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A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future

The concept of the future imaginary seeks to capture the ways people imagine the futures of their societies.[1] In Indigenous contexts we often refer to the seventh generation as a shorthand reminder of how our actions in the present will affect our descendants. Thus, the research group I co-lead, the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF), has taken that frame—150 to 200 years out (science fiction territory)—as the future about which we are interested in thinking.[2]

What do we, as members of Indigenous communities, think about when we think in those timeframes? As we have argued elsewhere, what are ready-to-hand are the images and ideas generated over decades of popular science fiction.[3] These touchstones have filled our imaginations with ideas about what kinds of governmental structures we might have, what sorts of rituals we might practice, what kinds of gender structures might be in place, what kinds of drugs we might take, and, of course, what kinds of technology we might use. One can think of the future imaginary as a distinct part of the current 'social imaginary,' described by Charles Taylor as "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings…not expressed in theoretical terms, but carried in images, stories, and legends."[4] It forms the popular vocabulary that we use to describe what we see when we see the future.

Given that popular science fiction has historically been the provenance of Western writers, it tends to reflect a particular set of imperial and colonial biases and prejudices. One consequence of this lineage is the fact that recognizable descendants of Indigenous

people do not often appear in the settler future imaginary, nor does one see any indication of Indigenous culture as having survived into the seventh generation and beyond. 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?"[5]

Despite its historical and contemporary colonialism, we at the Initiative love science fiction. It allows us to dream, concretely, about what the future might hold for our children, communities, and our species. The work we have conducted with the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) research network has focused on claiming territory in the newly forming virtual places of cyberspace.[6] We are now turning towards claiming territory in the future imaginary, or, better yet, creating our own.

Manifesting the Future

Indigenous artworks that explicitly imagine the future are not many. There is the work of my co-director at AbTeC, the Mohawk artist Skawennati, including *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* (2001)[7] and *TimeTraveller™* (2008 – 2013).[8] These two works, companion pieces, traverse a millennium of Indigenous past history and future history in North America, from pre-Contact to the twenty-fifth century. They offer up alternative readings of past events as well as visions of a future that centre Indigenous peoples in the narrative, whose stories grow out of a cultural context that emphasizes the continuity and evolution of our cultures (FIGs. 1, 2).

Mi'gmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby brings dystopic visual tropes familiar from both

Aldous Huxley's novel *1984* and Ridley Scott's sci-fi movie *Blade Runner* into his short film, *File Under Miscellaneous* (2010). It tells of the moment a Mi'gmaq man, "sick of being a man," chooses to undergo a grisly medical transformation to strip him of his Native skin so he can become white. The implication here is that, in swapping his brown skin for white, he is no longer a man. But he will survive, as whatever thing he has become (FIG. 3).

A year after *File Under Miscellaneou,* Nanobah Becker released a short film called *The 6th World* (FutureState series, 2011).Becker, who is Diné/Navajo, draws on Navajo origin stories that hold that our world, Earth, is the fifth world. Becker explores the idea that the next world, the sixth world, will actually come into being by colonizing Mars. She conjures a narrative where the Navajo captain of a spaceship taking much-needed corn plants to the Mars colony uses traditional agricultural knowledge to save the plants from a killing blight. Thus, he saves the starving Martian colony, and ensures that Indigenous spirit will be core to the new culture as it grows (FIG. 4).

The artist Solomon Enos works from a kanaka maoli viewpoint. His *Polyfantastica* is a sprawling epic spanning 40,000 years of alternate histories and alternate futures, drawing upon and radically expanding Native Hawaiian mythology.[9] Much of his work to date has been realized in the form of comics, drawing, and paintings. The gods, humans, and other creatures and worlds of this story open up vast new possibilities for thinking about how Native communities might evolve (FIG. 5).

Hybridizing the Present

The works by these four artists—Skawennati, Barnaby, Becker, and Enos—

manifest the future. A second path to the future imaginary is to hybridize the present in new or extreme ways, modifying contemporary realities to open up future possibilities. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's seminal work, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights*, is the first new media example of this approach.[10] This pioneering virtual reality piece was produced in the Art and Virtual Environments residency at the Banff Centre in 1994. It creates a virtual West Coast longhouse that draws viewers into Yuxweluptun's Salish traditions while simultaneously casting them into the future through its neon-bright representations (FIG. 6).[11]

The Oji-Cree artist K. C. Adams created the *Cyborg Hybrid* series in the mid-2000s as a speculative intervention into, to quote Mohawk curator Steven Loft, "a wholly different perspective on our possible future…[seeking] to inhabit the world of the trans-biological and of manufactured 'idols' with a radical Indigeneity" [FIG. 7].[12]

In 2011, Wendy Red Star from the Crow Nation created *Thunder Up Above*, a photo series that integrates futuristic regalia with interplanetary landscapes to create tableaus that suggest an entirely different mythology of Contact (FIG. 8).[13]

Altering the Past

A third path to the future imaginary is to imagine alternative pasts that lead to different futures. This strategy has been most richly mined in literature; I recommend Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon's discussion of "slipstreaming" in *Walking the Clouds*, published in 2012. This pioneering anthology of Indigenous literary science fiction discusses numerous stories dealing with "time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, and alternative histories," and positions them within a long history of Indigenous

philosophy that explores such concepts.[14]

But we also see this approach in the media arts, with one of the most significant examples being Cree multimedia artist Archer Pechawis's *Horse*. In this digital drum performance, Pechawis imagines what would have happened if, during the American decades-long assault on the Indians of the Plains, the horses from both sides had joined together to intervene and force a peace (FIG. 9).[15]

Shaping the Infrastructure

A fourth path to Indigenous future imaginaries engages with digital media and digital culture. As our present is increasingly saturated with technology, we can be fairly certain that our future will be as well. Creatively engaging with that technology and the culture that enables it is itself an act of imagination. This is one of the primary motivations for the Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Video Game Design, which provide Indigenous youth with the tools to build the future while at the same time reinforcing their conviction that they will have a place in it (FIG. 10).[16]

This work has been done in other places as well. The *Drumbeats to Drumbytes* think tank held at the Banff Centre in 1994—the same year as *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* it is worth noting—brought together a number of Indigenous artists to discuss electronic networks for media arts collaboration and production.[17] The *Skinning Our Tools: Designing for Culture and Context* summit held in Banff almost a decade later, in 2003, provided opportunities for Indigenous artists and technologists to think deeply about how to repurpose digital technology to better suit the needs of our communities, giving rise to ideas such as CREE++, an Indigenous programming language

conceptualized by Cree artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle.[18] It was also the site of the first

conversations about what would, five years later, become the Skins Workshops.

Critiquing the Project

The final, fifth path to the future imaginary comes through reflecting on our

creative engagements with technology. Key volumes here include *Transference, Tradition,*

Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture from 2006, which

seeks to situate Aboriginal new media within an older lineage of Indigenous video,

performance, and visual arts.[19] Two essays of particular note here are Cree/Métis media

theorist Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew's "Drumbeats to Drumbytes: Globalizing Networked

Aboriginal Art," and Métis/Cree filmmaker Loretta Todd's "Aboriginal Narratives in

Cyberspace." Maskegon-Iskwew's reflections on the *Drumbeats to Drumbytes* workshop

position networked Indigenous art as a medicine enabling autonomous, respectful sharing

between Indigenous communities across the globe. Meanwhile, Todd asks how embodied,

all-our-relations, territory-inflected Aboriginal storytelling might find a home in

cyberspace in light of its lineage of Platonic abstraction, Cartesian logic, and militaristic

command-and-control technology.

A second set of critical reflections comes in volume 17 of the Banff Centre's

online magazine of Canadian digital art and culture, called *Horizon Zero*. This issue,

titled "TELL: Aboriginal Story in Digital Media," was published in 2004.[20] From this

collection one should read, at the very least, curator Candice Hopkins's (Carcross/Tagish

First Nation) "Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic in Digital

Storytelling." Hopkins looks critically at the concept of tradition, particularly as it

pertains to artistic expression, and illustrates how digital media can not only serve those traditions but also can be used to spawn new traditions reflective of contemporary Indigenous life.

A third reference is *Coded Territories: Indigenous Pathways in New Media*, published in 2015, which describes and discusses a range of digital media practices by contemporary Indigenous creators.[21] Start here with Archer Pechawis's ambitious essay "Indigenism: Aboriginal World View as Global Protocol." Pechawis rejects various binaries: traditional/technological; Indigenous thought/western methodology; powwow drumming/rap or rock music. "I am not speaking of grafting Aboriginal protocols onto existing methodologies," he writes. On the contrary, he is

> looking to a future in which Indigenism is the protocol, an all-encompassing embrace of creation: the realms of earth, sky, water, plant, animal, human, spirit, and, most importantly, a profound humility with regards to our position as humans within that constellation.[22]

Making Things Our Own—A Preliminary Typology of the Future Imaginary

We can see from the above a preliminary typology for understanding various attempts to illustrate an Indigenous future imaginary:

- Manifesting the Future: imaginings of the future state of Indigenous individuals and communities
- Hybridizing the Present: re-imaginings of contemporary Indigenous lives and

culture

- Altering the Past: counterfactual narratives that re-imagine historical events, often to create more positive contemporary and future realities for Indigenous people

- Shaping the Infrastructure: engaging with the infrastructure of the present to bend it in a direction more conducive to Indigenous ontologies

- Critiquing the Project: reflections on the process through which Indigenous people are populating the future imaginary

This typology is an initial attempt to discern patterns in work that exercise the future imaginary. As a draft, it is still subject to revision and expansion. Indeed, as I was preparing an earlier version of this essay for presentation at the *Re-Create Media Art History* conference in 2015, another permutation suggested itself. For a long time I had wished that there were more connections between the international media art world, which I had entered as a young digital media technology researcher in Silicon Valley, and became more familiar with through my involvement with the Banff New Media Institute, and the Indigenous media art world in which I became enmeshed after the turn of the century as I started collaborating with Skawennati. I felt that Indigenous new media artists were making work was as strong as that found on the international scene. And I thought the international scene would be greatly enriched by being actually international rather than so tenaciously Euro- and American-centric. These connections, though, remain thin, even if the *Re-Create* conference itself made a conscious effort to address this bias. Yet, now I find myself appreciating that separation. It is a feature, not a bug. I

can see how, if it had been more integrated, Indigenous practice would most likely have been a minority practice within a larger, existing narrative, a few lonely examples within an existing cannon—subaltern—subject to established theory.

The way it has unfolded over the last two decades, though, is that we have developed our own critics, our own critical frameworks, our own antecedents, our own canon—the works, artists, and critics I have referenced above. Thus, we have not been preoccupied with getting "added on" or "brought in" to the narrative, to the canon, to the theory. This is in itself an exercise in imagining an alternative, Indigenous, future. It has allowed us to centre our practice in the cultural discourse and practices that generate it, and create a distinct future where we are not dependent on the gatekeepers to open the gates—not required, even, to storm those gates, or go around them. It has allowed us to create a distinct future in which we strike out on our own, into new territory.

Future Work

I will conclude with a brief preview of ongoing projects exploring the future imaginary that we are supporting as part of the Initiative for Indigenous Futures project.

2167

In collaboration with the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival, and the Pinnguaq media production company, IIF is conducting the *2167* project. *2167* has commissioned six artists to imagine a future North America using virtual reality (VR). The name is a reference to the celebrations that will take place in 2017 for the sesquicentennial of Canadian confederation. Our response is to

use the occasion to look in the opposite direction—150 years into the future. The

commissioned works will form an exhibition to be mounted in Toronto in the summer

and fall of 2017.

Two of the commissions are being produced at IIF headquarters, and exemplify

both "Manifesting the Future" and "Shaping the Infrastructure" imaginaries. Indigenous

arts collective Postcommodity is creating *Each Branch Determined*, a VR work

examining the multilayered history of the American southwest in order to imagine what it

might be like once reclaimed by Indigenous communities (FIG. 11). Visual artist Scott

Benesiinaabandan is working on *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky*, an immersive

environment that speculates about the future of the Anishinaabe language to bring to life

a prophetic Anishinaabe legend involving interstellar travel and the warping of space and

time (FIG.12)

Illustrating the Future Imaginary

In May of 2015, I gave a public talk in Toronto for which we commissioned

artworks from Indigenous artists imagining their descendants or community seven

generations from now.[23] We have continued the commission effort, and currently have

nine original artworks. Here is a sample of the "Manifesting the Future" imaginaries the

artists have created so far:

- Plains Cree artist Steve Sanderson imagines the day when his people are once
  more in command of the prairies and their own destinies (FIG. 13).

- Inuit Artist Heather Campbell illustrates a very dark future where global warming has forced humanity up above the tree line and onto Inuit territory (FIG. 14).

- S'Klallam artist Jeffrey Veregge imagines the first Indians in deep space, and how she might look different from what we think an astronaut should look like (FIG. 15).

- Mohawk artist Kaia'tanoron Bush imagines how her students' lives are changing now and will continue to change as they bring their culture into space (FIG. 16).

The extraordinary thing that struck Skawennati and me as we commissioned these works was how eager most of the participants were to take on this challenge. The commission motivated them to think concretely about the future, an opportunity that the needs of their lives and communities do not often afford them. More importantly, it seemed to provide them with a context that allowed them to look beyond the injustices of the past and the struggles of the present, to an expansive, hopeful, and vibrant future. It is best that the final words of this essay should come from one of these artists, Kaia'tonoron Bush, Mohawk of Kahnawake:

> 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.

NOTES

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