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Openings and Retrospectives

DIGITAL SUTURES: Experimental Stop–Motion Animation as Future Horizon of Indigenous Cinema

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The scholarship on Indigenous futurisms often focuses on an analysis of Indigenous engagements with the science-fiction genre or on the role of prophecy and cosmology within Indigenous traditions. In this essay, I want to shift the focus toward experimental stop-motion animation as a cinematic practice that literally handcrafts new, imaginative futuristic worlds, analyzing two films by Michif media artist Amanda Spotted Fawn Strong, an award-winning filmmaker living on unceded Coast Salish territories in Vancouver. Making use of the multimedia publishing capabilities developed by *Cultural Anthropology*, I have embedded clips from two of Strong's animations, enabling readers to experience the vividly rendered, otherworldly realm of the space of oral tradition in *Indigo* (2014) and the cinematic exploration of family history and cultural memory in *Four Faces of the Moon* (2016). Each of these films represents an engagement with Indigenous futurisms in ways that address the fluidity of Indigenous ideas of time, so that the past flows into the present and future, while digitally suturing generations of Strong's relatives together across time and space in a way that simply would not be possible with

live-action film. In these ways, the artistry of Strong's handcrafted puppets and set design, combined with her original illustrations and unconventional approach to cinematic storytelling, actively pushes the boundaries of the future horizon of Indigenous cinema.

TO IMAGINE OTHERWISE: Theorizing Indigenous Futurisms

I explore the idea of Indigenous futurisms by focusing on one example of a media practice that inventively creates Indigenous cinematic worlds, which engage the past to envision alternative Indigenous futures without necessarily utilizing the frame of science fiction. My approach to this work is indebted to scholars including Grace Dillon (2012), William Lempert (2014), and Danika Medak-Saltzman (2017), who have analyzed the emergence of a distinctive literary and cinematic aesthetic within Indigenous science fiction as a key site for the articulation of Indigenous futurisms. Central to this work is a critique of the ways in which Indigenous peoples have been misrepresented in mainstream media and in early anthropological scholarship, which often fixed Indigenous peoples in the past and refused to recognize their contemporary presence or envision their futures. As Medak-Saltzman (2017, 143) argues:

> Such futurist work, whether dystopic, utopic, or somewhere in between, serves to not only counter persistent settler-colonial fantasies of Native disappearance but, and perhaps more important, by envisioning Native peoples and our ways of being and understanding of the world as essential to any shared futures, these efforts to "imagine otherwise" (a term I borrow from Daniel Heath Justice, http://imagineotherwise.ca) hold the potential to help strengthen our communities as we work to negotiate within and beyond settler colonial realities. Imagination is a powerful tool for helping to envision, bring about, and build better futures.

Amanda Strong is an Indigenous media artist who, like the Indigenous filmmakers and artists with whom Faye Ginsburg and Fred Myers (2006, 29) work—is creating "an Indigenous presence" and a "force with which others must reckon." Whether through a cinematic adaptation of Cree oral tradition or by inserting the filmmaker back in time to talk with her ancestors and witness key historical moments of Métis resistance, Strong's films visually represent what Grace Dillon (2012) has called *Native slipstream*, a style of speculative fiction that infuses stories with time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, as well as alternative histories. According to Dillon (2012, 3): "Native slipstream views time as pasts, presents,

and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream. It thus replicates nonlinear thinking about space-time." Fascinatingly, in each of Strong's films, a piece of media technology becomes the portal or mechanism through which these Native currents of time flow and out of which an empowered Indigenous cultural future emerges.

GRANDMOTHER SPIDER AND THE STRENGTH OF THE DRUM

Strong's film *Indigo* is set in an otherworldly, uncanny house with multiple rooms and levels, all marked symbolically with different colors and rendered in an Indigenous steampunk aesthetic. From this space, Indigo, a confined young Indigenous woman, seeks to escape through the help of Grandmother Spider, a film projector, and a Native drum.
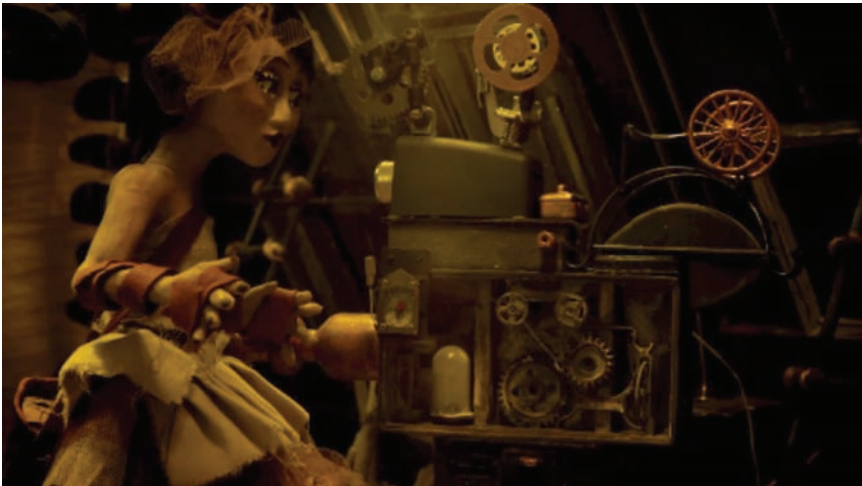

**Figure 1. Indigo, with film projector. Still from *Indigo* (2014).
Image courtesy of Amanda Strong and Vtape.**

While translucent, ephemeral memories flicker across the walls in the attic thanks to a film projector, Grandmother Spider seeks to restore the spirit of the young woman who ultimately escapes her confinement by drumming and singing, activities that make a tree grow up and out of the house. Strong describes this film, inspired by Cree and Anishinaabe oral tradition, as an exploration of the role of imagination, while mixing "Indigenous principles of the medicine wheel and stories of Grandmother Spider with personal experience" (Mattson 2014).

Figure 2. Grandmother Spider. Still from *Indigo* (2014).
Image courtesy of Amanda Strong and Vtape.

The color palette of the film—which shifts from a rich yellow to stark, cool white to vibrant red accented with deep black as the main character moves from room to room in the house—reflects the Indigenous principles of the medicine wheel. Indigo's clothing likewise points to the symbolism associated with the teachings of the medicine wheel. The entire film is set inside what appears to be a large Victorian house, opening with Indigo confined to the attic, which she escapes through a trapdoor in the floor. She then moves between rooms through a fireplace as Grandmother Spider encourages her to recall memories of her youth and Indigenous teachings associated with the drum.
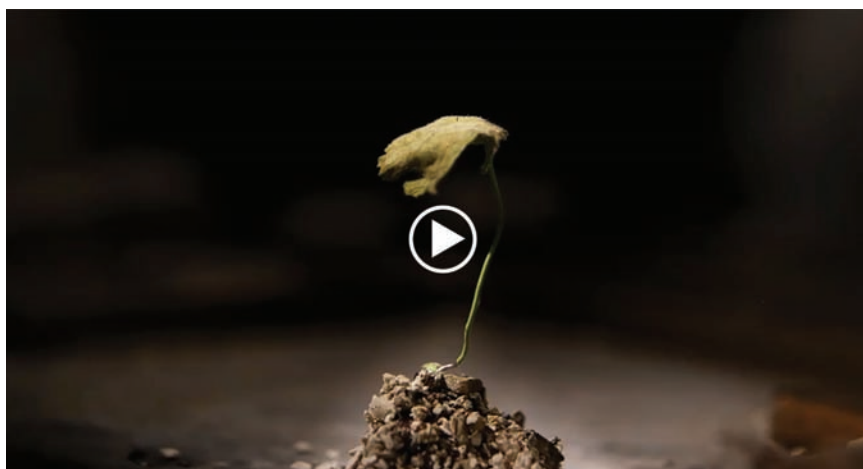
Video 1. Excerpt from *Indigo* (2014). Video courtesy of Amanda Strong and Vtape.

In the clip embedded above, Indigo and Grandmother Spider have fallen through a portal in the fireplace to a room that appears to be in the basement. As Indigo searches the walls for a way out, the viewer notices the sprout of a small tree growing in the center of the room. The nimble metal legs of Grandmother Spider scurry over to where Indigo's drum has fallen out of her red leather messenger bag. Insistently, Grandmother Spider taps her leg on the drum, pausing after each resonant sound as she notices that each beat makes the tree seedling grow. At this point, Indigo walks over to the seedling and kneels down to pick up the drum. Closing her eyes in reverence, she begins to play a round dance song on the drum. As she plays, the tree grows and grows, until it shoots through the ceiling and back up into the space of the attic where the film opened.

Figure 3. Indigo gazes up at the tree she has made grow with her drumming.
Image courtesy of Amanda Strong and Vtape.

Indigo looks up to the highest branches before she climbs up the tree back into the attic alongside Grandmother Spider. The drum once again secured in her bag, Indigo nods at Grandmother Spider and pats the bag, reassuringly holding the drum.

I interpret this sequence as a cinematic rendering of the cultural significance of the drum, suggesting that liberation can occur through a return to one's ancestral teachings. *Indigo* has neither narration nor dialogue, relying completely on Indigenous iconography, aesthetics, and adaptations of knowledge contained in oral traditions to drive the film. Strong explains:

> To me the medicine wheel is about balance. The rooms and Indigo's dresses interpretively reflect the four colors, directions, elements, seasons and stage of life among other teachings. Though I do not claim to be following any story in its entirety, I am intrigued by stories of Grandmother Spider. To me she represents the Creator and life cycle as well as a catalyst for spiritual awakening. (Sneyd 2014)

Indigo utilizes the strengths of stop-motion animation, combined with hand-drawn illustration and digital animation techniques, to create an Indigenous world that reflects a vivid rendering of the space of oral tradition, all the while anchoring the power of Indigenous futures within Indigenous knowledge and teachings.

DARKROOM AS TIME PORTAL

Four Faces of the Moon shifts the viewer through a lunar cycle while slipping backward in time and forward toward an Indigenous future resonant with cultural strength and infinite possibilities. Throughout the film, viewers find themselves enveloped in the sounds of four Indigenous languages spoken by actors voicing Strong's ancestors. I was struck by the photographic darkroom as a central space in this film. It becomes a time portal through which Amanda Strong, represented
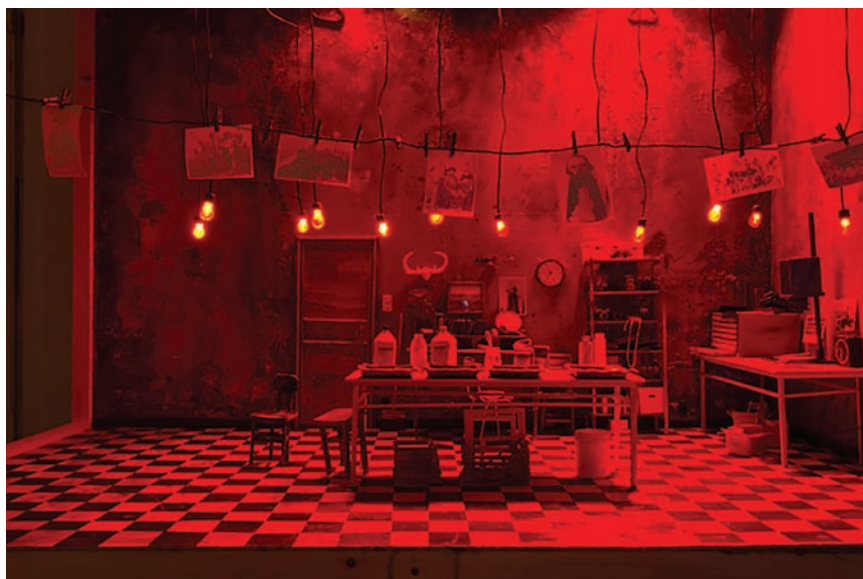

Figure 4. Photography darkroom, from an art installation of the sets, puppets, and props from
***Four Faces of the Moon* held at Vancouver's grunt gallery in July 2016.**
Photo courtesy of Dennis Ha/grunt gallery.

as the photographer in the film, inserts herself back in time to interact with her ancestors and witness important moments in Métis history.

Strong's masterful filmmaking creatively and effectively utilizes film's inherent capacity to manipulate time and space to digitally suture four generations of her family into the frames of the work. We can find this illustrated powerfully in a poignant production image, in which Strong places her head alongside two of the puppets representing her ancestors—her great-great-grandfather, Napoleon Bousquet, and her grandmother, Olivine Bousquet, as a young girl.

Figure 5. Amanda Strong, with two figures representing her relatives. Production still from *Four Faces of the Moon*. **Image courtesy of Amanda Strong.**

Four Faces of the Moon stands as a testament to the capacity of film to bridge time and space, allowing Indigenous filmmakers like Strong to connect with their relatives and ancestors.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

I am Gidagakoons (Spotted Fawn)
This is for my grandmother Olivine Bousquet.
It is also for those ancestors who walked before me,
People who carried Indigenous language and ceremony,
People who held the buffalo in a place of reverence and relied on them for sustenance
Before they were systemically destroyed and removed from the land.
                    —Opening title card for *Four Faces of the Moon*

The film opens with a sequence following a fawn as it runs through the forest fleeing an arrow. Suddenly, the fawn comes to a sharp halt and transforms into the figure of a photographer gazing up in horror at a pile of buffalo skulls as the film shifts into the space of the darkroom, where archival photos of ancestors surround the photographer. After putting on her cap with a beaded buffalo icon on its brim, the protagonist slings a camera over her shoulder before heading out the door of the darkroom and back in time, in search of a connection with her ancestors.

Video 2. Excerpt from *Four Faces of the Moon* (2016).
Video courtesy of Amanda Strong and the Winnipeg Film Group.

This clip from the opening sequence of the film underlines the power of stop-motion animation to craft the worlds that these characters inhabit. Rather than relying on live action or documentary, Strong uses sets and puppets for this stop-motion-animated world, which opens up new possibilities for interactions between relatives from different generations. Having inserted herself into the past, she makes visible the Indigenous histories and stories that Canadian settler society has sought to keep invisible for too long. This affirmation of identity, connection to ancestors, and the recentering of Indigenous history offers a vibrant example of what Faye Ginsburg (2002) calls "screen memories." According to Ginsburg (2002, 39), "Indigenous people are using screen media not to mask, but to recuperate their own collective stories and histories—some of them traumatic—that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten within local worlds as well."

Figure 6. Mound of buffalo skulls, from the 2016 grunt gallery installation.
Photo courtesy of Dennis Ha/grunt gallery.

Four Faces of the Moon contains a vehement critique of endlessly churning, destructive consumption on the part of Canadian settler society, symbolized by the historical pursuit of driving the buffalo to extinction. The history of the U.S. attempt to eradicate the buffalo as a means to disrupt the cultural way of life and primary food source of Indigenous Plains nations is well documented. In this film, however, Strong brings similar Canadian efforts to light, highlighting their detrimental impact on her Cree, Anishinaabe, and Métis ancestors. The haunting image of buffalo skulls piled up to the dark sky while an eerie green light emanates from the bones, along with an ominous sequence on a train in which hunters shoot buffalo from the windows, convey the horror and long-term cultural legacies of this historical experience. In a poetic voice-over, one of Strong's ancestors proclaims: "Victory was left unsatisfied, unsavory. They would not stop until everything became unrecognizable, unbalanced."

In contrast to this destruction and dispossession of Indigenous land stand the traditions and rhythms of Indigenous cultural protocols, respect for the land, and the honoring of the deep connections between people and place. At several points in the film her ancestors demonstrate teachings of respect for the land through ceremony and protocol: she learns to make offerings of tobacco to the earth and to the spirit of the buffalo whose skulls mark the landscape. For a film that

Video 3. Excerpt from *Four Faces of the Moon* (2016).
Video courtesy of Amanda Strong and the Winnipeg Film Group.

explores such a dark chapter of Canada's history, it might come as a surprise that the work ultimately concludes on an image of hope and resilience.

Figure 7. Still from *Four Faces of the Moon* (2016).
Image courtesy of Amanda Strong and the Winnipeg Film Group.

One of the most striking and powerful images in the film is a scene in which Strong stands hand in hand with her grandmother, Olivine, as the buffalo stream around them. Leather medicine bags hang around their necks, and Olivine wears a Métis sash diagonally across her chest. Both of their heads are held high and a fierce pride in their Métis and Indigenous identity radiates off the screen as the

voice-over declares: "We are awake and stronger within the circle. Carry peace in your heart even when witnessing corrupted shadows. Your blood recognizes the fire of home and remembers your spirit's name."

Figure 8. Olivine Bousquet, holding the puppet that represented her in
Four Faces of the Moon. Photo courtesy of Amanda Strong.

One cannot help but think of Strong's ancestors, as the anchors for her cultural identity and rootedness in her traditional territory, beaming with pride as she carves out her own path and distinctive artistic voice.

CONCLUSION

The characteristics of Amanda Strong's films that I have discussed above are precisely what animated my interest when I first set out to conduct my research on Indigenous media fifteen years ago. Quite simply, her films are unlike anything I have ever seen before. I view Strong as a powerful representative of the future because her inventive films pulse off the screen with richly rendered scenes ex-

ploring family history, ancestral memory, and deep connections to place, while simultaneously articulating an innovative vision that moves Indigenous cinema in a new direction. I am not the only one to see her as part of the future of Indigenous cinema. In January 2017, Alanis Obomsawin was chosen by the Toronto Film Critics Association as the winner of the Clyde Gilmour Award, which meant that she was able to choose a young filmmaker as the recipient of the Technicolor Prize, worth $50,000 in postproduction services from Technicolor. Obomsawin did not hesitate in choosing Strong, remarking: "When I saw her last film [*Four Faces of the Moon*], I was very touched by it, very impressed by her work. She obviously has important stories to tell" (Collins 2017). This honor seemed particularly meaningful, as Strong has described Obomsawin as an inspiration:

> Alanis is such an inspiration to not just Indigenous women in film, but all women in film. Her spirit and dedication to educating the world on Aboriginal issues in Canada is admirable. . . . It is an honor to have her works as something to aspire to, and it is my hope that I can continue to make pieces that embark on social change and awareness. (Collins 2017)

In a Twitter post on January 10, 2017, the renowned Ojibwe film critic and director of Canada's Indigenous Screen Office Jesse Wente succinctly captured this remarkable moment at the Toronto Film Critics Association Awards ceremony, remarking: "Spent evening with Alanis Obomsawin and Amanda Strong, the origins and future of Indigenous cinema. Love nights like these! #NativeAwesome."

Her distinctive visual aesthetic positions Strong as a rising voice in Indigenous cinema and as part of a younger generation of artists unbound by the weight of cinematic genre or convention. She reclaims her family and personal stories, branching these stories out to link them to larger Indigenous and Métis histories— experiences and narratives too often obscured in the Canadian consciousness. *Indigo* and *Four Faces of the Moon* vibrantly shimmer with the tremendous power of Strong's inventive cinematic vision, one that digitally imagines spirit and memory while suturing generations of her family and honoring the resilience of her relatives and the resurgence of Indigenous languages, identity, and nationhood.

This article has emerged from my ongoing collaborative research with Indigenous filmmakers in Vancouver, where I have spent fifteen years of my professional and personal life exploring the dynamic terrain of Indigenous media production. I am honored to be able to continue this journey collaboratively

alongside scholars, artists, and media-makers like Amanda Strong, who are pushing the boundaries and expanding the future horizon for Indigenous cinema.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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