

Thea Pitman - AIAI

What's your name and can you tell us a little about yourself and your field of study?

My name's Thea Pitman and I'm a Professor of Latin American Studies in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. I research digital cultural production in Latin America including, amongst other things, electronic literature, digital art, video games, webpages and tactical media interventions. My research tends to focus on the representation of aspects of identity in such works and in recent years I have worked extensively on the representation of Indigeneity in digital cultural production.

Can you give us an overview of the project?

AIAI: Artificial Intelligence, Art and Indigeneity was a pilot research project that set out to explore the ways in which new generative AI programmes for visual art represent Indigenous peoples and cultures. The overarching objective was to empower Indigenous artists to experiment with these new tools, taking a critical approach and appropriating them on their own terms.

A group of seventeen Indigenous artists, writers, thinkers and community leaders of different ethnicities, based in present-day Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Peru, joined the project partners for a series of virtual focus groups during which we created prompts together and discussed the resultant images. A selection of the images and the results of our discussions are available on the project website.

The project was funded by the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute as part of their Interdisciplinary Research and Impact fund for Culture 2022-23 with funding from HEIF.

The data analysis was not a problem. We focused on just one AI image generator for this project – the commercial, subscription-based product Midjourney, working with the version available at the time of the focus groups (version 5-5.1). This was picked simply because it was the tool that one of the researchers was playing around with at the point we dreamt up the project. All our materials can be found on the platform by searching for “aiaiindigeneity”.

Did you collaborate with anyone on this project, e.g., other departments, institutions, RSEs, etc.? How did this benefit the research?

The project team comprised myself as PI, co-investigators Tom Jackson (School of Media and Communication) and Andreas Rauh (Dublin City University), Sebastián Gerlic, director of the Brazilian Indigenous arts and communication NGO, Thydêwá, and aruma (Sandra de Berduccy), a Bolivian artist, best known for her work in textiles. The project would simply never have happened without this team's being in place – these are all people whom I'd worked with previously and in many cases they had also worked with each other. The project was Tom's idea and was discussed with myself and Andreas at the Dry Dock in Leeds over a pint in Summer 2022. Sebastián and aruma were particularly crucial in terms of providing contacts for the artists who participated and also in facilitating the virtual focus groups.

Can you tell us more about your current or any future research projects?

The NGO we worked with has just started a small follow-on project of their own entitled Indigenous Appropriation of Artificial Intelligence. We've also got two new funded research projects for 2023-24 that are developments of the AIAI project. The first is a grant from the ESRC-funded Digital Good Network (University of Sheffield) for a project using generative AI art to help think through the concept of the Digital Good from an Indigenous perspective. The second is a University of Leeds Enhancing Research Culture grant that will bring six of the Indigenous artists and all of the team members to Leeds next March to work with the Immersive Networks artists' collective on the design of a pilot AI image generation tool that can better represent Indigenous peoples and their worldviews.

Images produced by the AIAI team using MidJourney



Prompt: "Kaingang"



"Tikuna"



"Tupi Guarani"



Prompt by: Kadu Tapuya



Kuenan Tikuna



Nhenty Kariri-Xocó