

# Creating Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace

by  
**Jason Edward Lewis & Skawennati**

Keynote @  
*Differential Mobilities: Movement and Mediation in Networked Societies*  
conference

Concordia University, Montreal, QC

May, 2013

**STF** She:kon. Skawennati iontiats. Tekwanonwerá:tons. Welcome to my land! As a Mohawk from Kahnawake, one of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee --or Iroquois -- Confederacy, the island of Montreal, known to us as **Tiohtiá:ke** is part of our traditional territory. We Mohawks, or Kanienkehaka, as we have again begun to call ourselves, have a beautiful greeting that we say at the beginning of any gathering. It is called the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen. Words Before All Else. I will just say the very first bit, because the whole thing, when done properly, takes 3 days to say!

Today we gather together and remind ourselves that we, the people, have been given the responsibility to live in balance and harmony with one another and with all the living things.

We think of all the people who are here today, and of all those who would have liked to be here but couldn't make it; we think of the people we have met, and the ones we haven't met as yet. We remember that all of the people who live on every part of Mother Earth are all connected, related, and bound together in the same circle of life. So we bring our minds together as one as we pile high our greetings, express our love, and give thanks, to all the people here and everywhere.

**Together** Now our minds are one.

**JEL** We want to thank Kim Sawchuck specifically, and the other members of the organizing committee generally, for inviting us to speak, and to kick the whole shebang off. It is an honor for us to be here today.

Context is important. At this moment, we find ourselves out of context. The field of 'mobility studies' and the specific term 'differential mobilities' are new to both of us. In fact, everything we know about 'differential mobilities' we learned from Kim-- though all errors and omissions are of our own making.

We will do our best to make connections between these terms, and the concepts that animate our own work. It is new territory for us; we hope you help us travel across it safely.

**STF** We're not entirely out of context, of course. Our personal context travels with us where ever we go. We were reminded of this recently when I spoke at the Truth & Reconciliation Commission held in Montreal last month. (For our international visitors, the Truth & Reconciliation Commission is a component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Its mandate is to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools, the evil tool of assimilation and genocide that purported to "kill the Indian, save the child". My wonderful co-panelist, the elder John Cree, told us how he was recently asked how much land he needed. He replied that all he needed was the square underneath his feet; his territory moved with him wherever he went. Unfortunately, the person responded by saying, "Oh, so then we can take the rest!" John stands there and says, "That totally went over her head."

So what are we travelling with? I was born of a Mohawk mother and an Italian immigrant father and raised in a Montreal suburb that is just across the Fleuve St-Laurent, next to the reserve from which my family had been exiled. I was born an artist. My practice for the last twenty (!) years has focussed on experimenting with new media as a way to connect and empower people and to imagine and create the future. I became an activist in my teens, when I organized Wear White for World

Peace Day at my high school. (It was the Eighties.) Today I see the roles of artist and activist as complimentary and connected.

**JEL** I teach here at Concordia, focusing on the ways in which computation can be considered and worked with as a creative material. I am also an artist, interested in new forms of digital texts and poetry. And I am a Cherokee and Pacific Islander who was adopted and raised by a White family living in the northern California mountains.

There are many, many other details of our specific contexts. We mention these particular details to highlight the mobility of the bodies that came together to produce us. Another detail: we have two Mohawk-Cherokee-Italian-Hawaiian-Samoan sons. Imagine that? I get tired just listing it. But amazed, too. This map shows the mobilization of bodies that took place within the last century in order to make those two little boys appear in the world.

Enough context.

**STF** One thing that Kim said really stuck with us: “what happens if we think about power, social relations and aesthetics from the perspective of what moves--and what is made to be still.”

What moves. What is still. We are interested in how time moves, and how it does not. How tradition is understood--either as a fixed set of values and rituals: **still**; Or as a constantly evolving set of practices: **moving**.

**JEL**

Of course, as with all things, the lived experience is somewhere in between. Among Native people, or at least the people we know, we feel in tension with tradition. It is beautiful and rich, providing spiritual and even aesthetic guidance. Yet it often seems as if we are defined by tradition. Captured by it. Forced into a state of frozen amber, chilled to absolute zero in that last moment before Contact. **Still.** How else, the thinking goes, will we remain distinct, in the onslaught of a provincial, national, continental and global homogenization of culture pouring through the network, over the airwaves, off the boats and the jetplanes? How else can we set ourselves apart, and continue to lay claim to the territories on which we stand, in which our ancestors are buried? Our ancestors fought and died and survived and resisted; how else do we honor them than by mirroring their way of living?

**STF** For many in our communities, and, somewhat perversely, even more so outside of our communities, a strict adherence to tradition is the only answer to all such questions. This is evidenced by the questions we are asked, wherever we go, whenever the conversation turns to our Aboriginality. Our authenticity is judged by how closely our answers align with the asker's perception of tradition. **STF: "Do you speak your language?"** **JEL: "Do you follow your ceremonies?"** **STF: "Do you have an Indian name?"** **Does it mean anything?"** **JEL: Do you dance at Pow wows?"** **STF: "Are you full-blooded?"** **JEL: "Do you live on the reservation?"**

**STF** And, in the long-distance-relationship phase of our togetherness, when I would regularly visit Jason in San Francisco using my Native Status card as ID, U.S. Immigration has asked me: "How Indian are you?", "How are you Indian?" and "Exactly what percentage Indian are you?"

**JEL** These questions often feel meant to restrict, to immobilize, to stifle, to still. They restrict us to a space outside of the current era, and so we don't have to be consulted about what is happening now and what might happen in the future. They immobilize our ability to look at the past critically, and thus choose to carry forward the positive while casting off the negative. They stifle voices in our communities, suppressing dissent that would actually serve to make us stronger. They tell us "Ssssh. Be still. **STF That's not the Mohawk way.** **JEL That's not the Cherokee way.** **STF That's not the Indian way.**"

**STF** The work we have been doing over the last two decades has been aimed at breaking out of the stillness. When you think of an Aboriginal person, what do you see in your mind's eye? A sepia-toned photograph of a dark-skinned man wearing feathers and buckskin, carrying a tomahawk? Or what about a vibrantly coloured video clip of a dark-skinned man wearing a Starfleet uniform and carrying a tricorder? What about a tan man jetpacking down the flyway, lit by brilliant billboards, seamless and seemingly endless? Jason and I want to see what Native people look like in the future. We want to visualize it so that, together, with other artists, with youth, and with you, we can make it real.

**JEL** We are putting out images and ideas of ourselves as a thriving people in the near and not so near future. 100, 500, 1000 years hence. Because if we don't imagine ourselves getting there, who will? And if we're not part of that future imaginary, why bother with us in the present? We need to be active. Not still.

**STF** Another future-oriented strategy we've seriously undertaken is to encourage Aboriginal youth to embrace the tools of our modern, media-saturated society by

teaching them how to use those tools. We'd like to see them being producers of web pages, news, shows, video games, apps --not just consumers of them. We think that is another way for us Native people insert ourselves into the present and the future.

**JEL** We founded AbTeC, or Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, as a research network of artist, academics, activists and technologists interested these issues.

**STF** Art: TT - show episode 4. 4 mins or 8 mins. [[Episode 3. [8 minutes (without credits)]] AbTeC spiel.

**JEL** Education: Skins - show Skins 2.0 documentary. 11mm55ss. Skins spiel.

**STF** Exile: Membership process - show ? [Earlier, I mentioned that I spoke at the TRC. I am not a residential school survivor. I was asked to be on a panel because I am currently active in Kahnawake, my reserve, in trying to right an old and very hurtful wrong. The Indian Act is the name of the legislation that determines the relationship between the federal government and the first peoples. It defines who is an "Indian" in Canada. Up until 1985 it stated that any Aboriginal woman who married a non-Aboriginal man would lose her Native status, and any children they produced would not be considered Native. [I am one of those children.] Like the residential schools, it was another method of assimilation, especially effective because the Mohawk are a matrilineal nation. In 1985, Bill C-31 amended the Indian Act, reinstating the Native status of those ex-communicated women, and instating their children. Except Kahnawake did not want us back on their band list. I did not yet tell you that when a Native man married a non-Native women, the woman gained Native status (she became an Indian!) and, needless to say, their children were also added to the Band List. Inclusion on the band list comes with certain rights, and among them is the right to live in Kahnawake. When my mom married my dad, she was taken off the band list. When I was three, we left. I did not have the right to go to school there. Our family was growing, but the house was not. We

would not be able to buy a house there. But most significantly, we were no longer welcome.

STF What does it mean to be Onkwehonwe? JEL What does it mean to be GWY (Tsalagi)? STF What does it mean to be a Real Human Being?

JEL Those are the questions we need to ask. What did it mean then? What does it mean now? Most importantly for us--what will it mean in a thousand years? That is the field we need to traverse. Those are the concepts we need to mobilize.

STF Niá:wen.

JEL GV (Wado)

STF Merci

JEL Gracias

JEL STF Thank you.