

Indigenous Futurism and the Immersive Worlding of *Inherent Rights/Vision Rights, 2167* and *Biidaaban: First Light*.

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This essay may seem a very odd, even unsettling addition to an anthology focused on Canadian Interactive Documentary. In the first instance, the works I propose to explore are a series of Indigenous artists' projects produced in Virtual Reality including Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (1992) and his recent VR collaboration with Paisley Smith, *Unceded Territories* (2019); 2 VR projects commissioned by ImagineNATIVE under the rubric of *2167*: Scott Benesiinaabandan's *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky* (2017) and Danis Goulet's *The Hunt* (2017) and Lisa Jackson's *Biidaaban: First Light* (2018). Shaped and informed by the robust and long standing tradition of Indigenous futurism, these projects feature provocative meditations on the future rendered through animation, CGI and digital processing. They are speculative, fantastical, metaphorical and mysterious. Each, in its own distinct way is informed by and mediates Indigenous cosmologies, philosophies and world views, embodying radical relationality, complex temporalities, and de-colonial imaginaries of the future. They are, as should be evident by now, conceived and executed in a manner that is far removed from 'the charge of the real' or the indexical properties and ontologies of documentary, as traditionally conceived. This does not mean, however, that the works are devoid of political urgency, as I will argue. But it does mean that that the works' political implications are mediated less through rhetorics of persuasion or the articulation of claims around 'reality,' than through an immersive and affective embodiment of simulated worlds, visions and prophecies.

Most importantly, these works unsettle any easy designation of the national or “Canada” as an unmarked frame. Ironically, while *2167* received financial support from the Canada and Ontario 150 fund, intended to mark the celebration of Canada’s sesquicentennial, and Jackson’s project was produced by the National Film Board of Canada, all five projects implicitly contest the permanence and authority of the settler colonial state as they assert the *survivance* (to evoke Gerald Vizenor’s term)¹ of Indigenous peoples far into the future. Indigenous sovereignty rather than national belonging is a fundament of the speculative imagination apparent in these projects.

Sitting more comfortably within the adjacent, yet distinct, field of Indigenous new media, these projects extend the long preoccupation of Indigenous new media artists with expanded forms of cinema, the internet and innovative media technologies. As Candice Hopkins wrote in *Transference, Tradition, Technology*, a seminal anthology on Indigenous new media, “Cyberspace has been occupied, transformed, appropriated and reinvented by Native people in ways similar to how we’ve always approached real space” (Hopkins 2005, 135). Far in advance of the contemporary scholarship, new critical language, and institutional support for interactive documentary, Indigenous new media has been at the forefront of artistic appropriations of new technologies into media integrated performance, installation, and web based art since the late 1990s. Some of the most resonant projects in this tradition have incorporated documentary elements and strategies such as Dana Claxton’s *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux* (2004), a four-channel video installation that weaves contemporary documentary interviews with Elders, archival images and panning shots of an empty prairie landscape to reflect on the history of the forced exodus of Sitting Bull and his people to Moosejaw, following the Battle of Little Bighorn. Stephen Foster,² Cheryl L’Hirondelle,³ and David Garneau⁴ have also used modified

documentary elements in their new media work but, for the most part, Indigenous new media has been discursively and institutionally situated in the art world and disseminated through an international field of art festivals, galleries, university and community displays that have historically been quite separate from the extended exhibition circuits or broadcast medium of documentary.

Today, with the expansive and accessible affordances of web 2.0, the proliferation of platforms, and new institutional priorities of support and programming of interactive and immersive digital media, these two worlds have come into closer proximity. That said, there are surprisingly few instances I could discover of interactive documentaries produced by Indigenous directors in Canada. Stephen Foster's *The Prince George Métis Elders Documentary Project*, co-directed with sociologist Mike Evans in 2005 was not specifically designed for the web but was disseminated as an interactive DVD and multi-channel video installation. *God's Lake Narrows* (2011), an interactive photo-essay was directed by Winnipeg artist Kevin Lee Burton and NFB producer Alicia Smith, and featured photos of the God's Lake reserve community by Scott Benesiinaabandan. A clever use of GPS tracking allows *God's Lake Narrows* to challenge outsider perspectives of Indigenous reserves while exploring, the faces and places of Burton's home reserve in northern Manitoba. *Ice Fishing* (2014) by Newfoundland Mi'kmaq artist Jordan Bennett, is an interactive sculptural, sound and video installation which includes an actual ice fishing shack built by Bennett and his father, the process of which is documented in a short linear film (https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/ice_fishing_en/).

While the NFB's Digital Mandate (2008-13) coincided with the agency's increased prioritization of support to Indigenous filmmakers (formalized in the NFB's 2017 three-year equity plan)⁵ the actual convergence of these mandates has been intermittent and tenuous. Both *God's Lake Narrows* and *Ice Fishing* involved co-productions and initiatives initiated outside the NFB. *God's Lake Narrows* grew out of Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet's installation piece RESERVE(d) which was shown in Winnipeg at the Shaman Urban Gallery in 2010 before being produced by the Winnipeg NFB as an interactive documentary. *Ice Fishing* was supported by the Vancouver Digital Studio through Canada's Digital Partnership with the ImagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival. The NFB also collaborated with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts on *Kushapetshekan/Kosapitcikan—A Glimpse into the Other World* (2017), an immersive installation by Atikamekw artists Eruoma Awashish and Meky Ottawa, and Innu artist Jani Bellefleur-Kaltush.

While documentary remains the core institutional project of the National Film Board, its Digital Studios have interpreted the NFB's digital mandate as an "experimental canvas for interactive storytelling" (NFB 2015) and have not confined themselves to strict definitions of documentary. The NFB Vancouver Digital Studio, in fact, was the producer on Lisa Jackson's *Bidaaban: First Light*, a project that the Canadian Screen Awards included in the category "immersive fiction."

While the five Indigenous VR projects I want to explore rely on new technologies of spatial storytelling, an investment they share with the broad spectrum of interactive documentary, there are some key and crucial differences. While accessed through new platforms and personalized modes of navigation, the interactive documentary frequently retains a core of traditional documentary elements including witness testimony, interviews, and photorealistic depictions of

place and subjects. All the VR projects I will be exploring embody complex mediations of the computational and the real which lean far more toward simulation and hyper-realism than actuality. Yuxweluptun's *Inherent Rights/Vision Rights* recreates a Coast Salish longhouse but in neon animated renderings where space is populated by spirits and ghosts. Lisa Jackson's *Bidaaban: First Light* has an indexical relation to an actual location, the iconic Nathan Philips square in downtown Toronto, whose image is then textured and remediated as a futurist post-apocalyptic landscape. Danis Goulet's 2167 project, *The Hunt* mixes CGI and with 360 lens based video to create science fiction and Scott Benesiinaabandan's *Blueberry Pie Under the Martian Sky* reveals a dreamscape that is entirely computational. Either through the appropriation of the new technology of virtual reality or through the use of speculative fiction as a modality of Indigenous futurism, these projects operate outside of traditional ontologies of the real and is precisely for this reason that they are able to embody the distinctiveness of Indigenous cosmologies and world views in sublime, provocative and powerful ways.

The central challenge of this essay is how to engage with the rich philosophical provocations of these VR projects in a respectful mode than acknowledges their decolonizing impetus. As Mohawk and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts warns, translations of Indigenous cosmologies into Euro-Western scholarship often results in a reterritorializing of Indigenous thought into problematic abstractions or critical categories (Watts 2013). Indigenous world views are embodied and embedded in specific places, she argues, they come into being and are sustained only through active and reciprocal tending of relations to those places and territories, a process that Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson have termed "grounded normativity (Coulthard and Simpson 2016)." As a settler on occupied territories, I can never presume to fully

know Indigenous epistemologies or cosmologies. There are, however, many brilliant Indigenous philosophers, scholars and artists who I lean on and listen to in an effort to highlight how Indigenous world views are manifest in these VR projects. Each of these projects embodies a generous invitation to settler and Indigenous viewers alike to imagine alternative futures and to immerse themselves in other worlds. Of course, this invitation comes with the proviso that these virtual territories will be respected and not occupied or settled, and that the recognition (and even celebration) of Indigenous sovereignty is an apriori condition to all reformulations of settler and Indigenous relations.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (1992)

Cree/Métis director and scholar Loretta Todd's seminal essay, "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace," (1996) and Mohawk multimedia installation/ performance artist and cultural theorist Jackson 2bears', "A Conversation with Spirits Inside the Simulation of a Coast Salish Longhouse (2010)" provide rich frameworks for considering the evolution and specificity of what 2bears calls "an Indigenous theory of virtuality (2bears, 2010)." For both, a touchstone project is Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (IRVR), the first ever Indigenous VR project developed during a residency at the Banff Centre in 1991 and the first VR project to be exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada. I turn to IRVR now in the hope of tracing its contemporary legacy and the critical discourse that it inspired.

By the early 1990s Yuxweluptun was well known for his large scale, gorgeous and politically explicit landscape paintings which highlighted Indigenous dispossession, environmental

devastation and the toxic fallout of colonialism, inflected, as one critic notes, as much by Coast Salish mythologies as by “acid rock (Laurence 1995).” IRVR borrows many of Yuxweluptun’s signature ovoid shaped figures, psychedelic colours and hybridizations of Northwest Coast mask traditions to immerse the participant in a sacred Coast Salish long house where a spiritual ceremony is taking place. As Yuxweluptun writes, “the longhouse is a given space in time which I use to show a religious concept, to physically bring people into contact with a native worshiping aspect of life, praying Indians ... What it is like being in a possessed state feeling rhythmic sounds in a longhouse, feeling sounds go through one’s own self, feeling a spirit inside you (Yuxweluptun, 1996).” While IRVR might be seen as a departure from the exhortatory language of his paintings, the VR project is, nonetheless, deeply political in its assertion of the survival and integrity of Indigenous spirituality and millennial old traditions that persist despite 500 years of colonization, forced Christianization and assimilation through the mechanisms of residential schools and state sanctioned policies of cultural genocide. According to 2bears, IRVR is conditioned by Yuxweluptun’s initiation as a dancer into the Sxwaixwe Coast Salish secret society at the age of fourteen but as a self-avowed ‘modernist’ Yuxweluptun mediates the experience of the ceremony through the technology of VR and through his own syncretic and hybridized imagination.

From the standpoint of 30 years of technical refinement of Virtual Reality (for many a technology still in its infancy) IRVR seems crude. The project is only accessed through large headphones and clunky Darth Vader type helmet stuck into a plexiglass box containing two tiny monitors and a computer. A joystick provides the single participant with ability to navigate

through this space. There are fragments of IRVR which exist online in the form of frame grabs on Yuxweluptun's website (<http://lawrencepauluyuxweluptun.com/interdisciplinary.html>) and in an extended excerpt included in *Man of Masks*, an NFB documentary on Yuxweluptun directed by Dana Claxton in 1998 (<https://www.nfb.ca/film/yuxweluptun-man-of-masks/>). Mostly for this writer, however, the experience of IRVR is mediated through the accounts of contemporary spectators such as 2bears and Todd who viewed the project in its original incarnation and through a more recent account by Sarah King who writes about IRVR in the context of the Yuxweluptun retrospective in 2016 at the Museum of Anthropology.

One thing that is clear from all these accounts is that despite the clunky encumbrance of 1992 VR technology, the experience for all participants is intensely visceral and one of one absolute immersion. Here is Jackson 2bears account of his encounter with the project:

I begin to feel nauseous as this ecstatic feeling of disembodied-embodiment awakens feelings in me of a kind of psychoexistential transformation that has about it the quality of some ancient initiation ritual. Confused and discombobulated, my entire sense of "self" has become distorted, dislocated and entirely uncertain...I feel submerged in a kind of digital underworld, caught in a technologically enabled illusion, set adrift in a liminal zone with the feeling of being simultaneously inside and outside my body.

(2Bears, 2010)

Loretta Todd wrote of how Yuxweluptun's virtual environment allowed for an uncanny experience of time, "the time of walking from the outside to the inside. The time of listening to a

dog. The time of hearing the roar of the fire as the wood burns” (Todd 1996, 160). Sarah King also commented on IRVR’s immersive nature where “fire pits are active and ovoid beings are dancing, drumming and vocalizing (King 2017, 190).” When an ovoid figure looms up and seemingly passes through her, King finds the experience “overwhelming (191).”

Writing “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace” in 1996 at the height of uncritical and pervasive techno-utopianism, Todd is justifiably wary about the promise of these new technologies and asks whether cyberspace is not really “a clever guise for neo-colonialism,” (154) responsible for perpetuating the founding axioms of Western thought: “A fear of the body, aversion to nature, a desire for salvation and transcendence of the earthly plane...(155).” While refusing to absolve the general ontology and practice of cyberspace from its colonial entanglements, Todd reads IRVR as a notable and critical exception to the rule. “Yuxweluptun does not want you to forget your body (160),“ she insists, he “invites you into the mystery of the everyday. You must define yourself in relationship to the story around you (161).” Building on Todd’s insight, 2bears points to the paradigm shifting nature of IRVR with its possibility, as he argues, “of recontextualizing the Western “ontology of the virtual,” a transformation in which the focus becomes a return to the flesh as both an embodied and simulated experience under the sign of an *Indigenous Theory of Virtuality* (2bears, 2010).”

While 2bears’ argument is highly complex and built through a wide-ranging exegesis of texts from Carl Jung to Heidegger, what I believe is core to his argument is that Indigenous Virtuality as theory and as instantiated in IRVR, moves beyond the logic of either or to propose a simultaneous and even paradoxical conjoining of opposites: flesh and the virtual, spirit world and

the world of matter. The conjoining of opposites, moreover, is mediated through the particular nature of virtual reality technology which invites participatory immersion in a highly kinesthetic sensory experience where a user is able to move through a spatial surround that has volume, depth, and acoustic and visual presence. In other words, volumetric immersion may be virtual but the individual participant's experience is felt through the body, in waves of nausea, awe, fear, trembling and surrender. As 2bears writes, "the people who experience the work [IRVR] are not mere spectators but participants in the phenomenological hallucination of a sacred ritual -- they are users with agency who exercise free will while navigating a simulation of a Coast Salish longhouse (2bears 2010)" As with the traditional practices of ceremony, prayer, fasting, ritual or ingestion of mind altering substances, the VR experience facilitates the transposition of the subject into a state of altered consciousness. Yuxweluptun, in fact, has referred to the VR helmet as "the whiteman's mask" (Yuxweluptun 1996), a device, which like the traditional masks of Coast Salish peoples, operates to transport users into other worldly encounters with ghosts, animated spirits and sacred hauntings. For 2bears, IRVR foregrounds the specific potential of VR technology as animistic "alive and filled with spirit (2bears 2010)" as it models a new participatory and embodied relation in which an active participant is "interconnected with the virtual, caught in a feedback loop in which ... spirit-simulations move through the digital code and interface with the flesh (2bears 2010)."

In addition to the way in which VR facilitates a complex relay between the virtual and the body, 2bears and Todd argue that VR represents a technological mediation particularly consonant with Aboriginal modes of storytelling given its primary orientation toward space, an orientation embedded in the core precept of all Indigenous world views: namely the sacredness of land. As Vine Deloria Jr.'s points out in his canonical *God is Red/A Native View of Religion*, while

western philosophy is preoccupied with time, Indigenous spirituality is based on a philosophy of space and understands land as an animate entity that possesses or inhabits the people (Deloria 2003). As is obvious, one can't stress enough how distinct this view is from western ideologies for whom the land exists almost exclusively as an external, inanimate object whose value is dependent on its instrumental use as a resource for exploitation, extraction, and commodification. Even mainstream western environmental discourses tend to portray the ravaged, terra formed and polluted landscapes of the Anthropocene as an inert other. By contrast, Deloria and multiple Indigenous philosophers have meticulously delineated how Indigenous ontologies stand in marked contrast to the founding subject/object dualism of Western thought by virtue of their radical relationality. As Aboriginal scholar and activist Karen Martin so beautifully put it: "We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal" (Martin 2003, 209.).

"Inherent Rights," the declarative title of Yuxweluptun's VR project references the sacred trust invested in Indigenous peoples to care and steward the land understood as a vast assemblage of interconnected life and human and non-human beings. While IRVR offers a generous invitation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors to spiritual immersion in Coast Salish longhouse, his recent VR project, *Unceded Territories* (2019), produced in collaboration with VR artist Paisley Smith, takes a more confrontational stance (although tempered by Yuxweluptun's characteristic wry and ironic sense of humour), implicating the visitor as a colonizer and perpetrator of environmental devastation. Like IRVR, *Unceded Territories* appropriates the iconic figures of Yuxweluptun's Coast Salish surrealist aesthetic into an intense 6 minutes of hallucinogenic play. *Unceded*, however, adds elements of explicit game-like interactivity as the user is provided with hand controllers which turn into stylized bear claws inside the world of VR. As

my ‘claw’ touches a mosaic of rounded rectangles, the play begins and I’m encouraged to fling a ball into the world of the beautiful forest, each fling splattering neon colour into the environment. The gaming aspect is fun, driven by the pounding, intoxicating rhythms of *A Tribe Called Red* but soon the tone changes. The forest is invaded by Super-Predators and Colonial Snake whose toxic presence begins to change the natural environment: forests catch on fire, fish are poisoned and when one looks down, oil pools on the forest floor, growing with each insouciant fling of the ball. As the ‘game’ reaches a crescendo, the landscape shifts into a swirling blur of neon mosaics, which finally resolve into a gray and ruined world as the voice of Yuxweluptun offers a final admonition: “You must not touch what is not yours!”

Unceded Territories is playful and deeply mischievous but there is an obvious method to Yuxweluptun’s madness. The ‘Unceded Territories’ of the project’s title might very well embrace the whole of Turtle Island or, indeed, the territories of the world that have been subject to colonial dispossession since Contact. But in British Columbia, the title makes an immediate reference to the large tracts of land in the province (the last to be colonized in Canada) where Aboriginal Title has neither been surrendered nor acquired by the Crown, much of which is in protracted legal dispute. For Yuxweluptun and for the late Arthur Manuel, Secwepemc activist, Indigenous leader, environmentalist and writer, Indigenous struggles over rights and title represent the frontline of resistance and main legal challenge to the exploitation of lands and fossil fuel expansion. By referencing the ongoing struggle over Aboriginal title, Yuxweluptun reminds users of who the inherent and rightful stewards of the land actually are while positioning Indigenous resistance as the embodied manifestation of the sacred responsibility to tend and care for Mother Earth. As Manuel writes: “In defending the land at this time of the international

global warming crisis, we are defending something much larger than Indigenous rights. Our fight today is to preserve the planet in a livable form (Manuel 2017, 242).”

2167 and Indigenous Futurism

As part of the Toronto International Film Festival’s sesquicentennial initiative, *Canada on Screen*, four Indigenous filmmakers and artists — Danis Goulet, Kent Monkman, Scott Benesiinaabandan, and the interdisciplinary arts collective Postcommodity — were commissioned to create VR projects envisioning Indigenous life 150 years in the future. A collaboration between ImagineNATIVE, TIFF, the Inuit media collective Pinnguaq and Concordia University’s Initiative for Indigenous Futures, the commission was intended as a crucial and de-colonial counterpoint to the 150 years of Canadian confederation celebrations that took place throughout 2017. Shepherded and produced by the Artistic and Managing Director of ImagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival, Jason Ryle, the commission clearly took up the insight first developed by Loretta Todd and Jackson 2bears that highlighted the particular compatibility of VR with Indigenous world views. As the program notes for a panel discussion on 2167 put it, “The art of story creation in virtual reality offers a point of view and presence of place, space and environment that may be closest comparison yet to Indigenous oral storytelling practice (Ryle 2017).”

While Indigenous futurism has an extraordinarily robust presence in Canada, the movement is international and embraces a range of practices complexly entangled, as Karyn Recollet (2019) notes, with Afrofuturism as a discourse of speculative resistance. The term was first coined by

Grace Dillon in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012) which included contributions by Native Americans, First Nations, Aboriginal Australians and New Zealand Maori authors. Rigorously framed by Dillon, the anthology provided a deconstructive critique of conventional science fiction with its traditional colonialist emphasis on conquering ‘alien’ territories while highlighting the speculative and time-travelling traditions that had always informed Indigenous legends and oral storytelling. Indigenous Futurism has expanded kinetically within the last decade as an integral part of Indigenous resurgence and in its contemporary iterations includes a diverse range of media and theory making, gaming, machinima, hip-hop, computer animation and zines, mixed tapes, science fiction films and internet based practices.

One of the best known and cutting edge innovators in the field is AbTEc (Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace) a research network of artists and academics who investigate and create Indigenous virtual environments at Concordia University directed by Jason Lewis (Cherokee/Hawaiian/ Samoan) and Skawennati Fragitini Kawennati (a Mohawk multi-media artist). AbTEc hosts a range of symposia, ‘skins’ workshops on Aboriginal storytelling and Videogame design for Indigenous youth and ongoing research creation initiatives and scholarly interventions. Inspired by CyberPowWow,⁶ the pioneering online art gallery and chat space conceived in 1996, AbTEc has been developing an expansive conceptual framework around Indigenous Futurism for the past 15 years. Of particular note are the extraordinary and highly influential machinimas directed by Skawennati, *Time Traveller* (<http://www.timetravellertm.com/episodes/>) which follows a young Indigenous hunter who travels through time to immerse himself in key chapters in Indigenous resistance and *She Falls For Ages* (2016) (<http://www.skawennati.com/SheFallsForAges/>),

a gorgeous sci-fi retelling of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) creation story which reimagines Sky World as a futuristic, utopic space and Sky Woman as a brave astronaut and world-builder.

AbTec was a collaborating partner with *2167*, through the Initiative for Indigenous Futures, and the lab hosted a residency for Scott Benesiinaabandan as he worked on *Blueberry Pie Under a Martian Sky*.

As many of its practitioners have observed, Indigenous futurism evolves as a retort to the colonial imagination that views Indigeneity and Indigenous peoples as artefacts of the past, frozen in time, and on the cusp of vanishing or assimilation. Indigenous futurism insists that contemporary Indigenous peoples are not outside the world of technological development and modernity but are recouping and appropriating new technologies as Indigenous peoples have always done. As Grace Dillon has pointed out, Indigenous Futurism is markedly different from conventional science fiction and even, one might extrapolate, from contemporary post-apocalyptic imaginaries sparked by the increasing awareness of global environmental devastation and climate change. Indigenous scholars, artists and allies; Jolene Rickard (2016); Jessica L Horton (2017); Thomas J. Demos (2017); Zoe Todd (2015); Nicholas Mirzoeff (2014) are developing a crucial critique of the mainstream discourses of the Anthropocene which, while drawing attention to current and impending ecological disaster, serve to reinforce the colonial and Enlightenment centring of ‘man’ at the apex of planetary transformations and history.

In their groundbreaking essay, “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” Métis artist and scholar Zoe Todd and settler scholar Heather Davis argue that such problematic philosophical alliances are reproduced in the universalizing rhetoric of the

Anthropocene with its undifferentiated use of a culpable ‘humanity’ and its obliviousness to the striations of power, privilege and responsibility which have distributed massively unequal benefits and harms. For these authors, the Anthropocene is not a new event but a continuation of the processes of dispossession and genocide that have been at work since Contact. Decolonizing the Anthropocene, as such, requires a massive revision of its conceptual apparatus to incorporate Indigenous philosophies and world views beginning with the historicization of the new epoch at the commencement of colonization. Such a move, as much strategic as it is symbolic, foregrounds the violence at the core of colonization as a world changing seismic event and pluralizes the disasters of the Anthropocene beyond anthropogenic climate disruption, including the transatlantic passage and black chattel slavery. As Davis and Todd conclude, Indigenous peoples have already faced the end of their worlds, apocalyptic annihilation in the form of mass dispossession, genocide and ecological upheaval and this experience conditions all Indigenous approaches to the future with the generational knowledge that, despite overwhelming odds, Indigenous people have survived and possess the resilience, wisdom and skill to survive future apocalyptic iterations.

These insights certainly inform and shape the embodiment of Indigenous Futurism in the 2167 VR projects. For reasons of space and thematic consistency, I’m only going to touch on two of these, Scott Benesiinaabandan’s *Blueberry Pie Under A Martian Sky* and Danis Goulet’s *The Hunt* which, perhaps more explicitly than the other VR projects, appropriate tropes of science fiction to re-imagine the future as a necessary efflorescence of Indigenous survivance.

Blueberry Pie Under a Martian Sky

Of all the 2167 projects, *Blueberry Pie Under a Martian Sky*, feels most like a dreamscape or hallucination. As with IRVR, it provides a heightened kinesthetic experience, immersing the user in a space that is entirely abstract and mediated through computational rendering. We enter the story through a black void where a tall stylized scaffold of bent branches forms around us, tethered with bark or sinew. Suddenly a flock of birds flies through the structure, escaping from the top as the structure rotates in space. Caught in a whorl of time, we are without horizon or gravity and surrender to the sensation of floating and turning, staring into deep space. We are in the wormhole.

The wormhole, of course, is a staple in science fiction, a speculative trope that is loosely predicted by the theory of general relativity and that inspires ideas of time travel, of moving through disparate points in spacetime. In *Blueberry Pie*, Benesiinaabandan Indigenizes the concept, linking it to two traditional Anishinaabe origin stories: one a prophetic Anishinaabe legend about a young boy who travels back in time to his people's place of origin and the other a story about Spider Woman who weaves a web from the stars along which the Anishinaabe people travelled to Earth. Benesiinaabandan adds a contemporary twist to these origin stories, inserting the wormhole as the metaphoric time-travel medium, a space of complex temporalities where the future is folded into the deep past.

We hear the artist's voice introducing the storyworld, telling us that 100 years from now in the spring of 2167, a research collaboration between Anishinaabe and Omega announced the discovery of a localized, fuzzy wormhole, confirming years of speculative theory. Spider woman, he tells us, has also been seen in dreams and walking visions across the territory and a

little boy was selected for the first trip home. We are reminded that the wormhole is the conduit where descendants return, and that it represents an arduous journey where “gravity will reshape us and we will get used to it, it will also reshape our minds.”

Inside the black void of the wormhole, recursive geometric shapes spin and turn. A white and gray kaleidoscope of concentric pointed stars spins and dislocates, each band whirling off into the void. There are a few recognizable forms caught in the whorl, a teapot, an artefact of a bygone civilization floats by, but the wormhole is mostly occupied by abstract and constantly mutating shapes. The narration is taken over by a female Anishinaabemowin speaker who we hear in the right side of the headphone speaking Anishinaabemowin and on the left side speaking the English translation, the two languages woven together in a rich vocal invocation.

In a public panel at TIFF following the launch of *2167*,⁷ Benesiinaabandan spoke of how the project was inspired by his recognition that the Anishnabemowin term for “blueberry pie” did not exist until relatively recently (blueberries having been around since time immemorial, but not pie). Indigenous languages, he felt, are immensely innovative, constantly in flux and capable of adapting to new technologies, situations and new relations to kin and land and he wanted to explore how the language might evolve, seven generations into the future. Working with linguist Alan Corbiere, director of the Anishinaabemowin Revival Program Coordinator at Lakeview School, M'Chigeeng First Nation, they commissioned an Elder language group on Manitoulan Island to develop words for the future such as “black hole” or “event horizon.” Anishnabemowin, like all Indigenous languages is action oriented and implicitly embeds relations to human and non-human others in poetic and multi-syllabic words that function like short poems. These beautiful and melodic aural fragments are what

Benesiinaabandan used to compose the narration, as a testament to the creativity and power of the language to survive into the deep future.

The Hunt

In his contribution to *Coded Territories*, new media artist and activist, Archer Pechawis wrote, “I am looking for a future in which Indigenism is the protocol, an all-encompassing embrace of creation: the realms of earth, sky, water, plant animal, human, spirit and, most importantly, a profound humility with regards to our position as humans within that constellation (Pechawis 2014, 38). It seems to me that all the 2167 projects answer Pechawis’s call for future imaginaries that centre Indigeneity as the dominant world view and Danis Goulet’s *The Hunt* is no exception. Deploying a fictional mise-en scene and 360 photo realist video to construct its storyworld, *The Hunt* is perhaps the most explicitly political of the VR projects I’m considering. While the other VR projects project a future where settler colonialism is extinct and Indigenous worlding takes precedence, *The Hunt* imagines the perpetuation of colonialism as a post-apocalyptic police state where automated orbs patrol the skies to survey and control the remaining pockets of Indigenous community. As with her 2014 short linear film, *Wakening*⁸ where a lone Cree woman warrior hunts the Weetigo through a dystopian urban landscape, Goulet’s focus is on Indigenous resilience, celebrating, as she puts it, “the ingenious ways we resist colonization (Goulet 2017).”

The Hunt opens with a drone shot which takes us over parched landscapes and ruined technoscapes (wind turbines, cracked and lying on the ground) void of traces of population, to the edge of a field where a small group of Mohawk people are hunting. We realize we have been following the point of view of the surveying orb as it drops to ground level and the point of view

switches to the hunters. As the orb hovers over his head, a man protests in Mohawk (Kanien'keha) that they are on sovereign Mohawk territory and have the right to hunt, pulling out his state issued hunting permit. His assertion of sovereignty mediated through colonial state is suddenly eclipsed by the more forceful retort of a young woman hunter who takes aim with a laser crossbow and shoots the orb out of the sky. Joking about the men's feeble hunting prowess, the group make their way back to their shelter, a ramshackle group of huts patched together with corrugated tin and tarps. We see an abandoned bulldozer and car around the settlement, the debris and detritus from another time but the small community is vibrant and alive, multi-generational and ingenious in its tactical modes of survival. The camera follows the young woman hunter as she enters a storage space and pulls apart a black curtain to reveal a large mound of these glowing orbs. As the man exclaims "almost a full fleet," the woman hunter commands the orbs to Rise! Reprogrammed from state surveillance to resistance, the orbs obey her in a powerful move of Indigenous détournement, massing their energies toward a future confrontation with colonial power.

As with the other examples of Indigenous futurity I have discussed, *The Hunt* presupposes that Indigenous flourishing in the future is dependent on a deep and intimate knowledge of the land and a resurgence of language as the carrier of spiritual being and culture. These values are core to the future imagined in Lisa Jackson's *Bidaaban: First Light*, the final VR project I will consider in a more extended exegesis.

Bidaaban: First Light.

Winner of the Canadian Screen Award for Best Immersive Feature in 2019 (among a host of other awards) and featured at dozens of international film and media festivals,

Jackson's *Bidaaban: First Light* provides one of the more sublime experiences of virtual reality as it immerses viewers in a post-apocalyptic Indigenous future set in a landscape, Toronto's Nathan Philips Square. Crucially, the project was launched in the actual foyer of Toronto's city hall in Nathan Philip's Square, inscribing an uncanny link between the virtual and the real that was enhanced by the lush plants and vegetation that artfully surrounded the viewing booths.⁹

As soon as the project starts, I am viscerally catapulted into a dark abyss. Tiny beams of light that could be stars, atoms, infinite galaxies float through the dark resolving into the project's title then dissolving into a new title: Tkaronto, the Mohawk word for 'where there are trees standing in the water' the antecedent of the colonial place name of Toronto.

The scene cuts to black and I am suddenly on the edge of the dilapidated and deserted underground subway station. I look down and see the water that fills the tunnel and instantly pull back. I'm dizzy and unmoored. I can feel the dankness, can almost smell the odour of decay and abandonment. I hear the steady drip of water. I turn my head to look behind me and see debris on the other side, and a fading and indecipherable Toronto subway map on one of the posts. The silence is eerie and foreboding. A red canoe is docked in the tunnel, another is overturned on the platform. As I'm wondering if these represent a sign of inhabitation, a woman's voice asks "Änen shayo'tron' Shonywää'tihchia'ih sentiohkwa'?" as a title reveals the translation "Where did the Creator put your people?"

The next scene transitions from underground to the ground level of Nathan Philips Square, Toronto's iconic city hall with its modernist curved buildings designed in 1965 by Finnish architect Viljo Revell. Vegetation has taken over the buildings. Trees grow on roofs, ivy and vines coil down the crumbling sides of buildings. The Sheraton Centre and the CN tower survive in the background as pathetic and decrepit reminders of commercial boosterism, now a sad reflection of mortal hubris. The scene is uncanny, familiar yet *unheimlich*, a vision of Toronto blasted into a post-apocalyptic future that is as stunning as it is remorseless.

Bidaaban's meticulously detailed vision of the future evolved through an impressive collaboration between Jackson, the Vancouver Digital Studio of the NFB, Jam3--a design studio out of London, England and Mathew Borrett, a Toronto based digital artist whose original large scale photo project, *Hypnagogic City*, reworked actual 3D models of Nathan Philips Square, fusing the real and the computational into a stunning series of 2 dimensional views. Jam3 extended and adapted these views into immersive 3D spatial renderings.

One of the crucial distinctions, however, between Borrett's original photo renderings and *Bidaaban*, is that the future evoked in *Hypnagogic City* is devoid of human presence, an apocalyptic scenario increasingly prevalent in settler culture, in discourses of the Anthropocene and in recent non-fiction accounts of climate change disaster such as David Wallace-Wells recently released *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019). Gerry Canavan, in fact, has coined a new term "necrofuturism" to describe a contemporary pervasive imaginary that "posits a future that is doomed to continue modern capitalism's unsustainable and immoral practices even as those practices become more and more destructive and self-defeating (Canavan 2014, 1)."

Although I've used the term post-apocalyptic to signal some of the generic affinities of *Bidaaban* with contemporary instances of futurism, I should point out that in an interview in *Filmmaker Magazine*, Jackson strongly eschews the idea of describing *Bidaaban* with that descriptor. Her intent, she insists, was to foreground the resurgence of nature as a verdant animate force and to evoke a cosmic sense of a futurity linked to Indigenous continuity. Indeed, while the future evoked in *Bidaaban* shares the iconography of ruin with much post-apocalyptic scenarios, nestled among the ruins are multiple signs of human survival. I can see a fire pit by an old patio table and chairs with animal remains and antlers scattered by the side. The sound of a bird cawing directs me to a crow perched on a ledge. I turn my head and see a ghostly apparition: an Indigenous woman in a white dress, digging in the soil who looks up as the crow flies overhead. As subsequent scenes land us on the rooftop of a skyscraper looking down at the seemingly abandoned and deteriorating city, these visual signifiers of Indigeneity increase: strips of meat hung to dry on a traditional wooden rack, a wigwam built out of treated hides and branches. Most importantly, however, Indigenous presence is signified through voices speaking the traditional languages of the area —Wendat, Anishinaabemowin and Kanyen'keha (Mohawk) as the text translations float through space. The text is mainly composed of excerpts from the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, an invocation that expresses gratitude for all that sustains life while reminding listeners of a solemn promise to tend and care for the world with its abundant gifts. Jackson asked and received approval from members of Six Nations to use the prayer given its sacred and powerful status in the culture. The Address offers an expansive and 'shimmering' vision of a world of interconnected relations of humans, non-humans and all of creation, exhorting listeners that the proper stance before the bounty of creation is humility and

ethical responsibility: “We give thanks and acknowledge her, our mother the Earth that supports our feet. All our minds are one.”

Like *Blueberry Pie*, *Bidaaban* conjurs a complex non-linear temporality where future is only imagined in communion with the deep past. The Anishinaabemowin title: Bi (the future coming at us); daa (the past) a Ban (after they go into the spirit world) poetically embodies this non-linear view of time. Settler industrial civilization may have collapsed but time loops into traces of pre-Contact habitation sustained by deep Indigenous knowledge of how to survive on the land.

There are many uncanny resonances between Heather Davis and Zoe Todd’s essay “Decolonizing the Anthropocene” and *Bidaaban*. Indeed, it is as if *Bidaaban* answers the call that Davis and Todd issue to “those studying and storying the Anthropocene” to “tend to the ruptures and cleavages between land and flesh, story and law, human and more than human (Davis and Todd 2017, 775).” Could we read the apparition of the Indigenous woman digging in a patch of soil as an embodied instantiation of these relations and ruptures? Her digging does not appear to be a gesture connected to the instrumental ends of agriculture. Rather, the gesture feels performative and mysterious, an acting out of what Davis and Todd, following Indigenous scholar Vanessa Watts, has termed “Place-Thought.” Evoking Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee history and philosophy, Watts describes Place-Thought as “based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts (Watts 2013, 21).” For Watts “we [that is Indigenous subjects] are made from the land, *our flesh is literally an extension of soil* [emphasis mine] (Watts 2013, 27).” Viewed from this perspective, the digging woman embodies multiple gendered and philosophical implications as the site and body of female generative energy, fashioning and generating new peoples of the

land, through the “relatedness of land and flesh (Davis and Todd 2017, 769).” For Watts: “The feminine and land [are] fundamental to our extensions as people” and ensure the continued ability to act and think according to traditional cosmologies. (Watts 2013, 27).

In one of the last scenes of this breathtaking experience, I am inside the domed wigwam looking up at the skins stretched taut over the bent poles as they glow with reflected light from the moon. Suddenly the skins dissolve and I’m immersed in an intoxicating surround of stars and night sky. There is no horizon, no form of any orientation that would ground me to the earth, so I surrender, my body floats as if lost in an immense void of time and space. A male and female voice continue to speak the Thanksgiving Address in the original languages of the territory, as if their voices emanated from the night stars themselves, wrapping me in an acoustic envelope of sacred incantation. The experience feels transcendent, deeply moving, and for a brief and ephemeral moment, I can feel I’m inside a cosmic experience.

The acoustic envelope of incantatory vocalizations is obviously crucial to the experience of *Bidaaban*. *Bidaaban* and its sister installation project, *Transmissions*, grew out of Jackson’s interest in how Indigenous worldviews are intimately and profoundly embedded in Indigenous languages and convey distinct sets of relationships, as Jackson puts it, “to land, to each other and to time itself (Jackson, 2018).” While Wendat, Anishinaabemowin and Kanyen’keha, the traditional languages heard in *Bidaaban* have emerged over millennia of habitation and are shaped by the specificity of their territories, they also bear common orientations with all place-based Indigenous languages and ontologies. A core idea in Vanessa Watt’s Place-Thought, shared with multiple Indigenous intellectual traditions including Leroy Little Bear’s Blackfoot Metaphysics, is that the singularity of Indigenous languages and, by implication, Indigenous

worldviews has to do with their emphasis on radical relationality and the sacred connection between all beings, human and non-human. “Everything in creation is animate and imbued with spirit,” Little Bear writes, a sentiment at the heart of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address which offers gratitude to “the wind;” to “our elder brother the sun;” to “Grandmother moon and the stars in the sky;” to “running water;” “game animals;” “food plants;” and “birds.” While Western thought is oriented around the foundational dualism of subject and object (with profound implications for how we are able to instrumentalize others and the land itself), radical relationality provides a powerful alternative of living in embedded dwelling on the earth, in relations of kin and caring with all entities. This is the lesson that *Bidaaban* meticulously embodies, a lesson we all must learn if the earth and all its inhabitants are to be lovingly sustained.

Conclusion

This essay began with an exploration of Jackson 2bears’s Indigenous theory of virtuality to demonstrate why Indigenous new media artists have gravitated to VR, particularly artists invested in the tactical technological appropriations and interventions of Indigenous futurism. For 2bears, Virtual Reality facilitates a particular form of embodiment and participatory engagement that is radically distinct from the transcendental spectator of conventional cinema. As he has argued, wearing the ‘whiteman’s mask’ as Yuxwelputun names it, places us inside a “phenomenological hallucination” immersed in a highly kinesthetic sensory experience that can simulate alternate modes of knowing and being traditionally arrived at only through ritual practices.

In her essay “The World Navigated: Interactive Documentaries in Canada,” Jessica Mulvogue calls on Heidegger and his theorization of ‘world picture’ to distinguish the user experience of interactive documentary as one that potentially breaches the subject/object divide of Western ontologies. Conventional cinema, she argues, mirrors and reproduces Western modernity’s othering of the world as an image: “The world stands before and apart from us...as an object that we can define, conquer and control (Mulvogue 2019, 416),” I would argue that even more than interactive documentary, the affordances of VR provide for the possibility of such a breach. VR may embody interactive elements but its key distinguishing feature is its ability to immerse us in a spatial and auditory surround where the frame, with all of its complex ideological, ontological and perceptual effects, is eclipsed through immersive worlding. There is no doubt that VR can also be used to deleterious ends as in commercial pornography or gaming where the storyworld invites the user to occupy the position of colonizer or conquerer of alien territories. However, in the hands of Indigenous artists, as I hope I have demonstrated, VR has been skillfully deployed to mediate complex Indigenous world views.

All of the works discussed here provide a speculative vision of the future where Indigeneity is centred as a necessary relational ontology that eclipses colonial modes of vision, knowing and being in the world. This vision, as multiple Indigenous artists and scholars have argued is embedded in the future oriented nature of Indigenous world views which, as Wade Churchill writes, “stands in diametrical opposition to the totality of what might be termed “Eurocentric business as usual” as they offer “an antidote, a vision of how things might be that is based in how things have been since time immemorial, and how things must be once again if the human species, and perhaps the planet itself, is to survive much longer (Churchill 2003, 253).”

¹ Anishinaabe cultural theorist and writer Gerald Vizenor coined the term *survivance*, an amalgam of survival and resistance in his book *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Vizenor 1994) to insist on the active presence, ingenuity and continually evolving nature of Indigenous cultural and social realities throughout colonization.

² *The Prince George Métis Elders Documentary Project* (2005), directed by Stephen Foster (Haida/European) and Mike Evans is perhaps the most explicitly documentary in form, using interviews with Elders in the installation and CD Rom.

³ While not documentary interviews per se, *Why The Caged Bird Sings: Here I Am* (2014), directed by Cheryl L'Hirondelle (2014) uses documentary performances of incarcerated women filmed in correctional institutions. L'Hirondelle is of Métis/Cree, French, German, and Polish descent.

⁴ Métis artist David Garneau's video installation *Black Pepper* (2000) uses an autobiographical story narrated by Garneau and a fixed video image of an Indigenous male actor to recount an episode in Garneau's experience as a camp counsellor when he was instructed to discipline a young Indigenous child with black pepper. The performative elements of the piece highlight the complex ways in which documentary elements have been employed in Indigenous new media work.

⁵ NFB equity plan <https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2017/06/20/nfb-commits-indigenous-equity/>

⁶ <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/about.html>

⁷ <https://www.tiff.net/the-review/indigenous-existence-is-resistance>

⁸ <http://www.nscanada.ca/2015/01/wakening/>

⁹ Bidaaban's subtle insistence on the urgency of ecological materiality was apparently reinforced at the Tribeca Film Festival where viewers exiting the project were confronted with a large turtle in a glass aquarium, for many, a shocking juxtaposition.