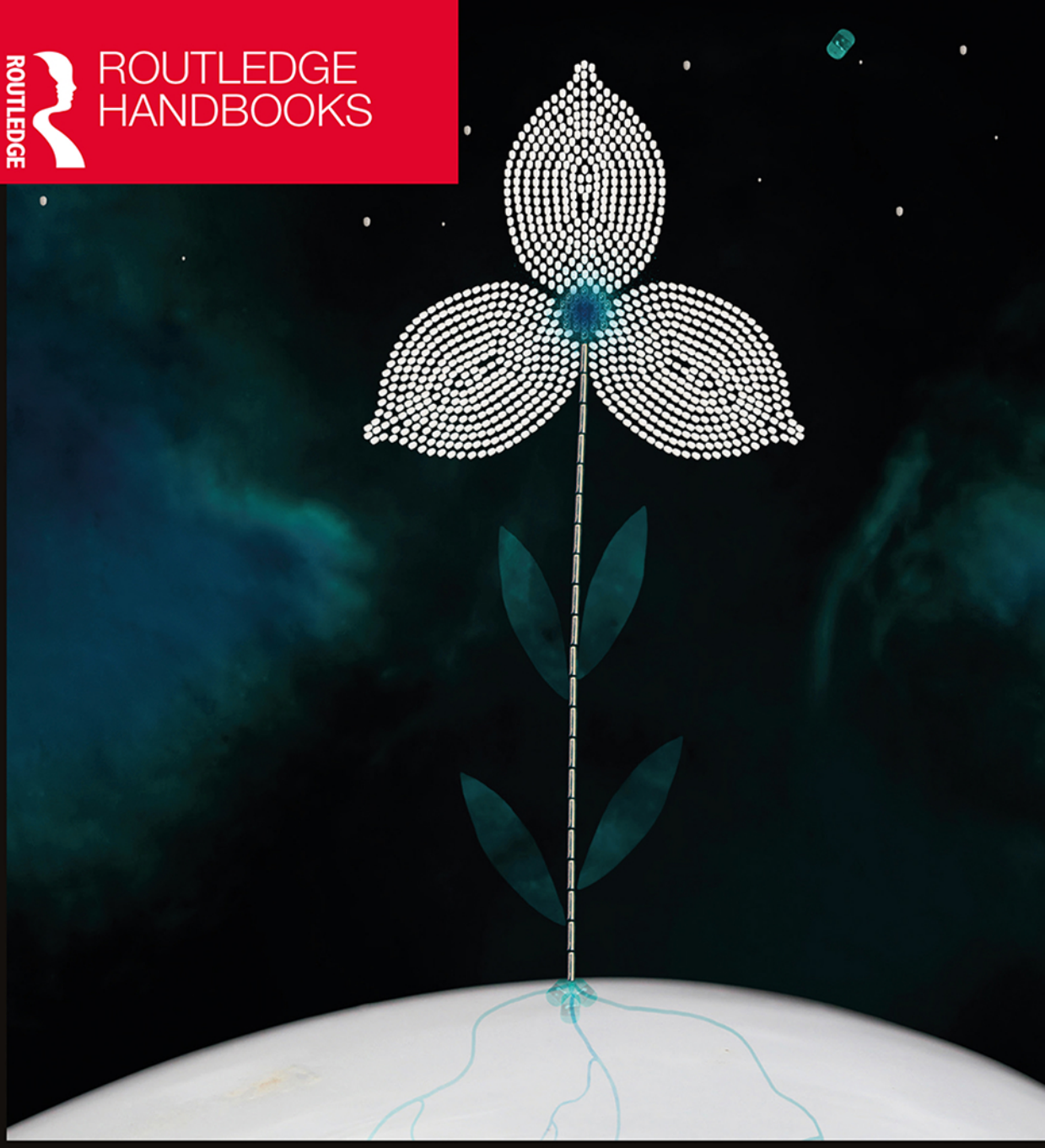
ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOKS



The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms

Edited by Taryne Jade Taylor, Isiah Lavender III, Grace L. Dillon, and Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF COFUTURISMS

The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms delivers a new, inclusive examination of science fiction, from close analyses of single texts to large-scale movements, providing readers with decolonized models of the future, including print, media, race, gender, and social justice.

This comprehensive overview of the field explores representations of possible futures arising from non-Western cultures and ethnic histories that disrupt the "imperial gaze". In four parts, *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* considers the look of futures from the margins, foregrounding the issues of Indigenous groups, racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and any people whose stakes in the global order of envisioning futures are generally constrained due to the mechanics of our contemporary world.

The book extends current discussions in the area, looking at cutting-edge developments in the discipline of science fiction and diverse futurisms as a whole. Offering a dynamic mix of approaches and expansive perspectives, this volume will appeal to academics and researchers seeking to orient their own interventions into broader contexts.

Taryne Jade Taylor is Advanced Assistant Professor of Science Fiction at Florida Atlantic University. Her research focuses on the politics of representation in speculative fiction, particularly feminist science fiction and diasporic Latinx Futurisms. She firmly believes science fiction and fantasy build paths to a better, inclusive future, which is why her research focuses on diversity, inclusion, and justice as presented in the secondary worlds of the fantastic.

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PART I

Indigenous Futurisms

1
THE FUTURE IMAGINARY

Jason Edward Lewis

The Future Is Reaching for Us

When you walk into my research lab you see, against the opposite wall straight ahead of you, a tall and wide filing cabinet. Affixed to it is a series of stickers:

Ne tá: we ne Onkwehonwehnéha
He wā maoli ke hiki maila
ᏅᏁᎯᏯ ᏴᏫ, ᎢᏳᎾᏛᏁᏘᏓᏍᏗ, ᎠᏐ ᎤᏃᎯᏳᏒ ᎾᏍᎩ ᎬᏂᎨᏒ ᏧᏂᎦᏘᏍᏓ ᎤᏩᎬᏗᏗᏒᎢ
Da-anishinaabekaa ani-akiiwang
Hiŋhaŋna kiŋ ike wicháša

These are translations of “the future is Indigenous” into, respectively, Kanien’kéha, ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi, ᏣᎳᎩ ᎦᏬᏂᎯᏍᏗ, Annishinaabemowin, and Lakȟótiyapi.[1] They invite visitors to shift frames as they transition from the university general into our Indigenous-led, Indigenous-focused space. Starting every workday with these words greeting me inspired the following short poem:

Future human beings
greeting us, reaching for us
suggesting subtle shifts in our first next step,
starting new trajectories
more likely to track out and through
into their embrace.

The future is reaching for us. How do we reach (towards) it? This question grounds the concept of “the future imaginary”.

Introduction

A “future imaginary” is a vision of the future that is shared by a group of people and used to motivate change in the present. Future imaginaries provide groups with shared vocabularies for envisioning the future and strategies for getting to the future they desire. Such imaginaries

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encompass both the macro—social configurations, political structures, technological infrastructure—and the micro—what we see, say, and do in the mundane day-to-day. Together, they create a field of "future facts", a fully realized reality that exists somewhere down the timeline, waiting for us to catch up to it. The concept of the future imaginary has been developed within the context of 25 years of research-creation and engagement within Indigenous communities, as a method for describing the futures we want and purposefully articulating the path(s) required to arrive there.

Genealogy

The concept has its roots in technological and creative practice. I spent the 1990s working for several Silicon Valley technology labs, conducting research into and developing new technologies exploring digital media.[2] For a decade I learned from and collaborated with multidisciplinary teams that spanned science, engineering, social science, humanities, design, and art. These were, by and large, talented people turning their capable minds to the challenges of figuring out how to best harness computational techniques for human interaction. Many of them also dreamed freely of the future, fueled in part by a combination of post-1960s Silicon Valley technological utopianism, a funder with near-infinite resources, and, as I slowly came to understand, substantial privilege stemming from being (mostly) well-educated twentieth-century white Americans with front-row seats at the revolution. Participating in those Silicon Valley imaginaries left me in awe of the agency one can feel in such an environment, including the conviction that one can and is shaping the future. Encountering the pioneering *CyberPowWow* online exhibition space for Indigenous arts in 1997 inspired me to bring that same sense of future agency, as well as the capacity to build future technologies, into Indigenous contexts.

Though I did not have the conceptual language to understand fully what I was seeing, the first Indigenous future imaginary I experienced personally was in the spring of 2001: *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*, a web-based interactive work by the artist and my long-time collaborator Skawennati (Kanien'kehá:ka). This work consists of a 1,000-year timeline stretching from 1492, shortly before Columbus's floundering into North America, to the year 2490. The viewer engages with different points on the timeline via a paper doll representation of Katsitsahawi, a young Mohawk woman from our contemporary period. At ten different time slices, the viewer can try on clothes from that period as well as read Katsitsahawi's journal recording her thoughts about that moment. The viewer can visit Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who kept the Lewis and Clark expedition from foundering in 1806; Raven, the Aluet from Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* cyberpunk set in 2121; or the 2488 Edmonton Olympics.

Later the same year I created my first Indigenous future imaginary: *Greetings to the Technological World*. This was another web-based interactive work, coauthored with Skawennati. This work, inspired by the Haudenosaunee Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen or "Thanksgiving Address", is composed of a three-channel video. On the left and the right are Skawenanti and myself, respectively, speaking directly into the camera in 20-second clips. In the middle is an overhead shot of a plate full of my family's American Thanksgiving meal—turkey, stuffing, potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, and string beans—being methodically consumed. (All you see of us are our hands on opposite sides of the plate, wielding a fork and knife.) The lines Skawennati and I speak are imagined extensions to the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen, which offers gratitude for the elements of the natural world that support our existence such as the earth, the waters and the fish. Our extensions give thanks to those things that make our contemporary professional lives possible, such as the internet, desktop computers and digital media tools, e.g., "We are all thankful for the computer, the platform from which we can create and communicate … for this we send greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one".

Both of these works appeared in the wake of a continent-spanning conversation amongst Indigenous artists in the 1990s about how new digital tools and the internet could be integrated into Indigenous art practices. Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton's (Coast Salish) *Inherent Rights Vision Rights*, the first VR environment created by an Indigenous person, appeared in 1992. Loretta Todd (Métis Cree)—reacting in part to *Inherent Rights Vision Rights*—wrote her seminal "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace" essay in 1996 to articulate the challenges and opportunities these technologies presented to and for Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew (Cree Métis) explored the possibilities of Indigenous digital and network culture across a range of essays, websites, and performances ("Drumbeats to Drumbytes", "Storm Spirits", "Talk Indian to Me #4"). Skawennati curated four iterations of *CyberPowWow* from 1997 to 2004 to train Indigenous artists in digital techniques and exhibit the resulting artworks. One of those she invited along was Archer Pechawis (Cree), the first Indigenous artist to build and incorporate interactive instruments into his performances (*Binary* 1; *Memory* 2).

In retrospect it is clear that this effervescence of digital art-making, and thinking and writing about digital art-making, was in part about Indigenous people trying to understand their place in a future increasingly mediated by computational machines. Though the development of the term "future imaginary" came later (as detailed in the subsection "The Future Imaginary"), it is these turn-of-the-century explorations of the intersection between Indigenous creative practice and the digital that provided the first glimpses into how important it was and is to actively imagine ourselves as fully empowered agents of the future.

Conceptual Foundation

The motivation to refine the future imaginary into a useful conceptual object came out of the activities of the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) research network. Founded in 2005 by Skawennati and me, AbTeC brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, academics, activists, and technologists interested in the Indigenous/digital intersection. One of our main projects has been the Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Digital Media Design that integrate Indigenous community cultural knowledges with technical and creative instruction on producing digital media of various types. These workshops generated several conversations with Indigenous youth about the future: their future, the future of their communities, of humanity, of the planet (Lewis, *The Future Imaginary*). These in turn led to the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF), founded by AbTeC in 2012. IIF's goal has been to think and create concretely around the idea of the future imaginary, drawing on Indigenous notions of the seventh generation to encourage exploring timescales that stretch into centuries. IIF built on the future imaginary work begun with *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* and *Greetings to the Technological World*, utilizing creative practice and deep technological engagement to support Indigenous people and communities in developing future imaginaries ourselves (Lewis, *A Better Dance)*.

The future imaginary is both a conceptual framework and a series of practices. Theoretically, it is founded in an intersection of sociologist Charles Taylor's notion of the "social imaginary" and literary scholar Grace Dillon's description of "Indigenous Futurism". While the former notion highlights the ways people imagine their social existence, the latter inscribes a means of establishing Indigenous presence in futures. This position takes further inspiration from the activist author Adrienne Maree Brown's understanding of speculative fiction as a way to "practice the future together".

Imaginaries

Taylor describes the social imaginary as "the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, not expressed in theoretical terms, but carried in images, stories, and legends" (106). He developed the concept to capture what I think of as the set of social "facts" that people take for granted as they operate in the mundane, everyday reality of their lives. It implies how we assume many things about the world without consciously aligning with a particular ideology or theory, but rather based on the stories we tell one another about how the world works.

I am interested in how we can create imaginaries of the future that establish fields of social facts that offer alternative configurations of how the world is ordered, for Indigenous people foremost but also for the wider human context in which we find ourselves. How do we get our people to assume life will be better for their seventh-generation descendants? To anticipate the revitalization and active everyday use of our languages? To point, with confidence, to futures marked by self-determination and agency? In other words, how can we change our expectations of how habitual, daily life can change? Once they are collectively articulated, future imaginaries can affect the current social imaginary to change how Indigenous people now think of themselves 100, 500, or a thousand years hence.

Futurisms

Dillon, in her seminal Introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, writes about how Indigenous people have always been engaged in what is now commonly called science fiction (2). Yet we have been all but invisible in the science fictions that populate popular culture. By highlighting the Indigenous futures that have indeed been underneath our noses all along, Dillon reminds Indigenous people of how we have always imagined futures for our peoples. Simultaneously, she underscores the need to be even more active in envisioning our futures, echoing the sentiment expressed by the novelist N. Scott Momaday:

> We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.
>
> *(167)*

Taken together, Dillon and Momaday express what I think of as the *imaginary imperative*: the necessary role that imagination plays in supporting Indigenous continuity by connecting the past and present to the future. Indigenous cultures are often written about and depicted as having been fractured or broken (Gruber), as a result of historical ignorance and attempts to delegitimize our existence as living cultures. Indigenous people also face pressures to conform to stereotypes of Indigenous ontology that withhold 'authenticity' from those actively engaged with many aspects of contemporary life (Crosby). Both kinds of settler strategies of elimination (Wolfe) interfere with the narratives we have within our communities about continuity between the past, the present, and the future. The imaginary imperative counters such strategies in its insistence on understanding Indigenous histories, current lives, and visions of the future as a persistent unfolding of an unbroken line of epistemological and cosmological frameworks that continuously evolve and adapt to support the lived experiences of Indigenous people.

Science fiction's roots in the imperial project are well-documented and require us to be wary of how naively engaging with its tropes invites the replication of colonial perspectives (Rieder). Yet it is also a powerful way to engender and celebrate the fantastical and the improbable.

We are fantastical, as seen from a settlers' perspective. Our circle of relations extends to the nonhuman, beings operating on geological time, connecting ourselves to our territories on timescales much longer than settlers' brief presence. Our continued existence itself is improbable, given the colonial forces arrayed against us and centuries of attempts to extinguish us. We survived apocalypse, proving our capabilities in surmounting challenges on an existential scale. Science fiction provides a palette expansive enough to accommodate imaginaries developed out of such complex histories.

Emergent Collaboration

"Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together", writes Adrienne Maree Brown (22). Her goal is to understand how to build systems of change, and, in that way, change systems. The approach she takes is to craft simple interactions through which the change one seeks can emerge, to avoid the trap of designing systems top-down and from whole cloth. Better to recognize that people live lives full of love and regret and chaos and resonance that is often nonlinear and difficult to predict; to recognize that social systems intertwine, interpenetrate, and interbreed in ways that always escape logical control.

Brown advocates a form of adaptive relationality: making connections with each other and other entities in our context that allow us to change and grow along with them. Such a path requires us to remain attentive to local entities (human, nonhuman, elemental) and conditions, flexible in the face of inevitable setbacks and capable of extending care where it is needed. Creating better futures must be a mindful, active practice. "What you pay attention to grows", she writes (46). The challenge is, "how we grow what we are all imagining and creating into something large enough and solid enough that it becomes a tipping point".

When considering the future imaginary, I prefer to think in terms of strategies rather than theories for the same reason I am interested in Taylor's recognition of the vernacular of embodied social behavior: most of us do not act day-to-day in response to ideologies and theories. We face challenges big and small every day, and we use the facts of our shared social imaginaries as the basis for developing strategies—again, big and small—to meet those challenges. Such strategies emerge constantly as we interact with each other, and evolve as the facts in those social imaginaries evolve.

Precedents and Resonates

I first spoke publicly about the future imaginary in 2013, when I gave a TEDxMontreal talk previewing what we were planning with the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (Lewis, *The Future Imaginary*). Preparing for the talk, my research assistants and I conducted literature searches to see how the term might have been used elsewhere. We found only two precedents, both—interestingly—from 2009. One was an exhibition at the gallery of the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, which grew out of a multimedia project called *The Imaginary 20th Century* by Norman Klein and Margo Bistis. The heart of the project is a fictional travelogue of the turn of the twentieth century, which first took the form of an interactive and networked multimedia experience and, then, five years later, as a book-length comic novel (Klein and Bistis). However, neither the novel nor the exhibition engage the future imaginary as a conceptual object; they merely deploy the term in a few places as one of many types of imaginaries.

The second 2009 reference was a single mention in a scholarly manuscript on academic considerations of the body titled *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*. One sentence, "Undoubtedly, there is a strong link between the future imaginary and technoscience",

is much in the vein in which I had come to use the term: as a conceptual object for understanding the link between how we think of the future and the work we do in the present (Kitsi-Mitakou and Detsi-Diamanti 203). Unfortunately, as with the first reference, the authors do not expand on it further.

The Future Imaginary

Those searches are what led us to the substantial literature related to social imaginaries as articulated in different flavors by Castoriadis, Taylor, and Anderson. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, I was particularly drawn to Taylor's definition of the social imaginary due to its emphasis on ordinary life. This emphasis helps ground future imaginaries in the challenges of lived experience while still allowing conceptual space for the fantastical visions inherited from science fiction.

The future imaginary is also conceptually recursive. As I developed it further in a series of essays from 2014 to 2020, I made a conscious decision to use "the future imaginary" rather than "the *Indigenous* future imaginary" in order to avoid the whiff of subordinance that terms such as "Indigenous literature", "Indigenous futures", "Indigenous arts", etc., carry with them. Such terms perform a vital function in making room within canonical discourses, but they also implicitly concede the center of "literature", "futures", "arts", etc., to the Western intellectual tradition. My interest is in placing Indigenous people's visions of the future in the center of humanity's future imaginary. As I have written previously, the goal is "to centre our practice in the cultural discourse and practices that frame it, and create a distinct future where we are not dependent on the gatekeepers to open the gates—not required, even, to storm those gates, or go around" (*Preparations* 1). In other words, if non-Indigenous thinkers begin employing the term, they will find Indigenous people already at the root of the concept and leading the conversation.

Indigenous Futures

Grace Dillon's excavation of Indigenous Futurisms in *Walking the Clouds* generates an essential grammar for understanding different ways literary Indigenous future imaginaries have been formed. By identifying subgenres such as "Native slipstream", "Contact", "Indigenous Science and Sustainability", "Native Apocalypse", and "*Biskaabiiyang*, Returning to Ourselves", her work helps us better understand the complex historical, social, and cultural processes that shape and create relationships between the texts she anthologizes and connects them to similar themes found in Afrofuturism, mainstream science fiction, and Indigenous studies.

Dillon's work shares space with several other scholarly engagements with Indigenous futures that resonate with my definition of the future imaginary. In "Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity", Eve Tuck (Aleut) and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernandez speak in a context of curriculum studies to articulate Indigenous futurities that resist the replacement logic of settler futurities through mechanisms of refusal and rematriation. Karyn Recollet's (Cree) "Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix" uses the term "future imaginary" to capture how dance, gesture, and movement practices embody new configurations of land, time, and space that better sustain Indigenous bodies. And Lou Cornum (Diné) discusses how "Indigenous Futurism is about honing our technologies to the most liberating ends", echoing the need to connect Indigenous futures with technological futures (*The Space NDN*).

Strategies

The future imaginary is a set of strategies as much as a conceptual framework. These strategies can be captured in five (somewhat unruly and promiscuous) dimensions:

- Ask our own questions
- Revise what we think possible
- Assert our presence in the future
- Romanticize our sovereignty
- Practice new futures together

Let us explore each in turn.

Ask Our Own Questions

> That is not our question.
>
> —*Manulani Aluli Meyer (Ho'oulu 62)*

> Answer with your life the questions that give it meaning.
>
> —*Manulani Aluli Meyer (The Context Within 251)*

The pursuit of knowledge starts by asking our questions. The questions we ask shape the outline of the knowledges we inhabit, leading us down different paths of discovery. Kanaka Maoli scholar Meyers writes about her journey through education systems designed to privilege the questions important to Western colonial states while suppressing the questions of importance to colonized peoples, denying the latter the time and space to pursue their questions. Articulating Indigenous knowledge systems within such frameworks is a never-ending struggle to justify one's way of thinking from a perspective that, in the end, often does not accept such methods of learning and engaging with the world as capable of producing legitimate knowledge. The habitual questions of Western epistemologies work to establish settler prejudice as universal fact.

Consider:

Settler society asks: "How can we help you fix your community?" to establish as fact that our community is broken. Our response to such a question could be: "How do we enable our community's continued thriving?" in recognition of the facts of continuity and resilience.

Settler society asks: "How can we use this knowledge to control nature?" to naturalize the subjugation of the natural world to human needs. Our question is rather: "How does our knowledge of territory allow us to coexist with it and all of our relations on it in a mutually beneficial manner?" in recognition of the fact that relational concerns are the foundation of all knowledge.

Settler society asks: "How can our technology make your lives better?" to establish the fact that Western technology is the most desirable thing. Our question is: "Can we show you how to build technology such that it promotes human abundance?" to establish the fact that we know how to make tools that fit within an ecology of care rather than an environment of extraction.

Responding to the colonizer's questions also means conceding the epistemological center before the conversation has even begun. It places Indigenous thinkers in the role of supplicant, requesting that we be allowed into the "real" conversation to make our case for why our epistemologies matter. It is much more fruitful to our communities' thriving to spend that time rather than on asking the questions that—to paraphrase Meyers—give our lives meaning, draw upon our understandings of our histories, and respond to our desires for the future.

Revise Our Sense of What Is Possible

> The pursuit of sovereignty is to revise not our past, but our possibilities.
>
> —*Scott Richard Lyons (449)*

One of the Skins Workshops is called 7th Generation Character Design. In these workshops we ask (usually Indigenous 18- to 25-year-old) participants to imagine a seventh-generation descendent of theirs. What is she wearing? What does her language sound like? What does her territory look like? With whom is she in relation, in her family, in her community, across her territory, and beyond it? We ask these questions while discussing the participants' present circumstances and the history of their community. We couch them in terms of the future, but the real goal is to help unlock participants' sense of what is possible now.

The political, legal, and social regimes of North American colonization were designed to facilitate assimilation and, eventually, extinguishment. One tool used to facilitate this process is through consistently constricting the range of Indigenous existence:

> You can't be married to a non-Native and still be Native. You can't live outside your community and still be Native. You can't get a higher degree and still be Native. You can't be a professional and still be Native. You can't be a scientist and still be Native. Don't speak your language anymore? You can't be Native [etc.].

The pursuit of sovereignty is the pursuit of possibilities for being Indigenous. It is a refusal to limit ourselves to categories created by settler society, and in which boxes they wish to keep us. We not only reclaim the potentials lost to 500 years of constriction, but we also make room for new ways of being Indigenous. Recognizing such potential is a necessary step towards altering the trajectory established when the invaders first arrived on these shores so that its arc ends up in healthier futures for Indigenous people.

Assert Our Claims on the Future

> We live in the future. Come join us.
>
> —*Bryan Kamoali Kuwada*

Come join us, indeed. Kuwada's quote (and the title of his essay)—responding to biased news reporting around protests against the installation of the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea on Hawai'i Island—compresses history, critique, agency, presence, and invitation into just eight words. *History* as the foundation for how we formulate visions of the future, rather than regarding the future as a means to forget our pasts and escape the continuity in which we find ourselves; *critique* of the Settler culture's repeated attempts to fix us in the past; *agency* in

crafting the pathways of our choosing to get to the futures we want; *presence* in the stories we tell about the future rather than the absence of brown bodies one often finds in Settler future imaginaries; and an *invitation* to recognize our common humanity and join in a common project of creating the conditions under which we can all thrive, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

Kuwada's statement inverts self-serving normative assumptions made by Settler culture about the "progress of civilization", where skin color proxies for stages of human advancement. Yet it expands even as it inverts, claiming the past, present, and future always and equally. "[T]he future is a realm we have inhabited for thousands of years", he writes elsewhere in the same essay. His is an argument for continuity rather than interruption, and for the past as a storehouse of knowledge for building rich futures rather than a relic that notions of progress require us to discard. These two short sentences serve as an example of how crafting contexts that encourage such expansive claiming of time and space need not be complicated.

Romanticize Our Sovereignty

> My present is very much controlled by our history and in this future I can imagine … we can flip that control. I also am romanticizing my own sovereignty, but allowing myself to do that.
>
> —*Hannah Donnelly*

Donnelly (Wiradjuri) uses the word "romanticizing" unapologetically *and* carefully. She is aware of how it might be dismissed as encouraging inconsequential fancy or selfish escapism. She is also aware of the power of both these modes of speculation to draw out the imagination, and, when contextualized through critical self-awareness, to encourage thinking "otherwise" per Crawley. To dream freely of agency is, by necessity, to romanticize it: no one of us is free of all constraints. We imagine doing only good, and forget the trickster's lesson that chaos will always sneak its way into order. We imagine the decisive act, and forget how many indecisive acts must accumulate to reach that tipping point. We imagine our children's children will see the world as we do, and forget that each generation sees anew the seams of the world.

But, as I have written elsewhere,

> dream freely we must, if we are to imagine worlds that grow from radically different founding assumptions. In order to feel what it might mean to live self-determined lives, we must romanticize our sovereignty, imagining moments, lifetimes and generations living with the control 'flipped'.
>
> *(Lewis, Proto-typing 128)*

Romantic gestures create excitement and energy, both of which are necessary to sustain the strategies we need to change our future facts.

Practice New Futures Together

Per Adrienne Maree Brown, the future takes practice. Like an athlete teaching her body nerve-muscle memory so that more and more of a movement can be done without thinking about it, we need to talk future story with each other to accustom ourselves used to new ways of being. If we want to shape a future defined by Indigenous sovereignties, we have to explore different paths forward to disentangle us from colonization.

Walking those paths is possible only in relation with others, and so such exploration needs to be with one another. The new stories we tell are codeveloped, so that we can see together how well they fit us individually and collectively. By iterating on our visions together, we can craft futures that accommodate more of our kin, as we learn how our envisioned actions affect them and how their responses affect us.

The Future Is Reaching for Us

In 2013, Skawennati, our young boys, and I participated in a life-changing event. The Peacemaker's Journey involved a group of two dozen mainly Iroquois citizens retracing the steps of The Great Peacemaker. We traveled around what is now Quebec, Ontario, and New York, visiting the different Haudenosaunee nations that he united into the Confederacy. At each stop we were hosted by the home nation, and their orators would tell the story of what The Peacemaker did with that community.

Skawennati and I had been in conversation about where, after eight years of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, we wanted to take our work together. The discussions about the future with Indigenous youth in our Skins Workshops had left a strong impression on us, and we were trying to figure out how to reframe our research-creation to focus on the future. I was writing both the TEDxMontreal talk and the first drafts of "A Better Dance and Better Prayers: Systems, Structures, and the Future Imaginary in Aboriginal New Media", the first time I would use "future imaginary" in print. I was anxious, though, as I had doubts about what it meant to direct our good minds away from the many challenges our communities face in the present. I had not yet read *Walking the Clouds* and was thus unfamiliar with how well Dillon had motivated the need for Indigenous Futurisms. Donnelly's call to romanticize sovereignty through Indigenous Futurism was … still in the future. I had not fully recognized the futurity inherent in the digital media work we did in AbTeC. Good minds are in short supply, I thought: should I turn them away from the present challenges?

At our stop in the Onondaga Nation, I found myself talking with an elder about AbTeC. I mentioned to her that we were thinking of spending the next decade or so with our heads in the future, and that I had concerns about how helpful it might be. She listened, nodding at first and then shaking her head as I expressed doubts. She pointed to our boys, who were playing with other children in the banquet hall, and said: "Look at them. If we aren't dreaming about better futures for them, what's the point? They need futures they can believe in, something better for our people. The next 500 years must be better than the last".

This was the imaginary imperative in a nutshell. "The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined", writes Momaday. Lyons asks us to revise our possibilities. Yet imagining our possibilities fully and freely can be difficult. Historical contingencies harden into what seem like facts that will never, ever change. The struggle to thrive in the present leaves little time for dreaming. People who pay scant attention to responsibilities to community and kin seem to have all the power, and do not seem likely to relinquish it. It is tiring having to constantly refuse the Settler's questions, and assert our presence in the future. It is labor to rewire our brains to revise what we think possible.

On the other hand, it is exhilarating to romanticize our sovereignty. It is fun to practice the future together. My own personal future imaginary is a lūʻau, where my great-great-grandchildren have finished the rebraiding of genealogies that I began, and sit once again amongst our kanaka ʻohana as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of an independent Hawaiian lahui. That is a future I feel reaching towards me. The future imaginary enables me to reach towards it.

Notes

1 Translations: Kanien'kéha by Hilda Nichols; ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi by Nolani Arista; Cherokee by Joseph Erb; Annishinaabemowin by Pat Ningwence; and Lakȟótiyapi by Suzanne Kite.

2 These were the Institute for Research on Learning, Interval Research Corporation, and Arts Alliance Laboratories.

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