The Initiative for Indigenous Futures
AAA Indigenous Futures Panel

Jason Edward Lewis

[Veregge]

The Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF) is a seven-year research-creation project exploring how Indigenous individuals and communities imagine themselves seven generations from now. Through a combination of art creation, technology making, multidisciplinary residencies, public symposia and lecture series, and graduate student support, IIF seeks to understand and encourage Indigenous futures of our own choosing.

[AbTeC Logo]

IIF grew out of a research networked called Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, or AbTeC. The artist Skawennati and I founded AbTeC in 2006 because we saw how computational systems were being used to define a new territory, the archipelago of websites, social media services, shared virtual environments, corporate data stores and multiplayer video games we call cyberspace. We felt that we—Indigenous people—needed to stake out some ground there. Cyberspace was clearly becoming central to our lives, and we wanted Indigenous people out there in it, exploring the blank spaces and filling them up with our voices, our faces, and our dances.

[Slide: Skins logo]

AbTeC approached this challenge from two directions. The Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Digital Media

Design trained Indigenous youth in the tools of digital production, helping them transform from consumers to producers of work in this new world.

We designed the workshops to integrate storytellers and storytelling from the community with creative and technical instruction. We've ran a number of these workshops to date, producing a series of video games where the students remediated stories from their oral tradition into an interactive, playable narrative as well as created videos using machinima—machine cinema, or movies shot in virtual worlds. The process helped the students' connect their cultural knowledge, passed down from the past, with the knowledge of the technology it takes to shape the conversation in the present.

[Slide: TimeTraveller™ collage]

The second direction was to actively imagine ourselves into these new territories. Skawennati's TimeTraveller™ project was the biggest effort we took in this direction. This is a series of nine videos made using machinima, or machine cinema, where you use virtual environments to make videos.

TimeTraveller™ is the story of a young Mohawk man from the 22nd century who 'visits' events of importance to First Nations history. As he experiences the other side of the one-sided fairy tales that pass for history in this Canada, the series constructs a counter-narrative that calls into question the basic legal and cultural structure of the mainstream society.

[2001; Star Wars; Blade Runner]

While conducting the AbTeC work we developed the concept of

the 'future imaginary'. The future imaginary is a component of the social imaginary, per Taylor, et al, one that crystallizes an informal and diffuse set of beliefs about how our culture will look one hundred, five hundred, or a thousand years from now.

The North American future imaginary is one that all of us in AbTeC share, as participants in a more general North American social imaginary. It is what allows us to wonder, jokingly, what happened to the jetpacks we were promised, to ask one another whether we would prefer the red pill or the blue pill, to disgust one another with one-line references to chest bursters, and to invoke instant anxiety about government hyper-surveillance by tossing the term "pre-cog" into the conversation.

[Crosby imaginary Indian]

These are playful engagements with a common social imaginary and its futuristic elements. Yet the contemporary social imaginary also contains creatures such as the "imaginary Indian." As described by art historian Marcia Crosby, the imaginary Indian developed out of the settler culture's need to erase the real Indian in order to depopulate North America in the minds of its immigrant population.[2] Here, at AAA, I don't believe that I need to go into detail about how the imaginary Indian renders actual Indians mute and invisible. Taking our place is a prototypical Indigenous interlocutor that speaks only from a position firmly rooted in the past, on the margins of modern North American society, and of radically diminished agency.

The few representations of Indigenous characters that do appear in popular science fiction-themed movies and video games authenticate themselves against this imaginary Indian.

[Walking the Clouds]

Yet ready counter-narratives can be found if creators would do the work to find them. In <u>Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction</u>, scholar Grace Dillon illustrates how Indigenous authors have employed science fiction tropes to give shape to fully lived Indigenous lives. She uses their work to position science fiction as a "valid way to renew, recover and extend First Nations peoples' voices and traditions."[6] The stories in the anthology provide a much wider range of characters, settings, and motivations than those stories created out of a social imaginary infused with the imaginary Indian. They reconfigure authenticity in terms of lived continuity rather than in terms of a slavish adherence to a settler fantasy.

The paucity of Indigenous people in the future imaginary is troubling. Most popular science fiction presupposes the continuation of white supremacy. To quote the science fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson (herself paraphrasing the author Ian Hagemann): "when I read science fiction set in the future, where there are no people of color, I wonder when the race war happened that killed us all of and why has the writer seen fit not to mention something so huge?" Absence implies non-existence, or, at the very least, non-importance. A people that are absent in the future need not be consulted in the present about how that future comes about.

We see AbTeC's current challenge, then, as populating the present social imaginary with fully empowered subjects of a future imaginary. That means creating Indigenous stories, epistemologies, and characters through which our peoples can articulate our dreams and aspirations, and make us present in the future.

[IFF Logo]

This has led us to the Initiative for Indigenous Futures, which we started in 2014. The Initiative is focused on enabling and sustaining a conversation about how we see ourselves seven generations hence—150 to 200 years in the future, science fiction territory.

Sketching visions of a future life—whether at the level of individuals, cultures, societies, or species—is rarely just about the jetpacks or the aliens or the minority reports. Jetpacks represent humanity's technical cleverness and desire to be unshackled from gravity; aliens represent the Others of our world—be they the primitive, the outcast, or the superhuman; and the minority reports represent living in a state of anxiety about the loss of free will in the face of a technologically overwhelming hegemonic state.

The Initiative for Indigenous Futures aims to build new sets of metaphors, new assemblages of biases, new imaginaries: ones that assert an Indigenous presence in the future of our species, ones that will bridge between who we as Indigenous people are now and who we might be.

[IIF Participant Map]

The Initiative consists of ten institutional partners, seven co-investigators, and seven collaborators. The institutional partners are a mixture of universities, colleges, arts organizations and reserved-based cultural and educational

entities. Some participants have been working together for decades, some joined us a year-and-a-half ago when we started.

[IIF Project Diagram]

The Initiative has four main components: Symposia on the Future Imaginary, an Archive, the Skins Workshops, Archive, and Residencies.

The Symposia and the Archives are pretty straightforward. The Symposia bring together the Initiative participants to present their work from the previous year; we also invite external artists and scholars working in similar areas to come share their works and thoughts. The Archive is an attempt to identify, preserve, and make publicly available the work of Indigenous new media artists. I've already told you about the Skins workshops; we will continue that work but experiment with content and configuration in order to reach more communities. The Residencies bring Indigenous artists to Concordia and other Initiative institutions to create artwork addressing the future; we are also committed to hosting non-artists—like anthropologists—who want to think concretely about the Indigenous future imaginary from their particular disciplinary standpoint.

All the time, we are continuing to dream, populating the future imaginary with scenarios of how our communities might thrive unto the seventh generation and beyond.

[Youth Workshops - Dechinta]

I'll close with a few examples. We developed a pen & paper workshop with one of our partners, the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, located in Dene territory north of Yellowknife. In between moose-hide tanning and ice fishing, we asked the students to imagine a character from their future.

[Kayla Tulugarjuk]

Here is one of the visions: Kayla Tulugarjuk wanted to imagine a future of female Inuit empowerment, where her "little Inuit descendent are running around living a nomadic lifestyle, using the knowledge of their ancestors to survive the environmental post-apocalypse."

[Residencies]

We are currently collaboration with the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Festival, TIFF, and Northern media developer Pinnguaq on the *2167* project. 2167 is a response to the celebrations that will happen in Canada next year commemorating 150 years of Confederation. We are not interested in celebrating that milestone. That history has not been kind to Indigenous people. Instead, we want to look forward. We have commissioned six artists to imagine life on this continent 150 years from now, using virtual reality technology.

[Scott Benesiinaabandan - Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky]

Anishnabe artist Benesiinaabandan recounts a story he was

told by Cree Elder Wilfred Buck about Spider Woman. From her home at the centre of the Seven Sisters, Spider Woman wove a long thread along which the Anishinabe people travelled to Earth. Some modern interpretations of this legend say that this spider thread is a metaphor for a wormhole. Another story says that some day, a young boy will return to that place from where the Anishinabe came. *Blueberry Pie Under The Martian Sky*'s VR experience will take place seven generations in the future, when human beings are able to travel through wormholes. It will follow that young boy as he journeys back to his people's place of origin.

[Postcommodity - Each Branch Determined]

Each Branch Determined imagines northern New Mexico 150 years in the future and finds a series of interconnected American Indian and Xicano pueblos working collaboratively to exercise community and regional self-determination. The immersive experience guides users through landscapes and settings that are framed to exploit sci-fi conventions of an apocalyptic future. However, over time, the user discovers that what appears as apocalyptic is actually a series of managed processes intended to restore and manage land and natural resources, and community ceremonies intended to culturally and socially actuate past, present and future.

[Illustrating the Future Imaginary]

Since the spring of 2015 we've been commissioning Indigenous artists to create illustrations of what they think or want the

lives of their descendants to be like. The project is called, straightforwardly enough, Illustrating the Future Imaginary. So far we have ten illustrations in this series, and will be commissioning several more a year for the next six years.

[Kai'tonoron Bush - ????]

I want to close my talk with this one. It is by Kaia'tonoron Bush, Mohawk of Kahnawake, who described her illustration like this: "The girls in the drawing are some of my students...I was...thinking about the role social media and personal devices will play in young people's lives and how this might change their futures and of course, as you said, the importance of preserving our traditions and practices. Initially my outlook on the future of Indigenous people was bleak. We spend everyday fighting for tomorrow, it was difficult for me to imagine something beyond 50 years but doing this work made me realize that we can build a kind future for our children."

Thank you.