, their radical efforts left a bad taste in the mouth of many traditionalists, specifically older tribal leaders. There was a large outcry from many of these leaders after AIM’s 1972 “Trail of Broken Treaties” and

subsequent march on Washington, D.C., and these elders assured the U.S. government that they were in no way affiliated with AIM, did not support their radical actions that did not represent traditional values of conflict resolution, and that they wanted no quarrel with the U.S. government. Therefore, as Fairchild already saw the Diné community divided between jilted men and disproportionately employed women, the presence of AIM occupying the factory would've most likely widened this rift. The belief that men and women have specific gender roles within communities is very much a traditionalist Native belief system. AIM, as aforementioned, was a progressive organization. Therefore, the presence of an organization that was attempting to unionize this company and thus increase its longevity, but almost solely for the women of the tribe, would've furthered the distaste for Fairchild by the already spurned Diné men, and potentially lead to violence, a reputation that came with AIM, and a proven result of the conflicts that occurred between Dick Wilson and the traditionalists at Pine Ridge.

Returning to my larger point at the outset of this post, the displeasure of the Diné men with women being prioritized in labor and abandoning their "traditional" roles of women's work is one example of the way in which technology, although it was brought in to modernize a community, seemed to have the exact opposite effect. Furthermore, as we discussed, the modernity and progressive ideology that comes along with technology is subverted again and again and is instead used to solidify gender roles. The fact that many video games feature sexy yet subservient female AI systems like Cortana or EDI, and that the female computer was replaced by a machine but now, is specifically a *female* machine in many instances, such as Siri or Cortana, exemplifies the ability of technology to become a gendered prison for women. This discussion of the ways in which technology can be co-opted in order to codify negative gender and race roles is something I wish to explore to a greater degree with the Marvin piece.