The Future Imaginary

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http://youtu.be/cwkyaUALKJc

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1. Openings

Talking about the future

talking about the past, talking about the future

Aboriginal communities have many ways of talking about the past. We retell the stories of our ancestors, we celebrate the heritage of our people, and we argue with everybody—academics, the government, the media, even ourselves—about our history. We do all of this, often, which is necessary and good. What we do not do much is talk about our future. We strive to stay mindful of the seventh generation…but we do not spend much time imagining what our communities will be like in one hundred, five hundred or a thousand years.

After the Dance

`After the Dance`

The art historian Richard Hill has written a short story that often comes to mind when I'm thinking about the future of our communities. A little history is important to understanding why. The Ghost Dance was a ritual developed in the late 1800's by Native cultures in the Western United States as a response to the genocidal practices of North American governments. It was created in the belief that performing this dance would reverse the expansion of White people into Indian territory.

`a better dance, and better prayers`

Hill's story, "After the Dance", is set in a post-Ghost Dance future, where the Thunder Beings have cleansed the white people from North America. The story's main character, Two Bears, is talking about the cleansing with his adopted son, the sole white person to survive, saved from the apocalypse by Two Bears himself. Two Bears says: "I am sorry for some of the white men. The anger of the Thunder on behalf of the people had been very great. But that's only part of it. I have to be honest. It was our own anger too. When it went into motion that initial power was so strong there was no pulling it back. I'm not sorry the way things are now, but I wish things could have worked out some other way. I wish we could have come up with a better dance and better prayers."

Dilemma

caught

Two Bears' words articulate a dilemma faced by many Aboriginal people caught between the desire to see our cultures ascendant once more and the reality of finding ourselves profoundly embedded within a larger multi-cultural society. We rue the day the colonists arrived and began methodically destroying our ancestors and our ways of life. We wonder "what if...?" Some of us dream of vengeance, and yearn for the Thunder. Some of us dream of a native-only utopia, somewhere, someplace, somehow. Some of us retreat to the land of the lotus-eaters, and seek merely to forget that they exist.

Imagine a Better Future

get imagining

Yet we are spouses, children, parents and friends with non-Aboriginal people. Pursuing dreams of a Ghost Dance to their extreme conclusion mean erasing essential parts of ourselves from existence. This is madness. Mad in its recapitulation of the siren song of purity, mad in its impracticality, and mad in its consequences. To imagine a different future, a future that does not require us to go down that path, we best get to imagining what Two Bears' better dance and better prayers might be.

2. The Future Imaginary: Concept

Social Imaginary

the social imaginary

My collaborator, Skawennati Fragnito, and I have spent the better part of the last decade trying to do just that. Charles Taylor, the Montreal-based philosopher, coined the term "the social imaginary" to describe the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings [through] shared images, stories, legends, etc. This social imaginary deeply informs peoples' motivations, beliefs and actions.

Future Imaginary

the future imaginary

Skawennati and I are interested in something similar we call The Future Imaginary, particularly as it relates to Native people. By Future Imaginary we mean the images, stories and legends that are being told about the future, about who will be in it, what sorts of people they might be, and what kind of societies they might build.

Science Fiction

science fiction

This Future Imaginary is being constructed in multiple ways. Science fiction is a big contributor. Think of the artificial life of Frankenstein's monster, or the tricorders of Star Trek. Consider how the Metaverse of the novel Snow Crash became the virtual environment Second Life, or how the total surveillance state of Brave New World has become the post 9/11 reality. From jet packs to satellites to robots to the internet, scientists and engineers are busy creating the future that artists have been imagining for us.

3. The Future Imaginary: Importance

"We are what we imagine."

We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine…who and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.

1. The novelist N. Scott Momaday talks about why such exercises in imagination are important: "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine…who and what and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined."

Future Paths

new stories

2. Skawennati and I embrace this view. We feel it would be beneficial to our communities if we pay more attention to the Future Imaginary. Stories matter, and old stories play a central role in how many Native cultures see themselves. But we should also focus on creating new stories…science fiction stories in particular, science fiction stories because they illustrate possible future paths. They play out the consequences of our decisions now, and they communicate ideas about who we might be tomorrow.

We don't appear in the future.

TED culture

3. This culture—the culture represented by the TED audience—is busy dreaming of the future, imagining what it might look like through science fiction, and building it with science fact.

`absence`

4. Yet Indigenous people rarely appear in those imaginaries. We are neither imagining that far future ourselves, nor is the colonizer culture imagining us in it. Sure, every now and then you get an ex-terrorist like Chakotay in Star Trek: The Next Generation, or a bloodthristy warrior like Raven in Snow Crash. Yet few of these characters have created a lasting impression on the popular imagination. And it is there, in the collective dreams about where technology will take us, that are found basic assumptions about who we will be when we get there.

Dangerous

`dangerous: for vs. with`

6. So we have two problems. Two dangers, really. First, the future is being built *for* us rather than *with* us.

`dangerous: ignorance`

7. The second danger is that absence implies—at best—lack of importance, or—at worst—lack of existence. A culture that is considered unimportant in the year 2113 can be more easily ignored in the year 2013.

4. Imagining: Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace

AbTeC

1. How do we address these dangers?

`[AbTeC logo]`

One way is to get more Native people actively engaged with these issues. In 2005, Skawennati and I founded Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace or AbTeC, a collection of Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, artists, activists and technologists who are interested in the intersection of Native culture and technology, now and in the future.

`our imaginaries`

2. AbTeC is an example of how future imaginaries of *our* choosing may be developed and supported. The project is an argument for the fundamental

importance, culturally and intellectually, of striving to consciously imagine ourselves into the far future.

Skins

[Skins logo]

3. One of AbTeC's major projects is the Skins Workshops that integrate Aboriginal stories into the video game production process.

producers vs. consumers

The project is designed to encourage First Nations youth to be *producers* of media, not just *consumers* of it.

seeding the future

4. We've conducted a number of workshops over the last seven years, and they've resulted in a series of award-wining videogames that place both historical and contemporary Native culture at the centre of the narrative and gameplay. More importantly, we've seeded the thought into a number of young, Native minds that they, too, can bend complex technology to their own ends.

TimeTraveller™

[TT logo]

5. The other big AbTeC project is a machinima series called TimeTraveller™. Created by Skawennati, TimeTraveller™ is the story of Hunter, a young Mohawk man in the 22nd century, lost and adrift in a high-tech society that has cut him off from his ancestors. He uses an emerging technology called TimeTraveller™ to watch and interact with historic events of importance to the First Nations of Turtle Island.

we got busy

6. Hunter's life in 2112 allows Skawennati to trace out the development of a future where the Native community, aided by the highest birth rate on the continent, has reasserted itself as the majority culture. Throughout the nine-episode series, Skawennati explores a huge range of themes related to identity, sovereignty and culture. But it is also important to note that the return to Native majority that she envisions, happens through procreation rather than through the destruction wrought in Hill's "After the Dance." As one of Skawennati's characters from the year 2112 says, "We got busy".

5. Imagining: Technology Developers

What counts as knowledge

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    [Cyberspace] has...been under construction
     for at least the past two thousand years
                in Western culture
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I said before that I had two suggestions. This quote by filmmaker Loretta Todd helps frame the second one. "[Cyberspace] has...been under construction for at least the past two thousand years in Western culture."

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              what counts?
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2. Technology designers and developers define much more than mere functionality. Rather, they design the protocols through which all of our mediated communication operates. These protocols end up defining what counts—as data, as connection, as action.

Design decisions

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              who decides?
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3. Through countless design decisions—What counts as a search term match, or Who counts as a friend, Do these the avatars have white skin or brown? Designers and developers decide what counts as knowledge, what sorts of operations we can perform on that knowledge, and how that knowledge becomes real.

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          protocols are culture
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4. I mean, in a world where 800 million people in more than 100 countries use Facebook weekly, the nature of the protocols that Facebook uses to encode those relationships become an important *cross*-cultural issue.

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          systems and structures
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5. That is what concerns me. Systems are being created, systems that affect us all. They are being created by a relatively homogenous group of people operating out of a fairly narrow cultural history.

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          we need to become active
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6. Native people need to become active in the shaping of those systems and structures. By acting we can help expand the assumptions upon which those

systems and structures are based and we can stake out our own territory in the Future Imaginary.

6. Closings

Make the Future

> **the best way to predict the future is to invent it.**

1. We cannot predict the future through sheer mental effort. Yet we do know that a great building project is underway, and, as Alan Kay observed, the only way to predict where it is going is to participate directly in that building effort.

> **look forward**

2. Now it is time to look forward and teach ourselves not only how to *use* these technologies but also how to *make* them as well. We have the opportunity and the obligation to involve ourselves intimately in the shaping of the systems and structures in which we will be living for the next five hundred years, and to populate that Future Imaginary with our stories, our tools, and our selves.

Haudenosaunnee

> **the people of this place**

3. I want to close this talk by acknowledging the Haudenosaunee people, on whose land we now find ourselves. They are the original people of this place. And, despite a long history of deception, betrayal and violence by the colonizer culture, they are still the people of this place.

Who?

> **whose past, whose present, whose future**

4. As I create technology and design interactive systems, I try to keep that in mind. And I encourage my students—all my students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous—to think about three things.
- whose past are you building upon?
- whose present are you taking for granted?
- who is included in your future imaginary?

Dancing

> **a better dance, and better prayers**

5. Remembering history helps us to better see the present. By better seeing the present, we can better imagine a future in which the Haudenosaunee people, my people, your people, and all of our people are present, and vital, and dancing.