SKAWENNATI'S *TIMETRAVELLER*™

Deconstructing the colonial matrix in virtual reality

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Abstract

This article examines the decolonizing imperatives of the nine-episode machinima film series *TimeTraveller*™ (2008–2013) by the Mohawk artist, writer and curator Skawennati. *TimeTraveller*™ assesses the (re)presentation of Indigenous pasts and futures. Using avatar characters, Skawennati *delinks* (Mignolo, 2011) from colonial, Western and imperialistic narratives and the hegemonic structures of a Eurocentric worldview. Avatar bodies act as a catalyst in order to break down the contemporary, political episteme of classification and create spaces for fluid *identities-in-politics* (Mignolo, 2011)—virtual bodies that reflect the layering of subjective personal experiences which may be multiple and changing. In asserting her Indigenous presence in cyberspace, Skawennati's work lies in between new media art production and decolonial gesture, provoking a rereading of bodies and identities in order to reimagine and reassert denied and silenced Indigenous voices in virtual reality.

Keywords

decolonization, media art, Skawennati, avatar, delink

Mohawk artist, writer and curator Skawennati's nine-episode film series *TimeTraveller*™ (2008–2013) reimagines the past and proposes vibrant Indigenous futures. The series presents decolonial gestures that begin to emancipate Indigenous cultures from a colonial narrative by reframing identities, delinking from problematic Westernized histories, and merging postcolonial theory with new media production. The symbolically trademarked *TimeTraveller*™ is an edutainment system used by Skawennati's characters to (re)discover North American history.

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The series addresses the lack of an Indigenous presence in futuristic popular culture and science fiction through stories of pain, hardship, triumph and love. Through the eyes of her protagonists, Hunter and Karahkwenhawi (Figure 1), the viewer is able to travel through time using the *TimeTraveller™* virtual reality headset. Travelling through time, space and across North and South America the viewer is asked to question problematic postcolonial modernity and consider the possibilities of decolonization. How can we employ decolonization to reimagine Western-centric histories and emancipate marginalized and silenced Indigenous bodies?

TimeTraveller™ was produced in collaboration with Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), a network of artists, academics and technologists developing Aboriginally determined territories within cyberspace and encouraging the use and development of new media technologies by Indigenous people. For Skawennati, "Second Life is a platform and a medium. [Our] island in Second Life is an Aboriginally determined space. I am not very interested in creating new platforms. I'm much more excited about shaping them, creating content for them, finding the killer app for them" (personal communication, April 11, 2016). The ownership of online spaces such as AbTeC Island in Second Life—used primarily as a filming site that can be closed off from the greater virtual public—enables creativity and the development of Indigenous narratives through the occupation of virtual space.

Skawennati creates a complex narrative through the nine-episode *TimeTraveller™* series filmed in machinima, a mode that combines machine and cinema, in other words, a movie made by recording the action in a video game or virtual environment. The machinima is shot in Second Life, an open-platform online virtual world. The series opens with the story of an angry young Mohawk bounty hunter named Hunter as he embarks on a vision quest to uncover the history of the Mohawk people for himself. Hunter—like all the characters in Skawennati's narratives—reflects the artist's own self-representation. Though she works collectively with a small team of production

FIGURE 1 Skawennati, *Native Love*, 2012. Machinimagraph from *TimeTraveller*. Image courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT.

assistants to create the spaces, skins and visualization of the series, Skawennati is the sole author of the story itself. She presents narrative aspects of her identity through a multiplicity of characters.

Why Second Life as a mode of storytelling? For Skawennati, the path towards *TimeTraveller*™ was not entirely linear. It borrows from past projects and research that have evolved with technological capacities available to new media practitioners. Skawennati first experimented with machinima in Second Life with her earlier work *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* (2001). Though the final iteration of the work is presented through the perspective of a female character who travels through a millennium of First Nations history, initially the project was set to examine the experiences of a series of characters, one of whom was named Raven (a reference to Raven from *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, a science fiction novel that inspired the creator of Second Life to develop the online interactive platform). Skawennati's story came into being through a collaborative project reframing the problematic and racist depictions of Indigenous peoples through the *Minnesota Massacre* panorama depicting the 1862 Sioux Uprising in southern Minnesota. In revisiting the work from a decolonial perspective, Skawennati wrote two journal entries outlining the experience of a young Indigenous man named Raven (who would later become the character Hunter). These entries would come to inform the first two episodes of *TimeTraveller*™.

The platform of Second Life was also a natural departure from Skawennati's *CyberPowWow* (1997), the first interactive online Indigenous art gallery. The participatory exhibition site was built in the "Palace", a pioneering online communication system that allowed users to chat and interact through simplified graphic avatars. According to Skawennati, Second Life was "like the Palace but all grown up" with the same general functionality of online communication but expanded with mobile avatar bodies,

customizable characters and the ability to build three-dimensional spaces and objects (personal communication, April 11, 2016).

TimeTraveller™ is a science fiction story that borrows from Skawennati's historical research into real events important to Indigenous historical narratives that had been told primarily through the lens of colonial perspectives. The central object of the story, and the element that allows Skawennati's characters to travel back and forth through time, is the *TimeTraveller*™ virtual reality headset: a source of entertainment and learning for the 22nd-century inhabitants of Skawennati's science fiction future. They can immerse themselves in both historical and futuristic time periods powered by the ultra-lightweight voice-activated headset that looks like a sleek transparent pair of glasses, but with incredible capabilities. In Skawennati's machinima film users don the *TimeTraveller*™ headsets as they embark on a series of global and temporal adventures. Characters wearing the headset may enter virtual reality immersions through two different modes: the "fly-on-the-wall mode" in which the user acts only as an undetected observer and the "intelligent agent mode" in which users can participate as characters in real historical events. Characters such as Hunter engage with Skawennati's historical narrative through the headsets that immerse the character and thus the viewer of Skawennati's work, who is participating through the first-person narrative lens of her characters.

In a sense, this mode of narrative storytelling delinks from colonial pasts. The process of delinking is articulated in Stuart Hall's (1997) assertion that the past is not reclaimed literally but through the imagination—perhaps through Skawennati's reimagining of Indigenous histories. Skawennati's writing and presenting of her own imagined (though based on historical fact) narrative of the past and future allows her to enter into a discourse that speaks of and to the silenced and denied histories of her own selfhood and Indigenous identities more generally. The artist is open in saying that the

work was made for her, though its audience has greatly expanded; she says, "I am the primary audience for the work. After that I think about my closest communities: my family and my artist-peers. After that, wider communities such as Mohawks, then First Nations; artists, art-lovers, humans" (personal communication, April 11, 2016). By asserting her own voice and narrative first, Skawennati points to the appeal and importance of her work in a public sphere that consistently denies Indigenous multiplicity and identity.

The process of delinking

Skawennati's main characters, Hunter and Karahkwenhawi, travel through time in order to reframe North American histories from Indigenous perspectives and propose vibrant futures for Indigenous cultures in order to delink from colonial histories. This method of delinking is characteristic of the decolonial theory and practice (see Lockward et al., n.d.). The initial formulation of decolonial delinking was by Alíbal Quijano in his article "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad" (1991). Quijano proposed, in light of a surging interest in postcolonial theory and the criticism of Western historical bias, that we must analyze and criticize the limits of the hegemonic structures of a Eurocentric worldview. Delinking is asserted as a mode of "epistemic disobedience" that can be employed as a tool to remove oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality (Quijano, 1991). In order to step outside of a colonially imposed narrative of rational superiority synonymous with Western modernity, the process of delinking subverts the constant search for "newness" in favor of a rethinking of temporal hierarchies—in other words, according to Walter Mignolo (2011), "the spatial paradigmatic breaks of epistemic disobedience" (p. 45), such as through the retelling and reimagining of Indigenous histories in *TimeTraveller*™.

Mignolo (2011) takes up Quijano's method of delinking as he points to the difference between postcolonial theory and decolonial thinking. Postcolonial theory (or postcolonial studies) is cemented in French poststructuralism while decolonial thinking locates itself in the "dense history of planetary decolonial thinking" (p. 46). For Mignolo, this global criticism of Western modernity and coloniality through the decolonial turn is emblematic of "the opening and the freedom from the thinking and the forms of living (economies-other, political theories-other), the cleansing of the coloniality of being and of knowledge; the de-linking from the spell of the rhetoric of modernity, from its imperial imaginary articulated in the rhetoric of democracy" (p. 48). The removal from the modern political episteme (right, center and left) inherent to the delinking project opens up the political, cultural and social world to a "pluriversality" that values, celebrates and expresses the multitude of histories and identities on a global/planetary scale.

How does this method evolve and transition through new media practice? Perhaps the online world and the the virtualized body can act as an entry point to breaking down colonial modernity and to decolonizing historical and contemporary identities and discourses. According to Edward Said, new media technologies are imperative to the construction of identities in formerly colonized regions since colonized peoples are able to learn about themselves through these forms of knowledge (as cited in Fernández, 1999, p. 12). Thus Skawennati's narrative played out in online virtual reality acts as a decolonizing gesture for the artist's own identity and other Indigenous identities that have been silenced by the discourse of modernity.

Episode 1: Delinking through knowledge sharing

Episode 1 of *TimeTraveller*™ begins by introducing the character Hunter in his "home"

year of 2121 in Montreal, Quebec, as he enters his apartment, a storage locker in a futuristic high-rise building. Hunter introduces the *TimeTraveller™* program, which he intends to use for the purpose of a vision quest to uncover the history of the Mohawk people from his own Indigenous positionality—as opposed to the dominant colonial narrative. Skawennati removes her story from a Westernizing framework through her leading character's perspective as an act of epistemic disobedience, extricating her positionality from the imposed linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality addressed by Quijano. As the artist is represented from the viewpoint of one of her many avatar characters (as she refers to each avatar as embodying an aspect or reflection or extension of her self), the emphasis is placed upon the perspectives of individual voices and narratives and the decolonial imperative to reclaim identities—opposing the imperial right to name and create such identities by means of silencing or trivializing. In this way Skawennati removes herself from the modernist sentiment of categorization and naming in order to allow a more fluid and evocative presentation of her self that can be multiple (in the sense that she may embody multiple avatars) and evolving. Skawennati can move through time and space, enabling an evolution of the characters as their experiences of Indigenous histories inform their identities in the present.

The use of narrative storytelling through machinima filmed in Second Life provides a platform for the complicating of the colonialist formation of North American and global histories. Hunter's search for his own identity through a vision quest reframes such histories through the lens of indigeneity, thereby delinking a marginalized Indigenous discourse from the dominating power structures of European colonialism. Skawennati's mode of delinking occurs through the insertion of Indigenous figures into cyberspace and the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and culture in a virtual setting.

The use of Second Life as a platform for Skawennati's nine-episode series addresses the lack of Indigenous peoples' presence in cyberspace as agents or creators of meaning. Indigenous peoples are often exempted from power positions within the development of online technologies. The lack of representation for Indigenous characters and avatars is also problematized through Skawennati's *TimeTraveller™* series. In an artist talk on FemTechNet, Skawennati addresses this lack as it informs her use of Second Life (Cowen, 2013). The tacit knowledge of technology is often passed from person to person through the act of teaching, similar to the way Indigenous storytelling has functioned to pass knowledge through generations. Skawennati, through her practice, has addressed the exclusivity of such knowledge often reserved for the Silicon Valley sect and has been participating in knowledge-sharing activism since the 1990s. Her development and designing of Indigenous avatars in Second Life and the process of revisiting histories through the lens of a Mohawk character delinks from the colonial matrix of virtual reality.

Hunter, the main character of the *TimeTraveller™* series, begins his spiritual vision quest by searching for an "Indian Massacre" using the program's randomized search function. His quest is to explore his own cultural history and reclaim his Mohawk identity by uncovering subaltern knowledge systems that have been marginalized by colonial histories. Hunter arrives in Fort Calgary, Canada, on December 24, 1875. It is Christmas Eve and a group of English settlers in a wooden cottage are preparing to watch a "moving picture": a series of paintings sewn together and held up with a wooden aperture that allows the images to be rotated using a crank as though they are being "played" (an early presentation of new media art). The moving picture is titled *Panorama of the West* by Nestor Vance and tells the story of an Indian massacre that occurred in 1862 in the United States. The imagery presented by Skawennati echoes the

real *Minnesota Massacre* panorama that depicts the Sioux Uprising in a series of forty-five 42 × 42 inch panels.

Panoramas such as the *Minnesota Massacre* were historically used as propaganda tools by the colonial powers of the West. The radical imagery promoted radicalized violence and the falsified narrative that Indigenous peoples were violent "savage warriors". Skawennati reframes the panorama through the lens of Hunter's Indigenous and futuristic perspective as he critiques both the problematic histories of colonization and the biased framing of histories through Western propaganda (Figure 2). The Westernized, and thereby biased, story presented through the panorama in *TimeTraveller*™ begins with a Sioux hunter who is dared by his friend to kill a white farmer but instead kills not only the farmer but his entire family. The Sioux hunter and many of his men go on to kill massive numbers of settlers before being stopped by the Englishmen. Hunter acknowledges that this film is being used as a tool to turn the English settlers against native people, a tool of colonizing propaganda.

In her presentation of this artifact as a historical item that catalogues the past from a biased Westernized and colonizing perspective, Skawennati asks the viewer to look critically at the past and question the authorship of our North American histories. In authoring her own historical narrative she proposes that we look back not passively but actively, in order to dismantle such universalism and consider multiple perspectives. Through this, Hunter is able to question imposed narratives as he seeks to address hidden or marginalized voices within a Western discourse.

Episode 2: Decolonization of time

Episode 2 begins with Hunter arriving in Acton Township, Minnesota, on August 17, 1862, on the day that conflict began between the Dakota Sioux and the American settlers. His vision quest has led him to visit the events depicted in the moving picture from Episode 1 in order to reframe the same history from the subaltern perspective of the Dakota Sioux. Hunter joins through virtual reality immersion a group of Dakota Sioux men as they search for food. The men are starving because the American settlers, referred to as "the feds" by the leader of the

FIGURE 2 Skawennati, *Fort Calgary*, ca. 2008. Machinimagraph from *TimeTraveller*. Image courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT.

Dakotas (i.e., representatives of the Federal government who owe money to his people), are late paying the Sioux people for their land use. Their situation has become desperate as the men and their families begin to starve. While hunting for food the men come across the home of a Christian farmer and decide to ask if he can spare some food for their families. When the Sioux men approach the farmer, he immediately draws his gun and threatens Hunter and the men. In return, the Sioux men draw their weapons before the farmer runs back into his home (Figure 3). The Dakota men leave to pursue food elsewhere and as they walk away from the house the farmer and his friends draw their weapons and once again threaten the group. In an act of defense the Dakota draw their weapons and fire at the farmer, killing him. Firing ensues between the two sides and the farmer's family are ultimately killed as well. As a result of this event a war breaks out between the Dakota Sioux and the US government. According to Skawennati's narrative, which references the real historical events, over 100 tribesmen were accused of treason by the United States and 38 Indigenous people were hung during the largest mass execution in North American history.

Skawennati brings a silenced narrative to the fore, showing the potential of a decolonial gesture that addresses the discontent and distrust felt by those who react against imperial violence.

The disconnect between Episodes 1 and 2, which consider the same historical event, is representative of the colonization of time. Mignolo theorizes the colonization of time in his text *Looking for the Meaning of Decolonial Gesture* (2014) as the process of reframing history through a Western lens, thereby homogenizing disparate histories under one Western linear and universalized global history. The marginalization of Indigenous histories was imposed in order to validate Western colonization of Canada and amalgamate Indigenous histories into a singular colonialist Canadian history (Mignolo, 2014). While the conflict between the Dakota Sioux and the US government may not be understood as Canadian Indigenous history it is important to a North American narrative more generally as the colonial project is implemented across borders by creating a trans-national fear towards and hatred of Indigenous peoples. Episode 1's moving picture propagates such fear and hatred in the

FIGURE 3   Skawennati, *Dakotas Raise Weapons,* 2010. Machinimagraph from *TimeTraveller*. Image courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT.

19th century by colonizing history and retelling a falsified narrative of actual historical events. The use of the moving picture as a method or propaganda implies that these stories and falsified Westernized narratives were meant to be disseminated across North America. While we perceive the "Minnesota Massacre" as an American act of colonizing violence, it is also subsumed into a greater global narrative through the telling and retelling of Western historical narratives across borders. The viewer is made aware of the English settler's constructed narrative through the perspective of Hunter as he participated in the actual event through *TimeTraveller*™ from the subaltern perspective of the Dakota Sioux. The viewer is made aware of the conditions surrounding the event, specifically that the Sioux were starving at the fault of the English settlers and were searching for food. This narrative is opposed to that proposed by the colonizer, which was constructed to position the Indigenous men as savages who unprovokedly killed a farmer and his family. Skawennati's retelling of the "Indian Massacre" decolonizes time as she addresses the biased Eurocentric narrative and removes it from a global Western history by retelling the event through an Indigenous historical narrative.

In proposing Western historical frameworks (e.g., the classifications of periods such as "Antiquity", the "Middle Ages" and the "European Renaissance") as the dominant framework for studying and telling histories, colonization takes hold of not only land but also temporal spaces. This process confuses the greater narrative of global histories with the imposed Eurocentric narratives of Western civilization's singular/linear global history. It relegates non-Western histories—such as the history of China, of Islam, and of the entire African continent—to linear narratives that suppose that all histories can be subsumed into the modern Western canon (Mignolo, 2014). This is also problematic for Indigenous narratives, and many other marginalized narratives, in that it supposes many of these identities no

longer exist and have been subsumed into the universalizing multicultural postmodern construct. How can marginalized bodies break from the imposed linear Western narrative of history?

Constructing identities in virtual reality

Skawennati constructs a metanarrative within her virtual world filmed in Second Life by allowing her avatar characters to employ their own avatars in the *TimeTraveller*™ immersions. In this sense the virtual bodies (or representations of Skawennati through avatars) are able to themselves occupy their own virtual avatar bodies as they enter into *TimeTraveller*™ virtual reality immersions (Figure 4).

Hunter's and Karahkwenhawi's meta-avatars become hybrid identities that exist in multiple temporalities simultaneously, breaking from the imposed colonization of time. Hall (1997) advocates for the construction of identities that recognize multiple histories, which is crucial in a contemporary decolonial world. According to Hall it is necessary to return to the past but not through a direct or literal narrative: "we go through our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact" (p. 58). In the Episode 6 immersion Skawennati's two protagonists meet in virtual reality and fall in love. Skawennati films the two interacting in the *TimeTraveller*™ immersion as avatars, as well as in their respective timelines as their "embodied" selves, located temporally in their respective "home" years: Hunter in the year 2121 and Karahkwenhawi in 2011 (Figures 5 and 6). The fluid nature of the character's bodies, as they move throughout time and between physical embodiment and avatar embodiment, creates a synthesis of outsider identities within a single subject as (s)he travels through time and enters into multiple histories. The fluid nature of their bodies and their ability to move throughout time and

FIGURE 4   Skawennati, *Hunter and Warriors*, 2012. Machinimagraph from *TimeTraveller*. Image courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT.

space both physically and through avatars creates a synthesis of identity, which is present in Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg.

Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) provides a feminist lens for the interpretation of cyborg identity in contemporary culture. According to Haraway, the cyborg identity is a potent subjectivity that is synthesized from fusions of outsider identities. According to María Fernández (1999), Haraway's cyborg is based on the model of mestizaje (the phenomenon of racial mixing that took place during the colonial period in the new world) (p. 13). The cyborg is born out of a notion of the hybridized human, animal and machine, that is emblematic of Third Wave feminism. For Haraway (1991), "women of colour" may be inherently cyborg due to their positionality as marginalized bodies (p. 93). However, this notion supposes a contrasting "non-hybrid" or "pure" state, which for postcolonial media theorists Fernández and Jennifer González is problematic. Perhaps rather than asserting that "women of colour" are inherently cyborg, we can posit that all bodies occupy a cyborg status through the accumulation of historical lineages, cultural influences and individualized perspectives that

make up our complex identities-in-politics both in our online avatars and in our physical bodies. When looking to the cyborg as a fusion of outsider identities it is important to consider the lineage of Haraway's manifesto, as it borrows from the scholarship of Chicana feminist theorist Chela Sandoval. An important contribution of Sandoval's is taken up by Haraway in her formation of the cyborg: the idea of "oppositional consciousness" (Sandoval, 1984). As with Haraway's cyborg and the decolonial identity-in-politics, Sandoval's oppositional consciousness is a mode of embodied experience that resists binary categorization of identities in favor of a fluidity that moves between them (Hewitt, 2010, p. 348). In this sense, the avatar body, like the cyborg identity, can be used as a fluid and malleable site for the decolonization of Indigenous and other marginalized identities. Through the resistance of binary categorizations the cyborg's oppositional consciousnesses contests the assertion of a "non-hybridized state" as unnecessary in a decolonized world.

The cyborg identity is able to move away from normative power structures of gender, racial and cultural identity, creating a cyborg identity-in-politics which is fluid and formed

FIGURE 5 Skawennati, *Five Roses*, 2013. Machinimagraph from *TimeTraveller*. Image courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT.

FIGURE 6 Skawennati, *Air Kiss*, ca. 2011. Machinimagraph from *TimeTraveller*. Image courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT.

by the individual self (Mignolo, 2011, 2014). The cyborg and decolonial identity-in-politics can be reflected in the fluidity and malleability of the Second Life avatar. Haraway's and Mignolo's manifestos destabilize and delink gender and cultural identity in a technologically driven decolonial world. The cyborg feminist, like the decolonial identity-in-politics, is a "disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self" that is formed and informed by a layering of subjective personal experiences (Haraway, 1991, p. 12). The temporal and physical fluidity of Hunter's and Karahkwenhawi's avatars as they live inside and outside of the *TimeTraveller™* immersion allows them to occupy a fluid cyborg position

and thereby delink from the fixed colonial matrix.

According to Pierre Levy (1998), "by virtualizing itself the body is multiplied. Virtualization is not disembodiment but a recreation, a reincarnation, a multiplication, vectorization and heterogenesis of the human" (p. 44). Thus, virtualization may become spiritual catharsis. In this sense, Skawennati's narrative is truly a telling of her own experience and selfhood. As she expresses her identity-in-politics through the multiple avatars of the *TimeTraveller*™ series, as well as characters from earlier works, Skawennati is able to present her own pluriversality of perspectives within her self in order to delink from the modern political episteme

and allow for an opening up of identities and positionalities (Mignolo, 2011). Some of her avatars are not identical representations, however; in reference to her 2015 piece *Dancing with Myself* (Figure 7), Skawennati asserts: "What I hope to show is not that I want to be like my avatar or my avatar wants to be like me but we want to be like each other" (personal communication, April 11, 2016). The avatar body and human bodies may coexist and form and inform one another (Figure 7).

This opens up the possibilities for colonized Indigenous bodies to re-create or reimagine identities that have been denied or silenced by the discourse of modernity and postmodernity (Mignolo, 2011). As Hall advocates, we must

FIGURE 7   Skawennati, *Dancing with Myself*, 2015. Diptych: machinimagraph and photograph. Image courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT.

construct a collective will through difference; this "implies the recognition of multiple identities" within the greater cultural sphere and perhaps even a single body (Fernández, 1999, p. 14).

The customizable and malleable avatar body can allow users to revamp their identities, which may have been discredited in Western systems of classification and their invention of hierarchies. This may still be complicated within the limitations of platforms such as Second Life due to the fact that users are presented with set options to construct and create their own virtual representation. However, Skawennati and a host of other users are working towards inclusiveness by creating new bodies, skins, hair and clothing for avatar characters; allowing users to customize and personalize their identities online. According to Sherry Turkle (1995), professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an individual's identity can be viewed as "several versions of a document open in a computer screen where the user is able to move between them at will" (p. 121). She also emphasizes the possibilities of play inherent to the online virtual body in that one can construct, play with, and manipulate one's identity and try out new ones.

When I asked Skawennati about the "seduction of the avatar" being its inherent malleability and openness to creation and manipulation (in the best sense), she compared the virtual bodies to Barbie dolls. For the artist, the Barbie dolls that she played with and controlled as a child offered her a sense of power in that these female characters were tools in play that allowed her to "go anywhere and do anything". The avatar, like Barbie, but to a much higher degree, allows the artist to go anywhere and do anything in the virtual realm while also presenting the open possibilities of constructing and presenting her own unique identity through these seductive iterative virtual bodies (personal communication, April 11, 2016).

It is important to problematize the inherent malleability of the avatar as it may indicate negative aspects associated with cross-dwelling in multiple identities. For Tim Dean (1997), such cross-dwelling involves a complex collection of issues including "tourism, colonization, Orientalism, appropriation, domestication and such—to which cultural studies in general and postcolonial studies in particular have sensitized us" (p. 914). In line with this perspective Homi Bhabha (1991) critiques the postmodern identity as the subject being encouraged to constantly refashion their selfhood, allowing one to be "somewhat dismissive of the 'real' history of the other" (p. 217). Though, for González (1995), the cyborg—or mestizaje—"given their multiple parts and multiple identities . . . will always be read in relation to historical context" (p. 272), "a cyborg is not without its origins" (Fernández, 1999, p. 14). While the illusive cyborg identity may evade the real, the virtual body does have its origins in the signifiers of its body and through the user who controls its actions and interactions in a virtual sphere. Though malleability may be problematic, it may also offer the user a beneficial exploratory ability to construct and play with possible identities as the malleable virtual body may be an identity-in-politics.

Conclusion

The synergy of new media art practice and postcolonial narratives proposes a unique and perhaps contradictory aim that participates in the decolonial imperative. While in new media practice "the organism has been replaced by its code" (Fernández, 1999, p. 13) (quite literally in the case of Skawennati's immaterial avatar bodies), the body in postcolonial studies "underscored the physiological specificity of the lived body as the realities of subjection are inscribed on the bodies of colonized peoples" (Fernández, 1999, p. 13). Postcolonial theory explores the problems of presenting the racialized body as a sign of stereotyping, exoticism

and primitivism (Bhabha, 1993; Fanon, 1967; Said, 1979). According to Fernández (1999), in postcolonial and media theories "the body is conceived as a palimpsest where relations of power are inscribed. In electronic media, the body is irrelevant to those relations" (p. 13). While early representations of the body online can be understood as problematic, artists such as Skawennati have been working towards a more nuanced presentation of the body through the development of new modes of customization. In this sense, the immaterial online avatar body can act as a catalyst for the reformation of a decolonized identity that is not laden with the histories of oppression and colonization. This body will rather celebrate *intercultural-ity*—a term used by Mignolo, with reference to the scholarship of Catherine Walsh (2012), to differentiate from multiculturalism which is enacted by the state and promotes identity politics rather than the decolonial identity-in-politics—and the re-creation of denied and silenced bodies that have been subsumed into the colonial and postcolonial historical narratives.

Skawennati's avatar bodies play out an Indigenous narrative that is decolonial in its reframing of the past and presentation of a vibrant future. The identities of the avatars, like Fernández's palimpsest and Turkle's analogy of a multitude of documents opened up on a computer screen, present and celebrate the complex and nuanced histories of Indigenous peoples in an act of defiance against the Western presentation of "other" histories. In this sense, Skawennati performs decoloniality online and offers an invitation to other Indigenous artists to reclaim their bodies, identities and histories by occupying, exploring and embodying virtual spaces. The avatar body is evocative and emancipatory through its ability to delink from Western-centric histories and enter into a new temporality that is malleable, multiple and written by individuals.

What happens next to the vast territory that is Second Life: a space that appears to be limitless in its hidden worlds and alternate temporalities? When Skawennati points to the decreasing sociability online and the fact that her virtual island has to be closed off during filming, I wonder where artists will move next? Will these virtual territories become overcrowded and hostile, or will artists like Skawennati be able to reconcile with this amorphous never-ending space and continue to explore the potential of the medium with an ever-expanding virtual public, in new and exciting ways?

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