

Openings and Retrospectives



THE ROAD FORWARD

FAYE GINSBURG

New York University

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2844-1185>

In this bleak political and cultural moment for so many—especially for Indigenous communities who are increasingly besieged by extractive industries, state violence, environmental assaults, and ongoing racism—the vitality and urgency of the writing gathered in this Openings and Retrospectives collection help us remember an important lesson: however desolate the circumstances, it is nearly always possible to mobilize creativity and community from ontological resources, to build Indigenous counterpublics, and to imagine otherwise. In the important works addressed by each contributor to this collection on Indigenous media futures, we have the privilege to learn how books, films, animations, archives, and installations are being used to build powerful alternative imaginaries for contemporary Indigenous lives. Even after centuries of horrendous genocidal policies, we see media futures emerging from communities in Aboriginal Australia and among First Nations and Inuit artists in Canada, works that draw on robust traditions, engage in collective self-production, suture the past to the present, and offer visions of “the road forward,” to borrow the title of the remarkable film

by the Métis/Dene filmmaker and activist [Marie Clements \(2017\)](#). In it, she uses Indigenous song, testimony, and history to tell the story of the roots of Indian nationalism in the 1930s, linking it to First Nations activism today.



**Video 1. Trailer for *The Road Forward* (2017), directed by Marie Clements.
Video courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.**

This film, along with the other works discussed here, offers testimony to Indigenous *survance*, the influential neologism deployed by the Anishinaabe cultural theorist [Gerald Vizenor \(1999, vii\)](#) to describe projects coming from Indigenous communities that have “an active sense of presence, and a commitment to native stories that are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.”

Before discussing these exceptionally rich essays individually, I want to turn to two key concepts that thread through them in productive ways: futurity and imaginaries. In *The Future as Cultural Fact*, the anthropologist [Arjun Appadurai \(2013\)](#) juxtaposes two ways of considering the future that offer a helpful framework. The first, *the ethics of possibility*, embraces futurity and those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that extend horizons of hope, expand the field of the imagination, and produce greater participation in what Appadurai calls the capacity to aspire. The second, *the ethics of probability*, emerges from regimes of quantification, governmentality, and hegemonic control, flowing out of what Michel Foucault saw as the capillary dangers of modern regimes and their efforts to control populations ([Appadurai 2013, 298](#)).

For the contributors to this collection, the question of future imaginaries is aligned with the ethics of possibility in the face of the ethics of probability, not

just in the kinds of representations with which the authors engage but also in the social relations, material, political, and ethical infrastructures, and other forms of support that have emerged off-screen to support the survivance of Indigenous media worlds. Indeed, it is astonishing to see what has materialized since I first started studying and writing about this work in the late 1980s. In addition to the artists named in this collection, consider the following: in Australia, we have the Indigenous Remote Communications Association, Indigenous Community Media, National Indigenous Television, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's extraordinary Indigenous department, indigitube, the Indigenous Unit of Screen Australia, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Message Sticks, Miyarrka Media, and the Karrabing! Low Tide Turning collective, to name only a few. In Canada, the imagineNATIVE film festival is heading into its eighteenth year, the Aboriginal People's TV Network is in its twenty-fifth, the online platform Isuma TV launched in 2008, and the Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan scholar Jason Edward Lewis, who holds the Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary at Concordia University, inaugurated the Initiative for Indigenous Futures and Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace in 2014. Thirty years ago, almost none of this existed. I mention these groups (only a few among many) to underscore how Indigenous media projects have grown over three decades, and to emphasize how crucial diverse cultural, technological, and financial supports are to offering a social location for building Indigenous imaginaries on their own terms.

Despite all this, I worry about the futures of these projects. In November 2016, I received sobering news, a reminder of precarity's constant presence in this media world. It came from Amalia Córdova, the curator of Latinx and Indigenous digital and emerging media at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife, an important scholar and advocate of Indigenous media in Latin America and a fellow supporter of the work of the remarkable Brazilian collective Video nas Aldeias (VnA), arguably the most successful and robust of Indigenous media groups on the planet (Aufderheide 1995). In the three decades that I have known its founder, Vincent Carelli, and the many people associated with the group, VnA has brought cameras to Indigenous cultural activists across the Brazilian Amazon; they have created more than one hundred astonishing videos, filming everything from land grabs by the mining and timber industries to extraordinary rituals, accounts of children's lives, ethnofictions, and much more. Their works have won awards at almost every festival on the globe, but more significantly, VnA has been a gen-

erative source of cultural pride and creativity to Amazonian communities. Yet, as Amalia Cordova emailed me, quoting a press release:

Shocking news: after thirty years of activity, Video nas Aldeias, a pioneering Indigenous video training project recognized internationally, is about to close its doors, leaving only a virtual address, said filmmaker Vincent Carelli, creator of the project.

This news is heartwrenching for those who, like me, have long been inspired by Video nas Aldeias's groundbreaking contributions. This loss has occurred in the same year as severe federal cutbacks have ended the decades-long work of hemispheric Indigenous film festivals run by the incredible team at the Film and Video Center at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. Preceding this, the Nunavut-based Inuit collective, Igloodik Isuma, perhaps VnA's competitor as the most robust, creative, and the staunchest of Indigenous media groups in the world, went into receivership in 2011 after a quarter-century of astonishing work, most notably the multiple award-winning first feature in the Inuktitut language, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Cohn and Kunuk 2001). In a sense, the group found it difficult to sustain the weight of its own invaluable archive, now under the control of the National Gallery of Canada and repurposed by Geronimo Inutiq in the *ARCTICNOISE* show discussed in Kate Hennessy, Trudi Lynn Smith, and Tarah Hogue's essay. These crises are indices of the fragility of social formations that seem strong, reminding us of the critical, if too often underappreciated role of funding and infrastructural support. These developments haunt my comments on the lively creativity of the projects represented here.

Daniel Fisher's essay offers testimony to the importance of Indigenous fiction as a media form that opens up Aboriginal future imaginaries. He points out that Indigenous Australian authors—and Alexis Wright in particular—share with the rest of the globe “dispersed anxieties around climate change . . . the shrinking of possibility as figures of the Anthropocene become a new common sense, and . . . the related fascination with extinction and an accompanying eschatology of what comes after” (Fisher 2018, 181). Fisher offers a brilliant analysis of the speculative fiction and politics of the future mapped by the distinguished Aboriginal author and noted cultural activist Alexis Wright (2013) in her award-winning dystopic futurist epic *The Swan Book*. The story is set in an imagined late twenty-first-century northern Australia, an area where Fisher (2016) has worked extensively with Indigenous media makers. The story follows an abandoned Aboriginal girl, given the name Oblivia Ethelyne Oblivion by a non-Indigenous old woman who

rescues her, Bella Donna of the Champions, after finding her in tatters, hiding in a gum tree, after experiencing a brutal rape by local youths. Bella Donna, a refugee from so-called climate wars, raises Oblivia while living on an old warship in a polluted, dry swamp where black swans—native to southern Australia—now nest. Improbably, Oblivia marries one of the other protagonists, Warren Finch, raised with expectations of leadership by his elders, which are realized when he becomes the first Aboriginal president of Australia. Incredibly, she becomes first lady, a role that confines her to a tower in a flooded and lawless city in the south. Fisher effectively loops his analysis of the fast-forward futurities depicted in Wright’s speculative fiction back to his longstanding ethnographic work with Indigenous youth in northern Australia. Many there, he points out, see the future in the “voices of young people who have been trained to represent their communities and to reanimate a series of relations fractured by colonial settlement and settler government” (Fisher 2018, 185–86). If Wright’s novel projects a desolate ethics of probability across a century in her sobering tale, it is also in dialogue with the ethics of possibility embodied in the lives of young people.

William Lempert’s thoughtful meditation equally draws on the significance of emerging generations to Aboriginal futures, even in the dark times of contemporary Australia. This orientation became apparent to him during two years of ethnographic work in North West Australia with remote Indigenous media organizations, in particular with Pilbara and Kimberley Media in the community of Balgo, where he assisted in the making of more than thirty films. These include *Dunba*, made with the elder Dunba Nunju in collaboration with National Indigenous Television. As Lempert (2018, 205, 206) writes, *Dunba* led “a life of unimaginable heartbreak and hardship,” yet he “embodies the future-oriented hope following tragedy” that is central to Lempert’s concept of generative hope, a term that embraces the difficult histories Indigenous people have endured, while insisting that a future is possible. Other works he discusses, like *For Young Futures* and the *Balgo Hip-Hop Project*, recognize the importance of intergenerational media imaginaries in insisting on possible futures. Considering this work in the context of a resurgence of Aboriginal activism around questions of recognition in the midst of government defunding, Lempert argues that these Indigenous media projects can play a key role in altering the representational economy that too often demonizes Indigenous Australians and their communities as utterly dysfunctional. Creating alternative narratives is crucial to building generative hope for Indigenous cultural and political futures, beyond the often grim imaginaries created by science fiction and postapocalyptic racist politics. Given anthropology’s

past role in contributing to a narrative of Indigenous erasure, Lempert stresses the significance of collaborative research in the creation of Indigenous media that helps build the generative hope—an ethics of possibility—speaking back to the nightmarish portrayals of Aboriginal lives created by hegemonic media.

Moving across the globe to Canada, Kristin Dowell builds on her outstanding work on visual sovereignty, the framework guiding Vancouver-based First Nations media artists with whom she has worked for more than fifteen years (see [Dowell 2013](#)). In this essay, she brings us a compelling consideration of the remarkable, award-winning work of the Michif artist Amanda Spotted Fawn Strong’s poignant and inventive experimental stop-motion animations. [Dowell \(2018, 189\)](#) argues that Strong offers an extraordinary new vision that looks at the past to open a way to the future, “a cinematic practice that literally handcrafts new, imaginative futuristic worlds” in her wildly original and compelling films, as well as at the 2016 installation of her steampunk-meets-First-Nations tabletop animation sets at Vancouver’s grunt gallery. One of those animations, *Four Faces of the Moon*, which opened to acclaim at the 2016 Toronto Film Festival, is a kind of palimpsest of Canadian colonial history told in four sections referencing the lunar cycle and mapping Strong’s family back to the 1600s; indeed, the film is dedicated to her ancestors. The protagonist is a puppet version of Strong as a photographer who uses her darkroom as a portal that enables her to travel across family history with cameras strapped to her back. Her character explores the reclamation of Indigenous languages, while revealing the impact on her family (and many others) of the settler nation’s extermination of both buffalo and Indigenous people. In *Indigo*, a young Indigenous woman is caught in what seems like an abandoned and haunted house, assisted in escaping this Victorian past by Grandmother Spider, a film projector, and a Native drum. Dowell reminds us of the resilience of the off-screen supportive infrastructures that enable Strong’s work to thrive, such as the Rematriate Collective, an Indigenous women’s group, and the artistic community around grunt gallery, well-known for its support and exhibition of work by Indigenous artists. Dowell makes a convincing argument that Indigenous futurism draws on many genres besides science fiction. Works that play with the mutability of First Nations views of past, present, and future on screen use the creative power of Indigenous media to not only reconsider the past but also envision future possibility.

Vancouver’s grunt gallery also figures prominently in the innovative *ARC-TICNOISE* installation discussed by Kate Hennessy, Trudi Lynn Smith, and the curator Tarah Hogue, who collaborated on that show with the Inuit artist and

video producer Geronimo Inutiq. The project was catalyzed by the acquisition of the Igloodik Isuma Video Archive (IIVA) by the National Gallery of Canada when the former went into receivership in 2011. As the authors explain, Inutiq, an accomplished younger Inuit multimedia artist active in digital video production, electronic music, and DJing, was invited by the National Gallery of Canada's curator Christine Lalonde to be a resident artist to "untangle and assess" (Hennessy, Smith, and Hogue 2018, 214) the extraordinary IIVA that she had helped the museum acquire. The question of how the archive came to be deracinated from its source community in Igloodik, arguably the most successful Indigenous media group in history, shadows this project, along with the troubled question of the precarity of archives for all of this work, as a crucial dimension of Indigenous futurity, a point Hennessy, Smith, and Hogue underscore. In *ARCTICNOISE*, Inutiq worked to remediate elements of the IIVA in a contrapuntal critical response to the Canadian musician and celebrity Glenn Gould's iconic 1967 radio documentary "The Idea of North," which failed to include the voices of any First Nations or Inuit participants, mirroring the settler-colonial imaginary of the time. Inutiq disrupts this absence with screens featuring digitally manipulated scenes from Isuma's films, repositioning the archive to literally speak back (in Inuktitut) to the shocking lack of Inuit voices in Gould's work. Hennessy, Smith, and Hogue make a compelling case: that Inutiq's work unsettles not only the settler-colonial narrative of the destruction and erasure of Indigenous lives but also disrupts conventional expectations of archival Indigenous media by foregrounding noise and glitch, calling attention to the place of random and difficult-to-interpret interference. Their rich, historically grounded participation in and analysis of *ARCTICNOISE* is a reminder of how often remote Indigenous communities have been subject to erasure by colonial regimes, a process I have discussed as "a history of Aboriginal futures" (Ginsburg and Myers 2006). For example, the 1950s Canadian government's sponsorship of the Cold War Distant Early Warning (DEW Line) system imposed on Inuit in the Arctic became the site of transformative potential for Indigenous media, as the system failed and became the infrastructure for TV Northern Canada, the progenitor to the Aboriginal People's Television Network. Similarly, the *ARCTICNOISE* project offers an example of how the materiality of prior Indigenous media projects are repurposed through collective and collaborative curatorial work, creating sites of community building and intergenerational recognition through projects that simultaneously mobilize and reconsider Indigenous pasts and futures.

There is a crucial and central point that these important contributions bring together in their attentive analyses of an impressive array of Indigenous media works from Australia and Canada. Indeed, these works offer a grounded glimpse of the hope that can emerge despite a long journey through decimation and occupation, as a number of recent works in anthropology suggest (Miyazaki 2004; Ortner 2016). It is essential that we not forget about the importance of sustaining the infrastructures and communities of practice and collaboration necessary to ensure a future for Indigenous media in a chilly climate of diminished support for this exciting and evolving field of cultural production. If Indigenous communities (and all of us) are anxious about the future, they (and we) are equally subject to the specter of the past. As these essays make clear, the two are inextricably bound together in Indigenous media projects of survivance that reclaim future imaginaries from colonial histories as sites of generative hope, possibility, and the road forward.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun
 2013 *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. New York: Verso.
- Aufderheide, Patricia
 1995 "The Video in the Villages Project: Videomaking with and by Brazilian Indians." *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 2: 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1995.11.2.83>.
- Clements, Marie, dir.
 2017 *The Road Forward*. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada.
- Cohn, Norman, and Zacharias Kunuk, dir.
 2001 *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*. Montreal: Igloolik Isuma.
- Dowell, Kristin L.
 2013 *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on Canada's West Coast*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.
 2018 "Digital Sutures: Experimental Stop-Motion Animation as Future Horizon of Indigenous Cinema." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2: 189–201. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.03>.
- Fisher, Daniel
 2016 *The Voice and Its Doubles: Media and Music in Northern Australia*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
 2018 "Untidy Times: Alexis Wright, Extinction, and Politics of Apprehension." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2: 180–88. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.02>.
- Ginsburg, Faye, and Fred Myers
 2006 "A History of Aboriginal Futures." *Critique of Anthropology* 26, no. 1: 27–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X06061482>.
- Hennessy, Kate, Trudi Lynn Smith, and Tarah Hogue
 2018 "ARCTICNOISE and Broadcasting Futures: Geronimo Inuitq Remixes the Igloolik Isuma Archive." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2: 213–23. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.05>.

Lempert, William

- 2018 "Generative Hope in the Postapocalyptic Present." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2: 202–12. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.04>.

Miyazaki, Hirokazu

- 2004 *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Ortner, Sherry B.

- 2016 "Dark Anthropology and its Others: Theory Since the Eighties." *HAU* 6, no. 1: 47–73. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.1.004>.

Vizenor, Gerald

- 1999 *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Wright, Alexis

- 2013 *The Swan Book*. Artarmon, Australia: Giramondo Press.