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A HOME BEYOND

Indigenous Futurisms in the Visual Arts

By Suzanne Newman Fricke, PhD

MOHAWK ARTIST SKAWENNATI (born Skawennati Tricia Fragnito) remarked, “Science fiction is an interesting place to play,”¹ as evidenced in her work. Her digital constructions have included a place to converse and share images through *CyberPowWow*; a virtual paper doll in *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*; and an adventure story with *TimeTraveller™*. *TimeTraveller™* features nine machinima² episodes about a Mohawk time traveler from the future who visits major historic events in Indigenous history, including the Aztec Empire at its height in 1490 before the arrival of Hernán Cortés; the death of Mohawk-Algonquin Saint Kateri Tekakwitha in 1680; the Dakota Uprising of 1862; the Oka Crisis in 1990; and 2121, when Indigenous nations have again become sovereign.

For the artist, claiming space in the digital world is key. Skawennati had feared that there would be no place for Indigenous people online, so she argued, “We need to make space to encourage people to occupy the future. I want to envision futures in which we are thriving, so I create images of Indians in the future.”



Imagining the future from a Native perspective is the essence of Indigenous Futurisms, a term first explored in depth by scholar Grace L. Dillon (Bay Mills-Garden River Ojibwe) in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous*

Science Fiction (2012). Indigenous Futurisms are based on Afrofuturism, a term Mark Dery coined in 1993 to describe futuristic art based on African and African diaspora cultures³ by people such as Octavia Butler, Sun Ra, Grace

1. All Skawennati quotes from discussion with the author, September 4, 2018.

2. Machinima refers to the use of computer graphics to create a video.

3. Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993): 179–222.



Jones, George Clinton, Janelle Monáe, and the film *Black Panther*. Indigenous Futurisms offer artists and writers a way to heal from the traumas of the past and present. For Dillon, science fiction offers “an equally valid way to renew, recover, and extend First Nations peoples’ voices and traditions.”⁴ Many narratives in science fiction postulate a post-apocalyptic world offered as fiction, but this is truth for Native communities. Lindsay Nixon, Cree-Métis-Saulteaux curator and editor-at-large for *Canadian Art*, writes that Indigenous Futurisms can make “a creative space to respond to the dystopian now ... we are living in a dystopian settler-occupied oligarchy fueled by resource extraction and environmental contamination, completely alternative to our traditional ways of being and knowing.”⁵ Indigenous Futurisms include the Native slipstream, “non-linear thinking about space-time”⁶ where the past, present, and future coexist. Dillon writes, “Native slipstream thinking, which has been around for millennia,



anticipated recent cutting-edge physics, ironically suggesting that Natives have had things right all along.”⁷

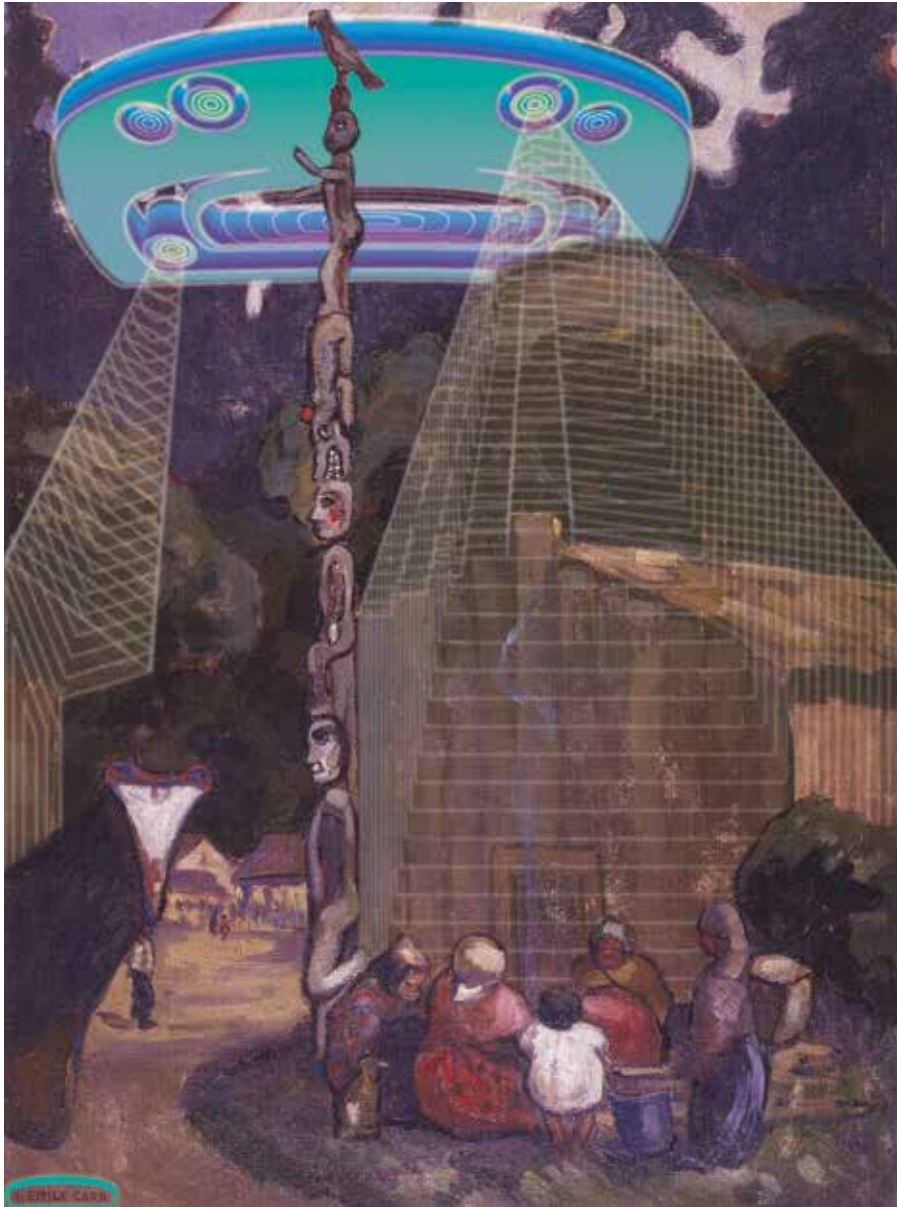
In visual arts, examples of Indigenous Futurisms date back several decades as Native artists reference characters, locales, and technology from popular science fiction. Mohawk photographer and filmmaker Shelley

ABOVE, TOP Skawennati (Mohawk), *Jingle Dancers Assembled*, 2011, production still from *TimeTraveller™*, 2008-13, machinima. Image courtesy of the artist.

ABOVE, BOTTOM Skawennati (Mohawk), *Stepping Out*, 2008-13, production still from *TimeTraveller™*, machinima. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti), *Tahu / Star Moto*, 2013, ceramic, wild spinach, part of the *ReVOLUTION* series.

4. Grace L. Dillon, *Walking with the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012): 1-2.
 5. Quoted in Alexandra Wikler, “Indigenous Futurism: Reimagining ‘Reality’ To Inspire An Indigenous Future,” *Exploring Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, November 28, 2016, web.
 6. Dillon, *Walking with the Clouds*, 3.
 7. *Ibid.*, 4.



ABOVE Sonny Assu (Ligwilda'xw), *We Come To Witness*, 2014, digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting (*Silhouette No. 2, 1930*) 22.5 x 34 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE, TOP Joseph Erb (Cherokee Nation), *Warrior*, etched copper cuff. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM Joseph Erb (Cherokee Nation), *Ssiquoyale Talugisgi Yvwi*, etched copper cuff. Image courtesy of the artist.

Niro, for example, wore a *Star Trek: The Original Series* costume in a self-portrait in her series, *This Land Is Mime Land* (1992). By depicting herself in the gold uniform worn by command personnel and holding a communicator, she placed herself inside a different world where she held agency and leadership.

Like Skawennati, some Native artists create their own versions of the future, seen in works by Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke) and Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti). In the series *Thunder Up Above*, Red Star photographed herself as a dancer in a “futuristic powwow”⁸ in bright, elaborate

dresses she constructed, then digitally posed herself against cosmic landscapes. Ortiz’s *Revolt 1680/2180*, an immersive work that combines video, ceramics, and murals, follows a group of time travelers who begin at the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and journey forward five centuries.

Several shows on the topic have been held recently. Jeffrey Veregge (Port Gamble S’Klallam) created an installation for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. The National Gallery of Canada’s *Indigenous Futurism: Transcending the Past, Present and Future* opened this year with pieces by a number of artists, including several Inuit artists. The Museum of Northern Arizona will have a show of *Star Wars*-inspired images from artists in the Southwest in October 2019 in Flagstaff, Arizona. With Chelsea Herr, I curated a show of science fiction imagery in Indigenous arts at the New Mexico State University Art Museum this past fall. Many of these artists also show at Indigenous Comic Con, held at the Isleta Resort and Casino near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Much of the study and practice of Indigenous Futurisms is centered in Montreal with Skawennati and Jason Edward Lewis, professor of design and computation arts at Concordia University in Montreal. Skawennati and Lewis originally met at the Banff Centre in the mid-1990s. Banff offers symposia and fellowships, making a space for Indigenous artists and scholars to meet and share ideas. Drawing inspiration from the *CyberPowWow* online artist gallery and the Banff model for trans-disciplinary approaches to new media creation, Skawennati and Lewis considered how to build a creative community to explore the potential of the digital world, which resulted in Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), founded in 2005. AbTeC is a research network of artists, academics, and engineers involved in creating and studying Indigenous virtual environments.

AbTeC led to the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF). The IIF

8. Zach Dundas, “Wendy Red Star Totally Conquers the Wild Frontier: Exploring the Native America of a Portland artist on the Rise,” *Portland Monthly*, April 2, 2015, web.



research team includes noted scholars and artists, including Inuk scholar and independent curator Heather Igloliorte and Anishinaabe, Métis, and Irish scholar, artist, and game designer Elizabeth LaPensée. Through his projects, Lewis considers how to be Indigenous and current and how to make the future “imaginary.” Lewis wanted to build the system rather than let others build it, so that “Indigenous knowledge, languages, and protocol will be served.”⁹ He sees using a computer to build a model for the future that fits into Indigenous perspectives. Lewis observes that Native cosmologies often describe relationships between humans and non-humans—for example, the Blackfoot learning from stones. Using computers and computer programs, AbTeC has created a number of projected designed to encourage more Native presence online, including teaching Indigenous youth to use digital media for storytelling.

Both Skawennati and Lewis note the benefits of working in Canada since, in their perspectives, “the political discussions are farther along. For many years, the contemporary art world in Canada has been led by Indigenous artists.” Major museums have collections that are more diverse. There is more funding for Indigenous studies in Canada as well as funding for experimental art than in the United States, where the market funds more historic forms of art. “A significant factor in us being able to do all that we do is substantial funding opportunities in Canada.” Four years ago, the IIF received a seven-year grant to bring artists and scholars to visit, which has led to a number of workshops, symposia, and art projects, including paying for Scott Benesiinaabandan (Wasauksing Ojibwe) and Postcommodity to create art in virtual environments.

For artists like Skawennati, Indigenous Futurisms offers a means to explore the Native identity in the present. “I ask myself, *Why be Indigenous?* How do I know that I’m Mohawk? It’s about stories and values, the original thinking, and teachings. It is necessary to make an Indigenous space in

the cyberworld, to make it part of our natural habitat. It’s a place where many people are going, and I don’t want to be left out.”

For Dillon, Indigenous Futurisms is as much about the past as it is about the future. She writes, “All forms of Indigenous futurisms are narratives of *biskaabiiyang*, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of ‘returning to ourselves,’ which involves discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world.”¹⁰

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9. All quotes by Dr. Jason Lewis are from communication with the author, September 10, 2018.

10. Dillon, *Walking with the Clouds*, 10.