

Openings and Retrospectives

INDIGENOUS MEDIA FUTURES: An Introduction

WILLIAM LEMPert

University of Colorado Boulder

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5137-5414>

This collection of essays engages the ways in which anthropological understandings of Indigenous media can be expanded and reimagined through a focus on futurity. Throughout, the contributors pose two distinct yet interconnected questions: What does the future of Indigenous media hold? And, how is the future itself being increasingly asserted through Indigenous media production? In a sense, then, the collection serves as both retrospective and opening. We reflect on the history of Indigenous media scholarship in tracing the trajectory of emerging forms and content, while also considering how the future is mobilized as a means for establishing temporal sovereignty in relation to anachronistic pasts (see Rifkin 2017). In doing so, we aim to provoke new questions about the histories, politics, and futures of Indigenous self-representation.

Despite seemingly dire circumstances for Indigenous communities, nations, and their media, we find more creative and political Indigenous assertions of sovereign futures than ever before. Recognizing that Indigenous media are not a panacea, we nonetheless emphasize that these mediations can have transformative

political potential through both the process of their production and the impact they have on diverse audiences. In light of centuries of explicit and implicit associations of Indigenous people with the past, invoking Indigenous futures invites contradictory and unexpected pairings that the contributors explore in these pieces, including bleakness and postapocalyptic hope; sutures of time and paper; apprehension and possibility; and noise and image. The collection is bookended by this introduction and a closing reflection, in which Faye Ginsburg thoughtfully engages each of the essays and brings them into conversation with one another, as well as the history and current landscape of Indigenous media. Here, I briefly frame some of the intellectual context within which we imagine Indigenous media futures.

THE FUTURE OF INDIGENOUS MEDIA

Until recently, Indigenous media has been closely associated with film and video. The increased availability of relatively inexpensive and durable camcorders in the 1980s led to the rise of Indigenous video production around the globe. This movement also fostered media collaboration with anthropologists and consequently altered the nature of ethnographic film.¹ In just a few decades, Indigenous film has proliferated, and today there are dozens of festivals around the world highlighting the growing catalog of this genre. Meanwhile, Indigenous television programs and channels have been established, including National Indigenous Television in Australia, Māori TV in New Zealand, and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in Canada.²

In imagining the future of Indigenous media scholarship, we aim to expand currently conceived boundaries of form and medium. Indeed, the contributors to this collection engage a variety of formats, including novels, stop-motion animation, and multimodal art installations. The recent influx of Indigenous comic and video-game production has been fostered by the annual Indigenous Comic Con. Established in 2016, the convention has expanded to include cosplay, puppetry, robotics, and experimental installation pieces in partnership with groups like the Santa Fe Meow Wolf art collective.

While each of these media provides a rich avenue for disciplinary engagement—especially in light of the current move toward multimodal anthropology—I want to highlight some recent examples of mass media that creatively reimagine audience relationships. In the Mohawk artist [Skawennati's \(2006\)](#) immersive *Second Life*-based machinima series,³ *TimeTraveller*TM, the viewer follows Hunter, a young Mohawk man from the twenty-second century, who travels between virtual

worlds from the years 1490 to 2121. In the first of nine episodes, Hunter introduces himself, acquires time-traveling glasses, and transports to Fort Calgary, Canada in 1875. There, he watches an illustrated presentation about alleged Sioux “rampages,” even as his narration draws attention to the long history of Indigenous misrepresentation through media.



Video 1. Episode 01 of *TimeTraveller*TM (2006). Video courtesy of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace.

As Hunter declares: “If there’s one thing every Indian knows, it’s this: when it comes to history, always get a second opinion.” Through this Native slipstream media project,⁴ Skawennati disrupts historical authority and the temporal boundaries of Indigenous existence imposed by what the Māori scholar [Linda Tuhiwai Smith \(1999, 23\)](#) has described as the “imperial imagination.” Furthermore, such projects provide rich intersections between anthropological scholarship on Indigenous media and the sociality of virtual worlds ([Boellstorff 2008](#); [LaPensée and Lewis 2014](#)).

Sponsored by the Sundance Institute, [Lynette Wallworth’s \(2016\)](#) virtual reality film *Collisions* tells the story of the Martu elder Nyarri Nyarri Morgan as he narrates his experience of 1950s nuclear testing near his homeland in the Western Desert of Australia. The film allows the viewer to adjust their visual and aural perspective through a virtual reality headset. The goal is not simply for audiences to understand, intellectually, the destructive potential of nuclear testing and its impact on Martu Country; the work’s sensorial immersion also affects the viewer at a somatic level and exemplifies [David MacDougall’s \(2006\)](#) articulation

of “the corporeal image.” The technological convergence represented in such media projects provides opportunities for a parallel confluence of theoretical literatures, in this case including those on affect, toxicity, and mediation. Yet such projects offer little sense of the technological sublime (see [Larkin 2008](#)). These media are not ends unto themselves, primarily emphasizing their capacity to collectively imagine and creatively communicate stories that matter for the actualization of Indigenous futures.

THE FUTURE IN INDIGENOUS MEDIA

While some of the most cutting-edge forms of Indigenous media engage the future—as demonstrated in *TimeTraveller*TM—most of the explicitly speculative projects are science-fiction films. Native sci-fi explores topics around dystopian assimilation, sovereign futures, and extraterrestrial encounters that defy colonial tropes of inevitable violence ([Lempert 2014](#)). More recently, this emerging genre has been developed for mainstream television through programs such as *Cleverman* ([Blair and Purcell 2016](#)), a critically acclaimed Australian Broadcasting Corporation show that directly engages issues of colonial trauma, urbanization, and intergenerational knowledge transfer through its story of two Gumbaynggirr brothers.

To articulate the deeper implications of Indigenous science fiction in this vein, the Anishinaabe scholar [Grace Dillon \(2012\)](#) has developed the analytic of *Indigenous futurisms*, which challenges scholars to re-examine the explicit and implicit ways in which Indigenous people continue to be representationally confined to imagined pasts. It also provides an important means for reimagining the temporal framing of Indigenous people in anthropology. For example, it serves as a future-oriented intervention into longstanding debates around savage and suffering “slots.” The concept of Indigenous futurisms can also advance disciplinary scholarship on temporality, as it takes alternative conceptions of time seriously, while simultaneously cautioning against the construction of ontological boundaries that may reinscribe radical and depoliticized difference.

As a model for how to further operationalize Indigenous futurisms, Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan scholar [Jason Edward Lewis \(2013\)](#), the director of the Initiative for Indigenous Futures at Concordia University, has articulated the importance of the “future imaginary.” Building on [Charles Taylor’s \(2004\)](#) notion of the social imaginary, the future imaginary takes inspiration from the Kiowa writer [N. Scott Momaday’s \(1970, 39\)](#) assertion that “we are what we imagine. . . . Our best destiny is to imagine . . . who and what, and that we are.

The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.” As Lewis (2013) renders it: “By remembering our history, we can better see the present. By better seeing the present, we can better imagine a future.” As an imaginative process that integrates history with complex analyses of the present, ethnography can and should have a powerful role in fostering Indigenous futurisms.

Many Indigenous engagements with the future are less explicit than science fiction and focus on the well-being and development of younger generations. For example, the Yolngu actor David Gulpilil followed up a well-funded mainstream success, *Charlie’s Country* (de Heer 2013), with what he considered an even more important project, *Another Country* (Reynolds 2015), which he cowrote and starred in. This documentary thinks through the history of colonial dispossession to imagine what it would mean to move beyond it. In the following clip from *Another Country*, Gulpilil articulates how some of the biggest challenges for Yolngu futures are imposed by outsider assumptions, noting that “going forward will take many, many years. Only future generations will get there. We can’t get there if you think you know more about us than we do.”



Video 2. Excerpt from *Another Country* (2015). Video courtesy of Ronin Films.

While we might imagine that Gulpilil is referring here to bureaucrats and politicians, it is productive to consider that he might also be speaking about anthropologists. Gulpilil highlights one of the key aspects of Indigenous futurisms: that they are not yet known and require a radical openness to a currently inconceivable otherwise (Povinelli 2014).

For Indigenous people around the world, representations of futurity carry serious political implications. As Turtle Mountain Chippewa scholar Danika Medak-Saltzman (2017, 144) argues, it is no coincidence that future-oriented In-

digenous media have emerged at the same time as a groundswell of Native activism. Rather, such media serve as “the creative arm of the Indigenous Futurist movement, [which] joins the more overtly political arm of the movement evident in the protest, legal and advocacy work . . . all [of which are] vital to seeing our way toward, fighting for, and calling forth better futures.” In this collection, the future *of* and *in* Indigenous media remains inextricably tied to the future of communities and nations. Indeed, it is this very nexus of creative mediation, temporal reimagination, and political urgency that we hope will inspire new and generative engagements with Indigenous media futures.

NOTES

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1. For example, [Terence Turner \(1995\)](#), in his collaborative media work with Kayapo communities, argued that such projects could have meaningful political implications in addition to ethnographic value. The continually shifting nature of collaborative relationships in media projects are developed within this collection.
2. In this introduction I emphasize Indigenous media in the major settler-colonial nations, as they most directly relate to the essays in this collection. For an overview of the broader history of debates around Indigenous media scholarship, see [Ginsburg 2011](#).
3. As a portmanteau of the words *machine* and *cinema*, *machinima* describes films created through real-time screen capture within virtual worlds rendered by computer graphics engines, including and extending beyond video games.
4. As [Dillon \(2012, 3\)](#) describes, the science fiction subgenre of Native slipstream “views time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream . . . [and] thus replicates nonlinear thinking about space-time.”

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