

## **A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future**

Before I begin, I want to apologize for coming into this symposium late. I have heard great things about yesterday and this morning, and am sad that I had a scheduling conflict. It's always a bit strange to come into a conversation this late in the game; hopefully what I have to say fits with what has come before.

I want to start by thanking Heather and Carla for inviting me to be part of this conversation. It's been a troubling week, here in North America, and I found myself at times in a deep despair for the future. But it is a week that ended with an amazing visit by an Indigenous game designer, Allen Turner, whose work points one way forward to an expansive and vibrant Indigenous creative presence on this content. And now, finally, I am here, in a room full of the good minds whose words and thoughts have been essential to helping me feel my way forward to an understanding of the full range of possibilities for being Indigenous. And all your beautiful faces remind me of something

Paul Chaat Smith once wrote, that “We must dare for something bolder. For those willing to leave behind the cheap, played-out clichés, a great project awaits.” The people in this room have taken that dare, you are thinking and making boldly, and I am heartened. Thank you.

The proposed title of my contribution is A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future. It’s the third instalment in a series of essays where I’m trying to work through the concept of the future imaginary. It is a concept that has been very generative for my work and the work that I do with Skawennati and others in AbTeC and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures. I am now in the process of trying to sharpen it up and see if it is generative for others, and where I can improve my articulation of it to make it more so.

The concept of the future imaginary seeks to capture the ways people imagine the futures of their societies.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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?”<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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)<sup>7</sup> and *TimeTraveller*<sup>TM</sup> (2008 – 2013).<sup>8</sup> These two works, companion pieces, traverse a millennium of Indigenous past history and future history in North America, from pre-Contact to the twenty-fourth 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 Miscellaneous*, 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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).<sup>11</sup>

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].<sup>12</sup>

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).<sup>13</sup>

### **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.<sup>14</sup>

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).<sup>15</sup>

## 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).<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> It was also the site of the first conversations about what would, five years later, become the Skins Workshops.

## **Critiquing the Project**

And, 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

## **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 there were Indigenous new media artists whose 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 canon—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 frame 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)

### *Dechinta Character Design Workshops*

### *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.<sup>23</sup> 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 we 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

- 1 Jason Edward Lewis, “A Better Dance and Better Prayers: Systems, Structures, and the Future Imaginary in Aboriginal New Media,” in *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media*, eds. Steve Loft and Kerry Swanson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014), 48–77.
- 2 Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati Fragnito, *Initiative for Indigenous Futures*, [www.abtec.org/iif](http://www.abtec.org/iif).
- 3 Jason Edward Lewis, “Preparations for a Haunting: Note Towards an Indigenous Future Imaginary,” in *The Participatory Condition*, eds. Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne, and Tamar Tembeck (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- 4 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 106.
- 5 Nalo Hopkinson, Interview with Paul Kennedy. “Ideas: The Coming Zombie Apocalypse,” *CBC Radio One* (27 October 2015), 2:09.
- 6 Jason Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 29.2 (July 2005): 29–31.

7 Skawennati Fragnito, *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*, 2001,

<http://skawennati.com/ImaginingIndians/> Accessed: September 7, 2016.

8 Skawennati Fragnito, *TimeTraveller*<sup>TM</sup>, machinima video, 2008–2013,

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9 Enos, Solomon, “The Basic Principles of *Polyfantastica*,”

[www.polyfantasticasketchbook.weebly.com](http://www.polyfantasticasketchbook.weebly.com).

10 Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights*, virtual reality,

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11 Jackson 2bears, “A Conversation with Spirits Inside the Simulation of a

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eds. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Victoria, BC: CTheory Books, 2010).

12 Steven Loft, “Cyborg Hybrid \cy·borg 'hi·brid\ n,” in *Storm Spirits*

*Exhibition* (Winnipeg: Urban Shaman Gallery, 2007).

13 Wendy Red Star, *Thunder Up Above*, print, clothing, 2011,

<http://www.wendyredstar.com/thunder-up-above/>

14 Grace L. Dillon, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science*

*Fiction* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

15 Archer Pechawis, *Horse*, video, performance, 2001,  
[www.apxo.net/performance/horse.html](http://www.apxo.net/performance/horse.html).

16 Beth Aileen Lameman and Jason Edward Lewis, “Skins: Designing Games with First Nations Youth,” *Journal of Game Design and Development Education* 1.1 (Winter 2011): 63–75.

17 Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes timeline,” *Drumbytes.org*, <http://drumbytes.org/about/timeline.php>.

18 Sara Diamond, “Reframing the Cathedral: Opening the Sources of Technologies and Cultural Assumptions,” REFRESH Media Arts History Conference, Banff Centre for the Arts (2007), [www.mediaarthistory.org/mah-conf-series/refresh/programmatic-key-texts](http://www.mediaarthistory.org/mah-conf-series/refresh/programmatic-key-texts).

19 Dana Claxton, Steven Loft, and Melanie Townsend, eds. *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual & Digital Culture* (Banff, AB: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions), 2005.

20 Cheryl L’Hirondelle, ed., “TELL: Aboriginal Story in Digital Media,” special issue *Horizon Zero* 17 (2004),  
[www.horizonzero.ca/index.php?pp=29&lang=0](http://www.horizonzero.ca/index.php?pp=29&lang=0)

21 Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson, eds., *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014).

22 Archer Pechawis, “Indigenism: Aboriginal World View as Global Protocol,” in *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2014), 40.

23 Jason Edward Lewis, “At Play in the Fields of the Future” (lecture, The Walrus Talks Play, York University, Toronto, May, 2015).