

## TWENTY YEARS OF ABORIGINAL TERRITORIES IN CYBERSPACE

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*This text accompanies Owerà:ke Non Aié:nahne - Filling in the Blank Spaces  
An exhibition-forum on the research and creative work of Aboriginal Territories in  
Cyberspace*

*A project by Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati*

*With documentation from the Skins Workshops, selections from Illustrating the Future  
Imaginary and other research/creation projects, and a CyberPowWow reboot*

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Somehow when you exit this site you definitely know you were in Indian  
territory.

Jolene Rickard<sup>i</sup>

Writing in 1999 about *CyberPowWow 2*—one of the first ‘Aboriginal Territories in  
Cyberspace’—the Tuscarora art historian Jolene Rickard identified a remarkable  
affordance of the Internet: community-determined use of networked media really could  
migrate Indigenous ways of relating into the digital age.

This was months before Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati met, years before  
they married, and far before they established *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*  
(AbTeC)—the acclaimed, international network supporting media arts. AbTeC was  
formalized in 2005 with the mandate to support and increase the number of Indigenous  
peoples creating digital media. For Lewis and Skawennati, and for their myriad

collaborators, this was an effort to ensure that the future would hold spaces for Indigenous voices. This initial ambition has flowered through two decades of cultural work that advances long-term futures of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

## The Frontiers of Cyberspace

Communications technologies have parallels in the history of colonization, where imperial powers exercised Manifest Destiny across territories regarded by European settlers as *terra nullius*, or empty land. Digital networks recall this earlier chapter in colonialism, in which technologies such as mapping, printing, and telegraphy secured a controlled flow of information for colonial powers. As Lewis (Cherokee, Kanaka Maoli, Samoan) and Skawennati (Mohawk) have written: “If Aboriginal peoples learned one thing from contact, it is the danger of seeing any place as *terra nullius*, even cyberspace. Its foundations were designed with a specific logic, built on a specific form of technology, and first used for specific purposes.”<sup>ii</sup>

From its outset, the popular imaginary of ‘cyberspace’ possessed a distinctly neocolonial ethos. From William Gibson’s *data cowboys*,<sup>iii</sup> to metaphors of the Internet as an *information superhighway* and an *electronic frontier*, to popular applications like Explorer, Konqueror, and Navigator, the Internet’s prevalent mythology has carried a thoroughly imperial flavour through the colonial expansion of digital technologies across the planet.

## Digital Natives

The first wave of Indigenous artists using digital media brought a critical lens to cyberspace, acting as a counterforce to this neocolonial imaginary. Digital technologies—still in their infancy—were set upon and reworked by these innovative artists. Looking to the future, they engaged in a concerted effort to make room for an

Indigenous presence in these new virtual spaces, and, in the words of Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “to re-map the hegemonic cartography of cyberspace.”<sup>iv</sup>

Significantly, these technophiles were concerned not merely with the superficial production of images and the appropriation of existing tools, but rather were deeply engaged in the design of media themselves. As the Plains Cree artist Archer Pechawis recalls: “We saw the Internet not just as a new technology but a new territory, one that we could help shape from its inception.”<sup>v</sup> They anticipated and revolted against the ostensible oxymoron of the *digital native*, in which the primitive ‘Noble Savage’ is meant to contrast the modern world of ‘the digital.’ Such self-actualizing endeavours flew in the face of clichés that misconstrued Indigenous peoples as pre-technological.

This occupation of ‘cyberspace’ in the mid-nineties came at a watershed moment for Indigenous artists using digital media in Canada. A proliferation of new media arts was born alongside networks of Indigenous cultural activism,<sup>vi</sup> grassroots and institutional changes in Canadian arts organizations,<sup>vii</sup> federal task forces and commissions on the state of Aboriginal peoples and cultures,<sup>viii</sup> and the development of important Indigenous cultural media networks.<sup>ix</sup> Parallel to this groundswell of cultural reform, the popular Internet arose and became crucial to an emergent generation of Indigenous artists.

## AbTeC

The story of AbTeC takes root at this historical juncture. It is a story about a generation of artists and cultural producers, writers, activists, elders and kids, networked in technologies and in consciousness. AbTeC participates in a history of Indigenous media arts that has catalyzed artistic communities and research networks, and introduced practices of mentorship, education and collaboration.

## CyberPowWow

Twenty years ago—still some years before AbTeC was formalized—Skawennati initiated the landmark online exhibition space *CyberPowWow*. In step with the growing online activity of international artistic cybercultures and the first net.art exhibitions, *CyberPowWow* uniquely laid out the groundwork for a distinctly Indigenous cultural presence online.<sup>x</sup> Running for nearly a decade, the project commissioned online artwork from dozens of artists.<sup>xi</sup> Users who visited the site could choose 2D avatars in the form of Indigenous bodies and navigate through graphical chat ‘rooms’ designed to replicate traditional and contemporary Indigenous spaces. Importantly, this was also a space to meet others online. Far before the saturated, media-rich, social-network-driven cultures of today, *CyberPowWow* represented an extraordinary experiment in creating online communities.

In four exhibitions over eight years, *CyberPowWow* created Aboriginally-determined territories on the early Web. The project housed network-based art, written stories and critical texts (in English and several Indigenous languages), as well as a real-time, graphical chat service that was live year-round. Integral to *CyberPowWow*’s aim of increasing public access to Indigenous media artists’ work was its *gathering sites*, which coincided with the four launches held at twenty-one art spaces internationally. The first of these events took place in April of 1997 at both Circle Vision Arts Corporation in Saskatoon and Galerie Oboro in Montreal. By the last *CyberPowWow*, in 2004, no less than a dozen organizations co-hosted the event.<sup>xii</sup> Each space supported simultaneous, two-day events—expanded ‘openings’—during which visitors were invited to eat and drink and, most importantly, enter *CyberPowWow*’s virtual space and engage with the art and other users online. Tech-savvy gallery assistants would guide users through the projects on computer stations, as in the mid-nineties personal ownership of computers and modems was not yet ubiquitous, especially among Indigenous populations.<sup>xiii</sup>

*CyberPowWow* was conceived as an expressly Indigenous space, and, for many participants of the day, interacting there was a distinctly Aboriginal experience. As Carcross/Tagish curator Candice Hopkins concluded: “In the end, *CyberPowWow* is not an experience of shedding identity, but an exercise in reaffirming it.”<sup>xiv</sup> Similarly, Pechawis suggested at the time: “Conversations with ‘strangers’ in the *CyberPowWow* Palace often come to a point of recognition... The anonymity of the Internet becomes the intimacy of community.”<sup>xv</sup>

## AbTeC Island

A decade after the first *CyberPowWow* a further groundbreaking exploit came in 2008, when Lewis and Skawennati together purchased a virtual piece of land in the online world *Second Life*. They named it *AbTeC Island*. Since this time the island has been utilized as a virtual classroom, an exhibition space, and as a film set for a range of media productions, including Skawennati’s celebrated *TimeTraveller™* series.

Freely accessible to the public, AbTeC Island is an imaginative assemblage of virtual landscapes and architecture.<sup>xvi</sup> At varying times, visitors will find the island of Alcatraz,<sup>xvii</sup> an historical Iroquois village, the Aztec Empire city of Tenōchtitlan, and futuristic houses, museums and cities. The sci-fi and fantasy appearance in many of the scenes of AbTeC Island conveys strong imagery of a future populated with Indigenous people. Outside the colonial borders of the reservation, and beyond mainstream settler imaginaries of the future, AbTeC Island is a decolonized space designed for Indigenous-determined futures.

## Skins

The *Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Video Game Design* began in 2009 as a collaboration between AbTeC, a high school teacher and her students, and tribal elders from Kahnawá:ke Mohawk Territory. Designed to mobilize communities in

translating their traditional stories into video games, it since has spread to involve communities from Montreal to Yellowknife to Honolulu with AbTeC conducting five major Skins workshops over the past decade.

Each workshop begins with the sharing of oral histories in which community stories are imparted, following which participants learn skills pertinent to the production of video games, from concept design and art direction to 3D modelling, animation, sound design, and computer programming. Qualified artists, game design professionals, and university students are hired to activate each workshop and guide the youth through the many tasks involved in producing a video game. For the students, the results are hard-earned pieces of interactive media with which they engage in cultural practices of storytelling. In telling stories, learning skills, and designing gameplay spaces, these young creators extend the histories and legends of their communities into the futuristic spaces of virtual environments. As Lewis has written, these workshops “provide Indigenous youth with the tools to build the future while at the same time reinforcing their conviction that they will have a place in it.”<sup>xviii</sup>

### Initiative for Indigenous Futures

We are now turning towards claiming territory in the future imaginary, or, better yet, creating our own.

Jason Edward Lewis<sup>xix</sup>

An expressly Indigenous vision of the future has underpinned much of AbTeC’s activities since its inception. The Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF)—an ambitious, countrywide, multi-partner research network—is the latest endeavour in this vision. The network is a wide-reaching project built to support a range of thinkers and creators committed to the future of Indigenous peoples. As with previous projects, the ambition is not merely to *imagine* the future, but to actively shape a space there for Indigenous creators. IIF engages artists, scholars, educators, and professionals from videogame,

film and technology development industries to envision Indigenous peoples in seven generations—150 to 200 years—into the future. Undertaking such a wide-range of cultural activity, IIF is overseen by AbTeC and realized with partners across the country. IIF projects include: digital media workshops with youth and elders, residencies and commissions for respected Indigenous artists, the development of a media art archive, and a series of lectures, interviews and symposia highlighting prominent voices in Indigenous art and culture.

### Illustrating the Future Imaginary

Among the outputs of IIF is a series of images commissioned from Indigenous artists prompted to illustrate their descendants of the future. As they launched IIF with their partners, one of the first impulses for Lewis and Skawennati was to ask artists directly: Where do you see your community seven generations from now?

The results—inventive, fantastic, and speculative—come from both younger and established artists who belong to a variety of communities and use a range of media. Some imagery is dystopic, but also envisions futures of community, kinship and harmony with the natural world. Freely accessible online, these images equally circulate as post cards.

### Future Imaginary Lectures and Dialogues

Throughout the past year AbTeC has invited a line-up of distinguished scholars to Montreal to think seriously about Indigenous futures. The *Future Imaginary Lectures and Dialogues* series comprises interviews, seminars and public talks led by leading Indigenous artists, activists, academics and technologists. Each contributor in this ongoing program is invited to speak from their field of study to larger, shared concerns for the future of Indigenous peoples and communities worldwide.

Participants in the series include to date: Cheyenne and Arapaho technoscience and sexualities theorist Kim TallBear, Tuscarora art historian Jolene Rickard, Lakota, Black and Irish game designer Allen Turner, and Métis social anthropologist Zoe Todd.

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In partnership with the Indigenous film and media festival imagineNATIVE, Toronto International Film Festival and Pinnguaq Technology, IIF commissioned a series of virtual reality (VR) artworks to respond to the sesquicentennial of Canadian confederation. Turning the *Canada 150* commemorations on their head, this series asks: What might this land look like 150 years from now?

AbTeC produced two of these remarkable, immersive artworks. Anishinabe artist Scott Benesiinaabandan's *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky* was developed from an origin story recounted to the artist by the Cree Elder Wilfred Buck. In it, Spider Woman weaves a long thread from the centre of the Seven Sisters, along which the Anishinabeg travelled to earth. In another, prophetic story, a young boy will return to the Seven Sisters in the future. *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky* follows the journey of this boy back to the Anishinabeg origin. Benesiinaabandan's interpretation takes place seven generations in the future, when humans have developed interstellar travel through the use of wormholes. The result is a dreamscape of sometimes unsettling imagery that explores the richness of Anishinabemowin languages and their pertinence to the cultures and technologies of the future.

*Each Branch Determined* is a VR artwork developed by the Indigenous artist collective Postcommodity.<sup>xx</sup> The project visualizes the northern New Mexican landscape 150 years into the future, at a time when a gathering of American Indian and Xicano pueblos are working together to manage their land and shared community. The project plays with tropes of sci-fi and apocalyptic imagery to create fantastic and surreal spaces. However, these spaces are revealed as sites for community ceremony and



managed processes of restoration. This is a future in which Indigenous knowledge of land and kinship proves to be essential.

### Filling in the Blank Spaces

To be sure, much of AbTeC's work for the past twenty years has revolved around imagination and speculation. The results have often been fanciful and far-fetched. But what's more, this future-gazing has been matched by material productions and critical texts that build methods to realize such futures. These efforts affirm the presence of Indigenous peoples in the technological future and ensure the capacities of Indigenous people to create their own roles in digital culture. These are not mainstream images of the future focused on the myth of the pioneering individual. Instead, we see in AbTeC's body of work cohesive and collective visions of the future enabled by communities and grounded in shared priorities. Through this impressive set of achievements, the research network has become an international criterion for active participation in digital cultures and a model for developing long-lasting community engagements. AbTeC's sustained effort in actively making a place in the future for Indigenous traditions helps ensure the continued vitality of their communities. As Lewis and Skawennati wrote over a decade ago upon the founding of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace:

We are confident that the lessons learned from CyberPowWow will prove useful in building new Aboriginal territories through which Native people can illustrate their stories to each other and to non-Natives. We are excited about these possibilities, and we invite members of other Aboriginal communities to come visit us, out where we are filling in the blank spaces.<sup>xxi</sup>

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and considers Queer and Indigenous artists working with networked media. He has curated exhibitions across Canada, Europe, and the Middle East.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Jolene Rickard, "First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared: No Treaties Needed," *CyberPowWow*, 1999, <http://cyberpowwow.net/nation2nation/jolenework.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Jason E. Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 30.

<sup>iii</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York City: Ace, 1985).

<sup>iv</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "THE VIRTUAL BARRIO @ THE OTHER FRONTIER (or the Chicano interneta)," *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, 1998, <http://archiv.hkw.de/forum/forum1/doc/text/e-gompen.html>.

<sup>v</sup> Archer Pechawis, "Not So Much a Land Claim," *CyberPowWow 2K*, 2001, <http://cyberpowwow.net/archerweb/index.html>.

<sup>vi</sup> The 1990 Kanehsatà:ke resistance marked a notable influence on Indigenous cultural activism, if only the latest in five hundred years of colonial resistance.

<sup>vii</sup> See for example, *Minquon Panchayat* (1992)—the anti-racist coalition which promoted the structural reformation of artist-run culture, the initiation of Tribe (1995) and Urban Shaman (1996) artist-run centres, and increased support for Indigenous artists using new media at the Canada Council, Banff Centre, among other Canadian art institutions.

<sup>viii</sup> See for example, the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada (1985), the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples (1992), and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996).

<sup>ix</sup> See for example, the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance (1991), Drumbeats to Drumbytes (1994), the Indigenous Media Art Group (1998), imagineNATIVE Film and Media Festival (1998), and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (1999).

<sup>x</sup> Canonical examples of early net.art exhibitions include *Club Berlin* during the *46th Venice Biennale* in 1995 and *dX*, as part of the 1997 *documenta X*.

<sup>xi</sup> The participants included in all CyberPowWows were: Âhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Archer Pechawis, Audra Simpson, Bradlee LaRocque, Edward Poitras, Greg A. Hill, Jason E. Lewis, Jolene Rickard, Joseph (Dega) Tekaroniake Lazare, Lee Crowchild, Lori Blondeau, Marilyn Burgess, Melanie Printup Hope, Michelle Nahanee, Paul Chaat Smith, r e a, Rosalie Favell, Ryan Johnston, Ryan Rice, Sheila Urbanoski, Sheryl Kootenhayoo, Skawennati, Travis Neel, and Trevor Van Weeren.

<sup>xii</sup> These included: The Walter Phillips Gallery at The Banff Centre; EMMEDIA Gallery & Production Society in partnership with MayWorks Festival, Calgary; Tribe, A Centre for the Evolving Aboriginal Media, Visual and Performing Arts Inc. and PAVED Art + New Media, Saskatoon; Urban Shaman Gallery, Winnipeg; InterAccess, Toronto; Artengine and G-101, Ottawa; OBORO, Montréal; Eyelevel Gallery, Halifax; and Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

<sup>xiii</sup> The digital divide between Indigenous and settler populations is shown by, among others, Christian Sandvig in his essay "Connection at Ewiiapaayp Mountain: Indigenous Internet Infrastructure," in *Race After the Internet*. eds. L. Nakamura & P. Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 168-200.

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<sup>xiv</sup> Candice Hopkins, "Interventions in Digital Territories: Narratives in Native New Media," in *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual & Digital Culture*, eds. Melanie A. Townsend, Dana Claxton, and Steve Loft (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2005), 136.

<sup>xv</sup> Archer Pechawis, "Not So Much a Land Claim," *CyberPowWow 2K*, 2001,  
<http://cyberpowwow.net/archerweb/index.html>.

<sup>xvi</sup> AbTeC Island may be visited in *Second Life* at [maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/AbTeC/31/231/137](http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/AbTeC/31/231/137).

<sup>xvii</sup> On the significance of Alcatraz see: Paul Chatt Smith, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996).

<sup>xviii</sup> Jason Edward Lewis, "A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future," *PUBLIC: Art/Culture/Ideas* 54 (Winter 2016), 42.

<sup>xix</sup> Lewis, 37.

<sup>xx</sup> Postcommodity is Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade L. Twist.

<sup>xxi</sup> Jason E. Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 30.