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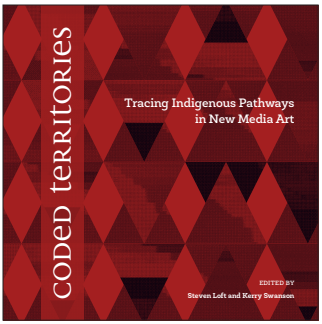

CODED TERRITORIES: TRACING INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS IN NEW MEDIA ART

Edited by Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson

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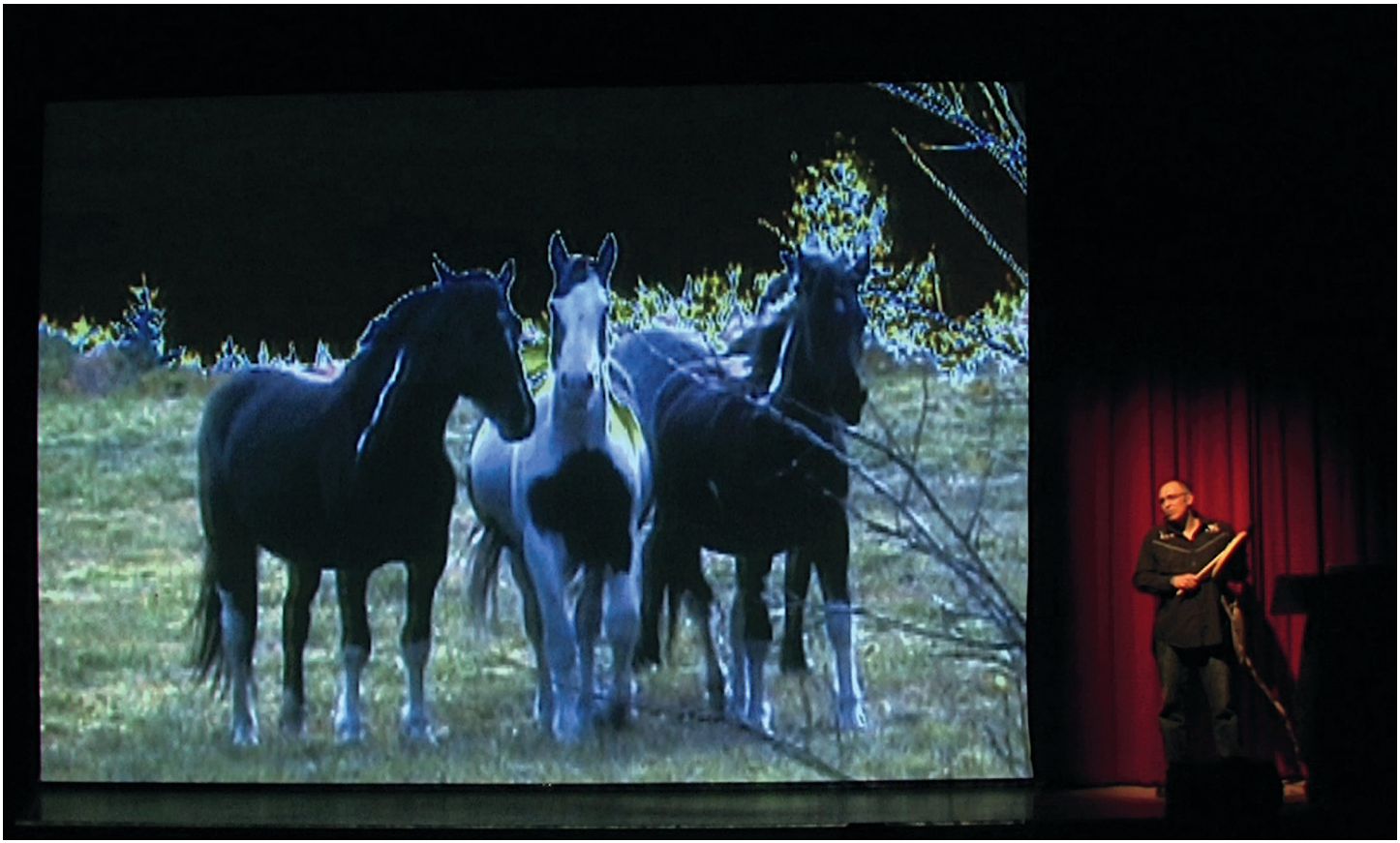
Beautiful Future
NEXT EXIT

ARCHER PECHAWIS

If we are to survive as a species, there must be a paradigmatic shift in our approach to life itself, one that encompasses Indigenous modes of thought and experiential reality.

Performance artist, new media artist, filmmaker, writer, curator, and educator Archer Pechawis was born in Alert Bay, British Columbia, in 1963. He has been a practising artist since 1984, with particular interest in the intersection of Plains Cree culture and digital technology, often merging "traditional" objects such as hand drums with "forward engineered" devices such as Mac PowerBooks. His work has been exhibited across Canada and in Paris, France, and featured in publications such as *Fuse* Magazine and *Canadian Theatre Review*. Archer has been the recipient of many Canada Council and British Columbia Arts awards and won the Best New Media Award at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in 2007 and Best Experimental Short at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in 2009.

Archer also works extensively with Native youth as part of his art practice, teaching performance and digital media for the Indigenous Media Arts Group and in the public school system. Of Cree and European ancestry, he is a member of Mistawasis First Nation, Saskatchewan.



'"Horse", a digital drum performance by Archer Pechawis, Winnipeg Art Gallery April 14, 2011.' Videographer Scott Benesiinaabandan.

'"Memory_V2", a digital drum performance by Archer Pechawis, A Space Gallery Toronto, September 17, 2010.' Photographer Wanda Nanibush.

'Archer Pechawis, with traditional Plains Cree hand tool. Note cross-cultural Haida markings by artist Corey Bulpitt.' Original photograph by Adam Steel, Photoshopped by Archer Pechawis.

'Poster image for "Our Beautiful Future", a performance by Archer Pechawis, Toronto Free Gallery July 2, 2012.' Image created in Photoshop by Archer Pechawis.

2 Indigenism: Aboriginal World View as Global Protocol

ARCHER PECHAWIS

PEYAK (ONE)

Imagine a gathering of our common African ancestors 400,000 years ago. This gathering has been occurring every evening for a number of days now, but the novelty is wearing off and interest is waning. The best and brightest of our venerated ancestors has made a claim that he will make fire, but so far he has failed.

But here is the moment: the dry grass he has collected this evening has ignited, a flame has leapt up. Everyone has a look of slack-jawed astonishment, save our intrepid proto-scientist, whose face is illuminated with joyous vindication.

Now freeze this moment in time, examine it carefully, and anchor your consciousness to it: this is precisely where we are in regards to post-millennial technology. Because we use Google and Facebook, we imagine ourselves the intellectual heirs of our Promethean relative. In reality, we are his astounded contemporaries, barely better able to grasp the implications of new technologies than our incredulous ancestors were half a million years ago.

My art practice hybridizes traditional First Nations culture and digital technology. In 2001, I wrote "Talking to My Horse, Whistling the Garry Owen" for a performance piece called *Horse*, in

which the Horse Nation comes heroically to the aid of the Cheyenne on the morning of November 27, 1868, during an attack on their encampment by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. Having rescued the people from massacre at great cost to his nation, the leader of the Horses offers a prophetic warning to his erstwhile master:

> See how it is today. We, the Horse People, have suffered greatly for you. Many are dead. Hear me now, and know this thing.
>
> Just as you are amazed by the events of this day, you will forget. Despite the sacrifice we have made for you today, you will forget. And surely as the sun will rise the time will come when you abandon us, the Horse People, for machines of your own making. And just as you abandon us for these machines, you will abandon your own selves for them. You will come to believe that these machines are your relations, and you will alter yourselves to be like them, thinking this will make you stronger. You will change your own minds so you may speak with them and they to you. On this day you will forever lose your relation to us, and to all the animal people.
>
> Hear me now, and beware. Never will your machines show you loyalty, nor love. Never will they come to your aid in time of need as the Horse People have done today. I would like for you to remember these words, but you will forget. It is the nature of your kind.[1]

It is easy to slip into a dystopian funk when considering the far-reaching effects of our development as a technological species. But what if our anthropocentric myopia is supplanted by a spiritual growth that catches up with and supersedes our technical prowess, a future in which the best values of traditional societies come to the fore, and a balance of spiritual and technological equality becomes the dominant paradigm? Since writing *Horse* I have come to believe that it is not a warning against the adoption of technology per

se, but rather an admonition to First Nations to retain our traditional world view in the face of technological adaptation, so we may offer a solution to humanity. Ward Churchill states:

> [I]ndigenism offers 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. Predicated on a synthesis of the wisdom attained over thousands of years by indigenous, landbased peoples around the globe — the Fourth World or, as Winona LaDuke puts it, "The Host World upon which the first, second and third worlds all sit at the present time" — indigenism stands in diametrical opposition to the totality of what might be termed "Eurocentric business as usual."[2]

NÎSO (TWO)

I'm learning Cree. Tuesday and Thursday evenings I fire up a Java program that creates an online virtual classroom and for two hours a lovely *kohkom*[3] named Margaret guides a disparate group of students through the gorgeous intricacies of our language and traditions. This scenario is one of the many I had hoped for when I first began to ponder computer technology and its implications for traditional culture back in the 1990s, but in the last decade I realized that a much more interesting question, with far more profound consequences, could be posed by asking instead, *What happens when we approach the visioning, creation, and application of modern technology from an entirely Indigenist world view?*

I am not speaking of grafting Aboriginal protocols onto existing methodologies. I am looking to 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.

My own understanding of this world view is far from perfect: I was raised without the Cree language and the multiverse it unfolds and was not exposed to traditional concepts until the age of fourteen, when my mother first took me to a sweat lodge ceremony. Since that time, my life has been one of seeking a deeper understanding, not only of my place in the world as a Cree man but also as a person of Native and European descent, and how I may harmonize two wholly disparate cultures and world views, of which I am a product.

Given these parameters, it is logical that I began to make work examining the intersection of digital technology and traditional Plains Cree culture; as a younger man, I thought they were the most dissimilar aspects of my dual heritage. In 1994, I had a vision of a performance that would not only reconcile but also celebrate the "two solitudes" of my being. I would wire a traditional hand drum to a digital audio sampler, which would allow me to incorporate sound bites into powwow songs. Inspired equally by the corybantic fury of punk, the blunt race politics of hip hop and my own post-Oka[4] rage, I wanted to emulate the roaring-but-danceable audio collage polemics of Public Enemy, but do so in a way that was inimitably Aboriginal.

To create this artwork, I took tobacco to two elders in my community, Bill Lightbown and the now deceased Harriet Nahannee (1935—2007), and videotaped their responses to my questions concerning technology and traditional First Nations culture, spirituality, and philosophy. The insights and wisdom they shared with me have come to shape my understanding of traditional values as much as the time I have spent in the sweat lodge. Bill and Harriet taught me to embrace technology as a perfectly compatible aspect of an Indigenist world view. Harriet also taught me that my vision of the electronic drum might not have come from me at all.

> We are our ancestors. When you were born, you were born with your ancestors' soul. Traditional people listen to that ancestor . . .

> . . . you can ask your ancestor for guidance, and it just pops into your head, you're getting it from them! You may think, "Oh yeah, I have a great idea," but it isn't! You're receiving it from your ancestors.[5]

These interviews formed the basis of the performance *Memory* (1997), my first investigation into what "traditional" means in contemporary First Nations culture. The work featured a hand drum wired to a sampler via MIDI which enabled me to drop various audio samples into the mix while I sang neo-traditional songs of my own composition. The primary samples used were from audiocassettes of my deceased grandfather, Thomas John Pechawis, drumming and singing, and the interviews with Bill Lightbown and Harriet Nahanee speaking to the issue of "what is traditional." Other samples included Jimi Hendrix, Soundgarden, The O'Jays, and The Fugees.

> This performance investigates the notion of what constitutes "traditional" Native drumming and singing through the use of a hand drum into which I have incorporated trigger pads that activate a digital sampler when struck. Simply put, if I drop a Motorhead sample into a round dance tune, is it still traditional? Cum on, feel the noize, heya heya ho . . .[6]

But at the time I didn't understand what I had created. Despite what the elders had told me, I didn't think my creation was "a real drum." Contrary to my stated aim in making the work, I had an internalized divide between what I considered "traditional" and the technological processes that constituted so much of my everyday life and artmaking practice. In part, I did not understand these things because I had not sought out the teachings on the use of drums in ceremonial contexts. I had not sought this knowledge because I did not understand that my performance was, in fact, a ceremony.

The protocols that govern the ceremonial use of drums are as specific as the protocols that govern traffic on the Internet. Since that first performance, I've been taught *a drum is a direct line to the spirit world*. Before any cultural work is done, one must *sing in the spirits*, a literal process of inviting the spirits to participate. At the conclusion of the work, the spirits are then *sung out*, or invited to return to their realm. This exchange with the spirit world is not a metaphor, but rather a fundamental aspect of ceremonial practice.

This practical application of interdimensional communication takes on new meanings when paired with digital technologies in a secular, performative setting. After my first digital drum performance, I realized that what I needed was a drum that played video samples to allow people to see the elders talking, not just hear them. While I was building this new device, Harriet passed away. After waiting an appropriate amount of time, I approached her family and asked for their permission to continue using her voice and image. With their blessing, I used her footage in a second version of the drum performance, *Memory_V2*, in 2010.

But something had changed. Because I was playing video samples of a deceased person, I was now invoking Harriet from the spirit world with my drum. By replicating the metaphysical functionality of a traditional drum, I had built a device that enabled an audience to experience communication with another realm in the secular context of a performance. I had converted a spiritual medium into a digital one.[7] As Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew writes:

> Indigenous digital artists around the world are deeply engaged with, and provide important contributions to interdisciplinary and cross-community dialogues about cultural self-determination. Their works 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. 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.[8]

NISTO (THREE)

In my artistic/spiritual journey, I have had to find space for my belief in both the Western scientific method and the Cree world view. This has been easier than I thought it would be: by definition my Creator is omnipotent, which gives him a lot of flexibility. My Creator is an evolutionist who loves non-anthropocentric, non-terrestrial viewpoints. As my traditional spiritual grounding and technical fluency deepen, the space between these two disciplines diminishes. More and more they become dialects of the same mother tongue.

Dr. Leroy Little Bear, in his lecture "Native Science and Western Science: Possibilities for a Powerful Collaboration," tells a story about the Higgs boson, the so-called "God particle":

> We talked to an elder about it and explained it to him. It took him a while to understand what these physicists were trying to do. But once he had a good idea of it he came back and said, "That's easy. The Higgs particle is what we call spirit."[9]

It really is that simple.

The hypothetical Higgs boson particle is a cornerstone of the Standard Model of particle physics, which for decades has dominated our understanding of the cosmos and helped explain how three of the four fundamental forces of nature work. Theoretically responsible for converting mass to energy and vice versa,[10] the

Higgs boson inspired scientists with enough faith in its actuality to raise 7.5 billion Euros for the CERN Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland largely to prove, or disprove, its existence.[11] The Higgs boson was dubbed the "God particle," a term physicists loathe, in Leon Lederman and Dick Teresi's 1993 book *The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?*[12] Inaccurate or not, the urge to confer a spiritual dimension to a scientific quest seems to be in our DNA. This urge can be seen in the work of many Aboriginal new media art practitioners.

Another weakness of the Standard Model is that it cannot incorporate gravity as described by Einstein's theory of relativity. An attempt to harmonize general relativity led to the development of Superstring Theory, which postulates ten dimensions, or an extra six to the readily observable dimensions of length, width, depth, and duration. If we reconsider these six "extra" dimensions as potential realms of spirit, we begin to see the space of reconciliation put forth by Dr. Little Bear:

> If those physicists would learn Blackfoot, or Navajo, we would be able to talk. English, because of its structure, can't explain certain things, [and] therefore [has] a reliance on a foreign language, [math, which] does not happen in Navajo. In other words the language is rich enough that it can explain those seeming paradoxes. That's where I see the collaboration taking place, that's where I see partnerships occurring in science.[13]

These partnerships are already taking place. The locus of these ventures is a growing network of First Nations artists who are adapting the tools of the moment to their respective cultures to create new artworks in unexpected media. Artists have always been the vanguard of social change. In harnessing the power of science and technology in service of traditional culture, Aboriginal new media artists are blazing new trails of possibility.

NEWO (FOUR)

Our technological journey began nearly half a million years ago. Realigning humanity with spirit may take that long as well. A transition from the dominant paradigm will not be miraculously simple, or easy. But clearly, if we are to survive as a species, there must be a paradigmatic shift in our approach to life itself, one that encompasses Indigenous modes of thought and experiential reality: an earth-centred philosophy that brings technological advancement in line with human, animal, and ecological concerns and ethical parameters. Perhaps the near or total destruction of the human-habitable ecosphere is a necessary step in our development. Or perhaps what will save us from ourselves *is* ourselves through understanding the world in a different way.

> It will be for a new generation of non-Native peoples who sat as children, youth and young adults and heard and learned our languages along with their own, who remember and recite our ancestors' stories along with all the others, whose worldview is shaped by these things — these will be the ones who will be true allies and partners with our children in a real and resounding cultural renaissance.[14]

Seminal science fiction author and inventor Sir Arthur C. Clarke famously opined that "[a]ny sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."[15] A meme currently being promulgated on the Net posits that "Any Sufficiently Advanced Civilization is Indistinguishable from Nature."[16] This proposed solution to the Fermi paradox[17] reasons that we cannot locate extraterrestrial life because we are looking for the electromagnetic signature we assume an advanced civilization would produce. It goes on to theorize that advanced civilizations would create, live in, and be sustained by technologies that would be indistinguishable from the natural processes of their environment, at least to a species as primitive as our own.

Imagine our civilization in which the "sufficiently advanced technology" *is* magic: the "extra" dimensions postulated by Superstring Theory are acknowledged as alternate realms of spirit, and the technological basis of the culture is predicated not only on this acknowledgment but also in an ongoing communication with those domains and on the limitless power available to us from those dimensions, through our own ancestral relations.

A whole-hearted embrace of Indigenism would provide us with a stable platform to create a world of self-sustaining technologies, a made-yet-living topography whose existence we would currently miss from orbit, let alone through the lens or antennae of telescopes peering across interstellar space. Within this future dreaming, we can imagine bioscience granting us unlimited powers of transformation over our bodies, to trade corporeal physicality for re-embodiment within a planetary network, to share a planet-body with our fellow trans-humans.

> The old songs are loud, pounding and powerful again, heating the blood of the young — dancing fires across their dreams. Around them softly, in quiet pleasure, gray heads nod with embered remembrance — all circling together in time with the sun. Now our sneak-up dance is working, provoking the slow awakening of non-Native peoples to the richness, complexity and depth of our ways of seeing and shaping the world. The families of our allies are growing, their children are being taught, the feasting and sharing together with honour has begun — preparing for the renaissance when you will talk Indian to me.[18]

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Tsibeotl, a.k.a. Harriet Nahannee. Interview by Archer Pechawis, December 1996.

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1 Archer Pechawis, "Talking to My Horse, Whistling the Garry Owen," text accompanying performance piece "Horse," 2001. http://apxo.net/writing/talking-to-my-horse.html (accessed May 4, 2012).
2 Ward Churchill, "I Am Indigenist: Notes on the Ideology of the Fourth World," in *Acts of Rebellion: The Ward Churchill Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 275–99.
3 Kohkom means "grandmother" in informal Cree.
4 The Oka Crisis was a land dispute between a group of Mohawk people and the town of Oka, Quebec, Canada, that began on July 11, 1990, and lasted until September 26, 1990. One person died as a result. The dispute was the first well-publicized violent conflict between First Nations and the Canadian government in the late twentieth century.

5 Tsibeotl, aka Harriet Nahannee, interview by Archer Pechawis, December 1996.
6 Archer Pechawis, "Artist Statement," from "Memory," performance art piece, 2007.
7 Archer Pechawis, in conversation with Candice Hopkins, March 2012.
8 Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, "Drumbeats to Drumbytes: Globalizing Networked Aboriginal Art," in *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*, ed. Dana Claxton and Steven Loft (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2005), 3.
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11 "Large Hadron Collider," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Large_Hadron_Collider (accessed May 2, 2012).
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15 Arthur C. Clarke, "Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination," in *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry into the Limits of the Possible*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 21.
16 There is some controversy on the Internet as to whom the credit for this idea should go. See http://www.playananda.com/writing/exotic-civilizations-a-possible-answer-to-fermis-paradox/; http://www.nextnature.net/2012/02/any-sufficiently-advanced-civilization-is-indistinguishable-from-nature/; and http://www.kschroeder.com/weblog/archive/2011/11/30/the-deepening-paradox.
17 The Fermi paradox (Fermi's paradox or Fermi-paradox) is the apparent contradiction between high estimates of the probability of the existence of extraterrestrial civilizations and the lack of evidence for, or contact with, such civilizations. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fermi_paradox (accessed March 2012).
18 Maskêgon-Iskwêw, "Talk Indian to Me #1."