



# An Interview with Skawennati: A New Frontier to Create Access to Arts and Culture



Photo Credit: Zoe Tennant

I recently had the honor of interviewing **Skawennati** for **Arts and Culture Connections**. We met at the **biennial Conference for International Exchange for the Performing Arts (CINARS)**, which was held last month in Montreal. We were both on a panel that explored how cultural spaces can become real citizen spaces.

**Skawennati** makes art that addresses history, the future, and change. Her groundbreaking new media projects are included in both public and private collections and have been widely presented in major exhibitions across **Turtle Island**, the original name for North America.

Born in **Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory**, **Skawennati** graduated with a BFA from **Concordia University** in Montreal, where she is based. She is Co-Director of **Aboriginal Territories in**

**Cyberspace (AbTeC)**, a research network of artists and academics who investigate and create Indigenous virtual environments. Their **Skins workshops** in Aboriginal Storytelling and Experimental Digital Media are aimed at empowering youth. In 2015 they launched the **Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IFF)**, a partnership of universities and community organizations dedicated to developing expansive visions of Indigenous peoples.

I was deeply impressed by **Skawennati's** project, which include creating access to the arts through cyberspace. I thought it was imperative to share her future-oriented vision with all of you.

**Donna Walker-Kuhne: How did you begin your work in the arts?**

**Skawennati:** I did my undergrad degree at **Concordia University** in Fine Arts. While there, I met a bunch of awesome Indigenous artists. Two of them were **Ryan Rice** and **Eric Robertson**. When we graduated, we wanted to ensure that we would continue making art. This was a time when there were not very many opportunities for Indigenous artists. (Or any other colour artists, really!) We formed a collective called **Nation to Nation** and had guerilla exhibitions in non-gallery spaces. We still have an old **website** online!

**Donna: What was it like, from a cyberspace perspective, for the Aboriginal Territories before you began AbTeC?**

**Skawennati:** In 1996, I learned about software called **The Palace**, an early chat room program that used avatars. It was still in its embryonic stage. There were not many Indigenous people online at the time; I looked for them and found a few people, including finding my husband. And I found people interested in trying to learn the stuff.

**Donna: Where did you see you could have impact in creating content and strategies to ensure Indigenous presence in the web pages, online environments, video games and virtual worlds?**

**Skawennati:** We thought that we could affect both the internet and people's attitudes. Indigenous people are often thought of as remnants of the past. Oftentimes people think we don't still exist. Many people seem to think that we can't both use technology **\*and\*** be authentically Native. The awful thing is that even a lot of Native people thought that! So, in addition to making digital stuff for the world to see, we wanted to let youth know that they could also be producers—not just consumers—of digital media.

**Donna: How can you ask the question of ‘How do Indigenous people imagine themselves in the future?’ when there is such a lack of awareness and respect for them in today’s societies?**

**Skawennati:** How can we not?!? We ask the question not for the benefit of the non-Native majority in society. We ask it so that our people can start doing it. It is essential that we see ourselves in the future. We need to see ourselves as not just existing, but as thriving! Once we can see that, we can make it happen.

**Donna: How has the participation in the various workshops enabled you to achieve your goal?**

**Skawennati:** With each **Skins workshop** that we design and deliver, we teach another group of Indigenous youth how to connect their own story and their community’s stories with digital media. With each game, movie or other artwork they produce, we have more successes to point to, which leads to more people asking us to do workshops. My hope was always that after starting in my own community, **Kahnawake (near Montreal)**, we would be able to send the workshops out in ever-widening circles, and this has happened! We have done workshops in places as far away as **Regina, Vancouver, and Hawai’i**. We’ve done them in the city and in the bush, a 20-minute helicopter ride north of **Yellowknife!**

**Donna: Are you educating not only the Aboriginal community to see themselves in an Indigenous future but also everyone else to include the Aboriginal community in the digital cyberspace future?**

**Skawennati:** Probably. Our goal is to work with the Indigenous community, but because our money comes from public, educational funding, we do a lot of documenting of our work, otherwise it could be invisible. We maintain vibrant social media and web presences; give public talks, classroom lectures and conference keynotes; do interviews with media, researchers and bloggers like yourself; participate in art exhibitions, and generally let the wider world know what we do.

**Donna: How did you approach thinking about your work, what were the influences? I love the fact that you incorporate and project tradition, values and culture into the future—so cool.**

My influences are so varied. I love thinking about the future and what comes up for humanity. I have loved sci-fi since I was a girl and began reading stories in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I began to realize that there were no Indigenous people presented in the future. So I asked myself, “Who do we want to be in the future and why do we want to be Indigenous—what are we fighting for?” The

answer came in our stories and world view. I didn't know **our creation story** until I was an adult. I started to hear it and did research on my own. I saw how amazing it was and different from the story of Adam and Eve –it doesn't put man above woman or people above plants and animals. Another story, **The Great Peacemaker**, and the peacemaker's ability to bring peace to ancient enemies was also rich. I did not grow up with these stories; however, I grew up in a highly-politicized household. I was always aware of legislation on Native people and how it shaped my life.

Now, the simple fact that I know I am **Mohawk** is enough for me. Like my mother did with me and my siblings, I am teaching my kids that they are Mohawk. It is so important, knowing that we survived against all odds with our identities intact. It came to the point where the answer was in the question: Why do I want to be Mohawk? Because I am Mohawk.

**Donna: What has been the response from both the Aboriginal community and the digital/cyberspace community?**

**Skawennati:** One of our very first responses from my community was: "Why are you going to put our story on the internet?" People were worried that by doing so, we would be giving access to our information to just anyone. That was almost 15 years ago, and since then attitudes have changed a lot. But even back then, our goal was not to "put our story on the internet." We explained that we wanted youth to learn how to be producers of digital media. And that we wanted them to see how they fit into this new world. That their heritage and their love for video games could live in harmony.

It took a while to find someone who could see our vision, but once we did, and we were able to deliver the first **Skins workshop**, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Young people say that they never thought they could integrate their heritage with video games until they did our workshop. For others, it has been a route into university. We now have community partners that stand behind us and our work.

**Donna: What are you most proud of as the result of creating access to the Aboriginal Territories via the cyberspace and digital world?**

**Skawennati:** I am very proud of the machinimas [<https://vimeo.com/269021935>] made by the youth in our Skins workshops. It makes me very happy when a Skins participant says, "I never thought I could integrate my heritage with my love for computer/video games."

**Donna: What do you think you will be doing 10 years from now with your university and academic partners?**

**Skawennati:** If all goes according to our hopes, **AbTeC** will become a Research Centre at **Concordia University**. That would mean that it would have a certain amount of core funding, but we'd still have to look for grants. What I would like to see in effect is the **Skins workshops** being run in multiple communities simultaneously. We would have a group of experienced instructors that could travel to various communities to give the workshops and also to train more instructors.

I myself plan to continue with my art practice. I am currently very interested in avatars and self-representation, both in cyberspace and in the real world. I think in 10 years time that interest will evolve to include clones, robots and Artificial Intelligence, and how we will develop our relationships with them.

**Donna:** Thank you so much, Skawennati, for sharing your experience and insights. Your future-oriented perspective embracing digital platforms, based on cultural traditions, cultivating skills and empowering youth, provides all of us with lessons for growing and expanding our own efforts to create access to the arts for all communities.



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