



**CODED TERRITORIES:  
TRACING INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS  
IN NEW MEDIA ART**  
Edited by Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson

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# Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art

STEVEN LOFT, ARCHER PECHAWIS, JACKSON 2 BEARS,  
JASON EDWARD LEWIS, STEVEN FOSTER, CANDICE  
HOPKINS, AND CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE

edited by *steven Loft* and *kerry swanson*



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# foreword

BY JASON RYLE

Adaptation and artistic response to new technologies is embedded in Indigenous realities. From glass beads to hard drives, Indigenous ingenuity has utilized contemporary tools for artistic means for centuries.

The imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, along with our partners, the Ryerson Image Centre and Vtape, is pleased to present *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*. This volume represents an important document in the critical discourse surrounding Indigenous new media arts from the perspectives of those at the creative front: Indigenous artists themselves.

*Coded Territories* has been a long time coming. The idea for a series of publications based on the media showcased at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival – film/video, radio, and new media – was a dream first discussed many years ago. Thankfully, it was made a reality by my colleagues involved in this publication. It is our intention that *Coded Territories* be the first of at least three volumes that critically examine the artistic fields of new media, film/video, and radio from the perspectives of Indigenous artists, curators, leaders, and scholars from Canada and around the world.

Indigenous artists working in new media (and aliases: digital art, electronic art, etc.) are among the forerunners of this art form in Canada and internationally. There has, however, been too little critical discourse, academic or otherwise – and much less published – about their work from their diverse world views. *Coded Territories* takes a significant step forward in filling this void.

This publication has been made possible by the generous support and shared vision of our partners, the Ryerson Image Centre and Vtape, with valuable support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. I would also like to thank

and acknowledge the shared commitment, wisdom, and talents of Doina Popescu, Steven Loft, Lisa Steele, and Kerry Swanson.

imagineNATIVE's commitment to presenting diverse and contemporary works by Indigenous artists remains firm. *Coded Territories* is a milestone in our history and one that I hope will spark new ideas, passionate discussions, and endless inspiration.

Jason Ryle  
Executive Director  
imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival

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# foreword

BY DOINA POPESCU

The Ryerson Image Centre is proud to be partnering with the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival and Vtape in the publication of *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*.

Aboriginal curator Steven Loft, co-editor of this volume of critical writing, is a Trudeau Fellow and was recently Visiting Trudeau Fellow at Ryerson University and Scholar in Residence at the Ryerson Image Centre. I am delighted that we have been in a position to support his research into Aboriginal art history and his many curatorial projects focusing on contemporary Aboriginal art practices. Ryerson University, which is also home to the prestigious Centre for Indigenous Governance and the seat of a very active Aboriginal Education Council, has made a significant commitment to trans-disciplinary Indigenous learning and scholarship.

*Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art* is an important anthology that offers the reader fresh insights into contemporary Indigenous art historical scholarship and the ongoing examination of Aboriginal cultural specificity and self-definition within the contexts of contemporary art practices, highly complex socio-political histories, and differing world views. We are invited to share in the construction of an art history that is re-examining its own imperatives and historical roots. The inclusion of the Aboriginal voice in art historical discourse and the necessity to find bridges between differing critical practices is becoming ever more evident. This anthology takes us on an exciting step forward on this essential path.

Doina Popescu  
Founding Director  
Ryerson Image Centre



# FOR IKTOMI

Come into my office," Iktomi<sup>1</sup> said, "I want to hear more about your project." Coyote had warned me about this one. "This one," he said, "will tell you fantastic things. They are, to be sure, all true, and he will weave them in his web, and you will be seduced and mesmerized . . . and if you don't watch out, you will go on fabulous adventures to realms of light and energy and spirit."

On September 26, 2006, our good friend Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew passed on.

Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew. Agitator, activist, artist . . . writer, curator, thinker. Words that describe, but never really catch the spirit of the man until we add one other: Aboriginal. His thinking, his way of being, his artmaking, was always informed and animated by his "Indigeneity," by Aboriginal philosophies, and by customary knowledge and thought. Far from being dogmatic, his was an Indigeneity of intellectual and cosmological manifestation. With the rise of the inclusion of Aboriginal artists in institutional arts programming in the past twenty years, there has been increased dialogue around the nature and political/cultural imperative of Aboriginal arts presentation and discourse. Ahasiw was on the front lines of these struggles throughout his career — not just as a thinker and writer, but by actively mobilizing ideas of Aboriginal cultural sovereignty and self-determination through his tireless policy and theoretical work. Maskegon-Iskwew's influence on organizations such as the Canada Council for the Arts, Pitt Gallery, Circle Vision Arts Corporation, Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, and Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art is a testament to his leadership role in bringing Aboriginal media and new media to the fore.

He believed that Indigenous media art production constituted a very different kind of media ecology than “Western” practitioners and theorists hold. Through his artwork, critical thought, and tireless advocacy, he furthered our understanding of, and engagement with, the concepts of “transformation and shifting states of being”<sup>2</sup> that are central to Indigenous thought and ways of knowing. His was an epistemology of animism rooted in Aboriginal philosophies and technological imperatives. For him, the works of Aboriginal media and new media artists “explore and bear witness to the contemporary relevance of the histories of Indigenous oral cultures and profound connections to their widely varying lands. They also reveal the creative drive that is at the heart of Indigenous survival. The cultures of animist peoples require a continual sensitivity to, and negotiation with, the cultures of all of the beings and forces of their interconnected worlds.”<sup>3</sup>

In his seminal work *Drumbeats to Drumbytes*, he wrote, “Indigenous digital artists around the world are deeply engaged with, and provide important contributions to, interdisciplinary and cross-community dialogues about cultural self-determination.”<sup>4</sup> And, in his introduction to the groundbreaking *Storm Spirits* virtual exhibition series, he wrote, “the ancient process of successfully adapting to their worlds’ shifting threats and opportunities — innovating the application of best practices to suit complex and shifting flows — from a position of equality and autonomy within them, is the macro and micro cosmos of contemporary Indigenous cultures: a truly networked way of being.”<sup>5</sup> This philosophy of art and culture is perhaps even more cogent and salient today than when he wrote it.

In all his work, Ahasiw engaged a spiritual as well as cultural Indigenous philosophy and deeply woven aesthetic sensibility. He was a warm, loving, generous soul, one of the foremost thinkers and practitioners of Aboriginal new media art, and a true friend to all who knew him. He had a profound impact on Aboriginal art in this country and his influence is still being felt today. This book is lovingly dedicated to his memory.

Rest in peace, Ahasiw. May your continued journeys take you places to commune with the ancients and be one with your ancestors.

"I've been the mirror reflecting other's selves . . . I am Iktomi."<sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 In Lakota mythology, Iktomi is a spider-trickster spirit. There is a prophecy that stated Iktomi would spread his web over the land. Today, this has been interpreted by some contemporary Indigenous people to mean the telephone network, and then the Internet and World Wide Web. Iktomi has been considered by the Lakota from time immemorial to be the patron of new technology; from his invention of language, he gave to the people today's modern inventions, such as the computer. *Editor's note:* And that's why, for me, Ahasiw will always embody the spirit of Iktomi.
- 2 "Talk Indian to Me," part 2, <http://www.reg.trilabs.ca/artists/ahasiw/cree1.htm>.
- 3 [http://www.conundrumonline.org/Issue\\_1/drumbytes.pdf](http://www.conundrumonline.org/Issue_1/drumbytes.pdf).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Editorial, *Drumbeats to Drumbytes: The Emergence of Networked Indigenous Art Practice*. [http://www.conundrumonline.org/Issue\\_1/drumbytes2.htm](http://www.conundrumonline.org/Issue_1/drumbytes2.htm).
- 6 From John Trudell's song "Iktomi," off the *Madness and Moremes* album.



## Decolonizing the “Web”

As I began thinking about this book, I looked to a number of theoretical formulations of media “ecology.” I was looking for a starting point, a way of entering into a new dialogue around media that responded to Indigenous ways of thought.

I came across an article written by the highly respected media theorist, scientist Robert K. Logan, titled “The Biological Foundation of Media Ecology.”<sup>1</sup> In it, he posits a biological model of media ecology, reordering the technology-based systems we have from an organic position. The model is based on the work that he and Marshall McLuhan developed together. His abstract reads as follows:

Media ecology is shown to embrace not only the study of media but also the study of language, culture and technology and the interaction of these four domains. It is demonstrated that language, culture, technology and media behave like living organisms in that they are emergent phenomena and that they evolve, propagate their organization and interact with each other in a media ecosystem. This model allows us to explore the biological dimension of media ecology, which, it is claimed, has been hitherto ignored. It is shown that both biological and media ecosystems may be considered as media in themselves and that an ecosystem is both the medium and the message.<sup>2</sup>

My intent here is not to refute Logan’s hypothesis (in fact, I find it very interesting and constructive), but to offer a differing structure

of media theory more in keeping with an Indigenous media “cosmology” — a model of media ecology based in the epistemologies, histories, traditions, communication systems, art, and culture of the Aboriginal people of Turtle Island.<sup>3</sup> “Media cosmology” embraces an Indigenous view of media and its attendant processes that incorporates language, culture, technology, land, spirituality, and histories encompassed in the teachings of the four directions. The phrase “all my relations” is often used to explain the interaction of all things within an evolving, ever-changing social, cultural, technological, aesthetic, political, and environmental intellectual framework (what I would refer to as the cosmological dynamic) and can certainly be applied to the landscape of media. Cosmological intellectual ecosystems exist as media, as message, and as a form of knowledge transferral. They are epistemological environments wherein notions of nationhood are interspersed with, connected to, and integrated with a larger sense of the plurality of life.

By eschewing “Western” conceptions of media ecology, we posit a unique new media landscape not predicated on Western foundational thought but rooted in our own world views. These theories do not supersede or repudiate those of Western thought but can be seen as distinct and in many ways complementary to other discourses. But the differences are important and they point to a fundamentally dichotomous view of Indigenous thought and association with that of “Western thought.” For Indigenous people the “media landscape” becomes just that: a landscape, replete with life and spirit, inclusive of beings, thought, prophecy, and the underlying connectedness of all things — a space that mirrors, memorializes, and points to the structure of Indigenous thought.

This does, however, imply a differing contextual environment in which the work must be viewed. Language, as cultural signifier, evolves and changes, constantly redefining a culture’s existence. Likewise, new media production by Aboriginal artists is transformative and transformational: a shapeshifter. It is an act of proprietary self-definition and cultural self-determination.

In many ways, the work of Aboriginal new media artists can be seen as the outgrowth of a distinctly Aboriginal visual and oral culture. It represents an aesthetic of nexus based on a storytelling (knowledge transference) tradition, as well as the ongoing participation of Aboriginal artists in visual and media arts culture. Thus, articulation of Aboriginal artistic production becomes a locus for contesting dominant modes of presentation and discourse.

The writers chosen for this book are some of the pre-eminent scholars, writers, artists, and thinkers in Aboriginal art and aesthetics in Canada. Their insights into the nature and practice of an Indigenous new media constitute a new narrative of art historical discourse, imagining and realizing the landscape of “Coded Territories.” Their contributions, as well as those of the artists and practitioners they write about, move us forward in ways we might never have thought possible.

Steven Loft  
Co-Editor

#### NOTES

- 1 Robert K. Logan, “The Biological Foundation of Media Ecology.” *Explorations Media Ecology* 6 (2007): 19–34, [www.physics.utoronto.ca/people/homepages/logan/BioMedEcol.pdf](http://www.physics.utoronto.ca/people/homepages/logan/BioMedEcol.pdf) (accessed January 3, 2012).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 3 Turtle Island is a term used by several Northeastern Woodland Native American tribes, especially the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacy, for the continent of North America.

