



CODED TERRITORIES: TRACING INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS IN NEW MEDIA ART

Edited by Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson

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As we develop a new language of art history that is located in Indigenous cultures, we must create radical, critical, and culturally dynamic discourses that respond to, and engage with, an Indigenous cultural sovereignty.

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7

Mediacosmology

STEVEN LOFT

The old grandmother coughed and wheezed again. Her eyes moved under her eyelids.

And then, we will change. It will be a change not like before. Things will be the same, but they will not. We will forget much after that. We will be here, but we will be not. We will survive, but it will take us a long time to thrive again. To live with a completeness and wholeness that we are now used to. But we will.

The old turtle struggled to take a breath.

These things will happen all at once and over a long time. So long that time will pass without notice. So long that the change will be always. Just as it has always been. We will simply notice it more.¹

In his essay From Cliché to Archetype, Marshall McLuhan writes:

For archaic, or tribal man there was no past, no history. Always present. Today we experience a return to that outlook when

technological breakthroughs have become so massive as to create one environment upon another, from telegraph to radio to TV to satellite. These forms give us instant access to all pasts. As for tribal man there is for us, no history. All is present, including the tribal man studied by Eliade.²

How, then, do we negotiate the views of McLuhan and Eliade from an Indigenous cosmological perspective? We can, of course, negate the use of certain language (racist as it may be) by locating it in the time it was written. But as we delve deeper, we can see an evolving understanding of fundamental ontological difference between Indigenous thought and McLuhan and Eliade's attempts to place it (without fully understanding it) within the framework of new media ecologies.

Mohawk scholar Deborah Doxtator has noted: "The legacy of past definitions of difference as separate and exclusionary, instead of as interconnecting and inclusive, requiring incorporation into a whole, may have helped to obscure points of possible rapprochement between two different ways of ordering knowledge and conceptualizing the past." ³

McLuhan seems to be reaching for this realization but must ultimately frame it within what he knows, the Western construction of thought: "The quality of past homogeneity has now acquired archetypal status, thanks to the powerful electric environment of retribalized man. This new electric service environment of oral culture enables us to perceive value in archaic communities where everybody shares a large body of traditional lore and experience."

For him, this movement toward "retribalizing" is an antecedent to participation in a truly communicative media environment. He doesn't quite get it, as he falls into the Western theoretical trap of inscribing a romantic ideal of the "noble savage" onto some newfound Western experience, but it is instructive nonetheless. For us, this relationship to oral culture, technology, and communicative

agency is nothing new. A cosmological model of communicative agency, then, transcends the simplistic notions of "romance" offered by anthropologists, ethnologists, art historians, and media theorists. There is no "re" for us.

If we, as Aboriginal people, see the "Internet" as a space populated by our ancestors, our stories, and, in a wider way, ourselves, then we must believe it existed before the actual realization of the technology. It is then, indeed, a "cyberspace," attuned to, and inclusive of, our past memories, our epistemological concerns, and the culmination of lived experience.

WAMPUM AS HYPERTEXT

Aboriginal intellectual, communication, and aesthetic traditions contain clues to a long regard of a multiplicity of forms of societal engagement and communicative strategies. These Indigenous sign technologies (such as winter counts, birch bark scrolls, and the Aztec codices, among others) are complex information systems with layers of meaning, memory, and interaction, but here I will concentrate on the customary function of wampum, used by First Nations peoples of the Eastern Woodlands (most notably the Iroquois Nations).

Wampum is a tubular bead of purple and white, made from the quahog clam shell formed with other material components (bark fibres, sinew, hemp fibres, string, or other weaving materials) into individual strands or woven into belts, and has been used by First nations of the Eastern Woodlands for ceremony and as records of important civil affairs for at least a thousand years.⁶

Wampum serves as a mnemonic sign technology that has been used to record hundreds of years of alliances within tribes, between tribes, and between the tribal governments and colonial government, as well as important social contracts between individuals, communities, and societies.

In her analysis Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice, Angela Haas writes:

In order for wampum to be communicative, a hybridization of the oral tradition and symbolism is woven into the material rhetoric. Furthermore the technologies woven into the belt have communicative agency, as with the colors of the shells and the design patterns. The cultural context and community where the wampum resides is yet another source of meaning that gets encoded into the wampum. Thus wampum is a hypertext of communicative modes — all of which contribute to cultural knowledge production and preservation.⁷

Thus, wampum and wampum belts in particular exist as contract, as acknowledgment of important social bonds, and as communal memory. They ensure communally shared history linked via mnemonic and transferable knowledge through(out) history.

Wampum belts and strings constitute a "living" material connection to the stories, treaties, alliances, and social interactions that define (in this case, Iroquois) media cosmologies. They are the embodiment of a particular culture, metaphorically and literally woven into the cultural, social, and political life of the nations. Recited, remembered, renewed, and performed, they memorialize the "peoples" in a non-linear, user-generated, and "hypertextual" way. And as Haas states:

The same is not true of Western hypertexts, where changes can be made in a moment — or no changes are ever made, and the links therein are broken. Thus while all affected parties need to tend to the links to ensure the alliances survive, tribal memory keeps the wampum rhetoric alive while individuals need to continuously update hypertexts and their content to keep them

relevant. Unless the author notes the latest revision date, we cannot be certain when the hypertext is "dead" — until we use it. On the contrary, using the wampum belt in the way it is intended keeps it alive.⁹

Jackson 2bears makes much the same argument concerning the use of the Iroquois False Face masks in his chapter of this book: "To my ancestors, these masks were considered to be *living* entities, animate artifacts, and sacred technologies that we used to access the spirit world for the purpose of healing and to ask for guidance." And Cheryl L'Hirondelle adds in her chapter for this book:

What these historical Indigenous practices and knowledge of numbers and counting suggest is our ability to take account of vital information with the creation of a physical object and move beyond what has been oversimplified as solely orally centred transmission processes. The "object" is charged and embodies the interplay of processes between the oral and the written (notched/drawn) used to aid in its own retelling. The combination of the oral testimony and the interaction with the object created becomes multimedia and/or an event. The object then, from the perspective of many Indigenous world views, literally becomes animate and alive.

Together, these various sign technologies represent a method of recording and an aid in narrating a specific Indigenous intellectual environment politically, socially, and culturally. Wampum, "counting objects," and False Face masks (among others) all portray an innate media ecology akin to contemporary notions of interconnectivity, hypertext, and cosmological imperative, creating communicative as well as spiritual agency. This reinforces not only the significance of shared responsibility for cultural transfer but also its multifaceted and multilayered technological instruments. They are part of a visual language, conceptual and mystical, transcending the temporality of the written word: a language for the

ages, to be constantly recounted and re-inscribed for the generations past, present, and into the future. In Doxtator's view, "The descriptive, visual nature of the languages, the evocative power of the multiple meanings of concrete metaphors, and the means of recording knowledge (such as wampum belts) all support this kind of concrete, experientially based knowledge." ¹⁰

CYBERSPACE AS NETWORKED TERRITORY

From this vantage point, "cyberspace" is a networked territory, a shared space defined and articulated through the connections we have with it. Thus, it has always existed for Aboriginal people as the repository of our collected and shared memory. That hardware technology has made it accessible through a tactile regime in no way diminishes its power as a spiritual, cosmological, and mythical "realm." The mere fact that it also holds an overabundance of porn, gimmickry, advertisements, and even hateful propaganda takes nothing from its place as mystical space (it is, after all, a shared territory, with all the attendant colonial baggage that brings along).

Cyberspace as cosmological territory is not proprietary and, like the earth, the galaxy, and the universe, is a space and a place of inquiry, interaction, and life. As Vine Deloria puts it, "in a world in which communications are nearly instantaneous and simultaneous experiences are possible, it must be spaces and places that distinguish us from one another, not time nor history."¹¹

Cyberspace connects the past to the present and the spiritual to the material in ways that would make our elders laugh. They've always known this. It's in our stories and it's in our ways of communicating and remembering. In much of his writing, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew would reiterate this point. For him, as animist cultures, Indigenous peoples had an innate relationship with the ebb and flow of life:

Animism is the belief that all natural phenomena have spiritual essences that are subject to very little human intervention, and in most cases, beyond much more than a very limited and contingent understanding by humans. Human spirits are only a small part of this spiritual community, participating in a wide variety of relationships, alliances, conflicts, and temporal frameworks within it.¹²

In a sense, Native cultures with their particular conceptualization of difference solved this problem of communication across different cultures a long time ago. One of the strengths of a "writing" system without words is that it can confer concepts and information without the participants having to share the same spoken language.¹³

My point here is to provide a broader Indigenous media theory attuned to Indigenous thought and communicative practice that conflate the material/virtual divide. For Dot Tuer, "it seems all the more imperative to think about cyberspace as a product of human labour and a projection of human consciousness that demands a rethinking of the boundaries between the two." A cosmological, adaptive, and decolonized cyberspace that presages its own development ... a full circle, if you will. And, it is entirely consistent with our ways of transferring knowledge and culture. What Indigenous new media artists are doing is creating what Tuer has termed a "hybrid subjectivity" that navigates the virtual in a fashion that overlays (thus disrupting) the colonial narrative of the World Wide Web. This is not to portray cybersapce as some pan-Indian utopia but to posit a syncretic Indigenous ontology that is material and virtual.

As Deborah Doxtator clarifies, "Native concepts of history find no gulf between different segments of time. Each time is different, but it does not mean that there is an impenetrable wall because of that difference." She goes on to relate a Seneca story:

An old man from the world of the ancients comes to visit a boy who is hunting birds. He explains that the boy must come back to the same place by a large rock every night to hear the stories. Every night the boy returns and brings with him more and more people to listen until there is a great crowd. Ostensibly, some of the people have arrived at different times but they are none-theless all part of the assembled crowd. The man who tells the stories explains that he and others like him have "remained at home in the world that was" but can visit the world that is. There is little if any actual physical distance between the two worlds of what is and what was. They are different and distinct, yet rather than being separated by a gulf, they are in essence part of the same incorporated universe. ¹⁷

In this, the "old man" instructs us to see time, history, and our place in a mystical (and concrete) universe as a constant, although evolving, point in time. It is a rejection of linearity of thought, and an espousal of the interconnectedness between time and place.

This kind of oral storytelling and mnemonic cultural transfer can be applied to other, newer mediated environments without any disjuncture of meaning or intent. In other words, it is as it has ever been.

THE NETWORKED INDIAN

For Indigenous people, interconnectedness is a key principle underpinning our cosmological understanding of life. The episodic nature of the World Wide Web and of cyberspace, which Jason Lewis alludes to in his chapter earlier in this book, is clearly at odds with a Western, linear-focussed narrative trajectory. Lewis writes:

The structures and systems that instantiate that virtual network reify particular notions about what it means to be a social actor, what sorts of relationships one has, and how one communicates with one's friends. No matter how one might choose to define Indigeneity, it is a safe bet that a designer working within an

Indigenous world view would define some of those notions differently than a peer working solely from within a Western frame of reference

For Aboriginal people, circularity of thinking and concepts of time/ space and continuity are intrinsic to the way we see the world and behave toward it. It speaks to a horizontality of thinking that eschews hierarchy. As Métis scholar David Garneau states:

We must recognize Indigeneity's dual nature. On one hand, formation as 'Indigenous' is political, strategic; a collective act of will, driven by necessity. On the other hand, this globalizing name also acts as a blanket that covers real analogous histories and ways-of-being that Aboriginal peoples recognize in each other when they meet and share stories; elements that are different from the Settler imaginary. They are a combination of the legacy of colonial oppression combined with what Gerald McMaster, Clifford E. Trafzer and the NMAI call the "Native Universe." This shared perspective or universe, one song, is our essential collective condition. How we conduct ourselves following this common source is strategic, a necessary condition of our solidarity.¹⁸

A networked Indigenous exceptionalism, then, would incorporate this multiplicity of voices and philosophies as well as artistic practices into an expanded and expanding information structure. We have always "mapped" our environments. From the routes that crisscross the vast expanses of Turtle Island, to our stories, rituals, and ceremonies, to our various sign technologies, these conceptual maps have provided a direct link between the past, present, and future.

For example, Renaissance explorers such as Champlain relied heavily upon Montagnais and Huron conceptual maps and geopolitical interpretations of their territories to make their own maps. Appropriately, Deborah Doxtator asks: "Why is it that attempts to incorporate Native versions of seventeenth century events by attending to Native oral traditions and stories have proved to be so frustrating to scholars who seek to write within the western traditions of historical writing?" The same could be asked of media scholars today.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle takes up this theme of mapping in her chapter of this book:

Our connection to the land is what makes us Indigenous, and yet as we move forward into virtual domains we too are sneaking up and setting up camp — making this virtual and technologically mediated domain our own. However, we stake a claim here too as being an intrinsic part of this place — the very roots, or more appropriately routes. So let's use our collective Indigenous unconscious to remember our contributions and the physical beginnings that were pivotal in how this virtual reality was constructed.

Two examples of networks created by Indigenous media producers and networked in a "cosmological" model are CyberPowWow (1996–2004) and drumbytes.org (2003).

Produced by the artist collective Nation to Nation, the CyberPow-Wow project was a series of interconnected, graphical chatrooms that allowed visitors to interact with one another in real time. An important aspect of the project was the "mixed reality" openings, which took place simultaneously in real-world galleries and the virtual chatspace. It formed a virtual gallery with digital (and digitized) artworks and a library of texts. The works were created specifically for CyberPowWow by emerging and established Aboriginal artists and writers.

The CyberPowWow series curated by Skawennati and Archer Pechawis, among others (www.cyberpowwow.net), was a pion-

eering, Aboriginally determined website and chatspace which together formed an online gallery of commissioned digital artworks and texts.

What distinguished CyberPowwow from previous projects, such as the Native Net, was its understanding of the Internet as a territory that could be claimed and appropriated by the community, as the project's identification as an "Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace" suggests. The imagination of cyberspace as a social space, and the community as online performance model that evolved from it, would have a lasting influence on the Aboriginal new media art world.²⁰

The website drumbytes.org, created by Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew in 2003, was a portal for the dissemination of Aboriginal media-based art. By creating an open, accessible, and interactive site, Ahasiw provided, in drumbytes.org, a space to examine issues of access to technology and communications; issues of colonialism and globalization in relation to Aboriginal arts, cultures, and languages; and critical dialogue about digital media aesthetics, process, and context. Ahasiw wrote:

New media is both an outcome and a facilitator of major cultural and social shifts, not merely an additional creative tool. While media art already has well-established critiques closely aligned to cultural self-determination and social change, the apparatus of media arts production and presentation has often been institutionally prescribed, inequitably distributed, and Indigenous access to it tenuous and temporary. New media, while still far from meeting standards of equitable access to production and presentation, is providing many more communities world-wide with tools for international expression, activism, recognition, and networking.²¹

Drumbytes.org succeeded in creating a networked space for artists, individuals, and communities, not unlike the social media

sites we know so well today. Ahasiw was a harbinger of this kind of collective interconnectivity in an ever-expanding cyber-universe. As usual, he was ahead of his time.

These Aboriginal artists and producers used new technologies to support, strengthen, and enrich Native cultural communities by establishing a nation-wide, computer-based multimedia telecommunications network for Aboriginal and Indigenous artists working in digital media. They transformed (perhaps even "shape-shifted") community networks into digital spaces. They were self-determined, collaborative reflections of Indigenous self-representation and communality. And as Ahasiw himself put it, "For some, this is the first time since contact and submergence within dominant, pre-existing European cultural practices that their voices and images are being heard, seen, respected and celebrated outside of their own communities."²²

WORD-WARRIORS TO CYBER-WARRIORS

I have referred to the work of Marshall McLuhan several times in this article, partly to show the difference between Western conceptual/rational thought and Indigenous cosmological thought, and partly because McLuhan was a brilliant thinker and has had, as we all know, an undeniable influence on contemporary thinking about media and culture. He is indeed one of the truly visionary thinkers of the twentieth century. But there is another reason I have continued to return to him. He seems to have had a truly innate sense of what we might call "the Indigenous imagination." So, as much as I object to McLuhan's "Tribal man," I am still amazed by his insight into an area into which other Western theorists fear to tread. And sometimes he just nails it. When he writes, "The function of art in a tribal society is not to orient the population to novelty but to merge it with the cosmos. Value does not inhere in art as object but in its power to educate the perceptions."23 "[I]n a homogenous mechanized society, the individualist role of the training of perception scarcely exists. The primitive role of art serving as consolidator

and as a liaison with the hidden cosmic powers again comes to the fore,"²⁴ I think, wow . . . now you're seeing like we see.

The distinctions he makes here are far from inconsequential. McLuhan distinguishes an epistemological concern that I would argue can be attributed to a North American Indigenous cosmology — an Indigenous cosmology that incorporates and integrates Indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, histories, traditions, ritual, ceremony, spiritual practices, and stories in ways of thought, of being, and of artistic and intellectual practice. Archer Pechawis has articulated this cosmology in his essay for this volume: "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."

Scholar Dale Turner has a term for those Indigenous intellectuals who "engage European ideas as both a philosophical exercise and political activity." For him, these "word-warriors" are intellectuals who "critically engage European ideas, methodologies, and theories to show how they have marginalized, distorted, and ignored Indigenous voices."25 I would like to add another term to Turner's formulation of philosophical sovereignty - "cyber-warrior" (an overused term, I know, but one that seems to me to fit perfectly): those artists, scholars, curators, and intellectual practitioners who expand the realms of Indigenous media cosmology in respect of and with "all our relations." Indigenous new media art production constitutes an Indigenous media ecology. Jimmie Durham once wrote, "traditions exist and are guarded by Indian communities. One of the most important of these is dynamism. Constant change-adaptability - the inclusion of new ways and new materials — is a tradition that our artists have particularly celebrated and have used to move and strengthen our societies."26 Projects such as CyberPowWow, drumbeats.org, and many others (some referenced

in this volume) constitute a contemporary manifestation of a centuries-old customary practice and cosmological integrity. Together, they continue to add to, form, and expand what David Garneau (citing Gerald McMaster and others) refers to as "the Native Universe." It is woven into our sense of being and our relationship with all things. It is articulated in the works of our artists, our thinkers, our elders, and our ancestors.

Finally, I will return to the words of Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, to whom this book is dedicated:

Stories of and by these communities must be told and preserved, new artworks made and seen, and our dynamic in this great storm described in every way possible. If we are favoured to survive it, future generations may have some of our stories to help them understand reverence, learning and the cycles of generations that originate beyond scientific materialism that support and seek guidance from self-determined natural ecologies.²⁸

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NOTES

1 Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, "Oshki Bimaadiziwin, New Life," in Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years, ed. Sherry Farrell Racette (Winnipeg: Plug-In Editions, 2011), 46.

- 2 Earlier in the essay, McLuhan recounts that Mircea Eliade, in Cosmos and History, states: "In the particulars of his conscious behaviour, the 'primitive,' the archaic man, acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else, some other being who was not a man. What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others." Marshall McLuhan, "From Cliché to Archetype," in Essential McLuhan, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1995), 325.
- 3 Deborah Doxtator, "Inclusive and Exclusive Perceptions of Difference: Native and Euro Based Concepts of Time, History, Change," in Decentring the Renaissance: Canada and Europe in Multidisciplinary Perspective, 1500–1700, ed. Germaine Warkentin and Carolyn Podruchny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 34.
- 4 McLuhan, "From Cliché to Archetype," 337.
- 5 This attitude is also reflected in his 1964 quote from "Understanding Media":
 "A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them." Quoted in Essential McLuhan, 278. His use of the term "oppress" in this context also places his thought process as distinctly quided by a colonial mentality.
- 6 Angela M. Haas, "Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice," Studies in American Indian Literatures 19, no. 4 (2007): 78–80.
- 7 Ibid., 91.
- 8 "Hypertext is the presentation of information as a linked network of nodes which readers are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion. It allows for multiple authors, a blurring of the author and reader functions, extended works with diffuse boundaries, and multiple reading paths." The term "hypertext" was coined by Ted Nelson, who defined it in his self-published Literary Machines as "non-sequential writing." "Hypertext," The Electric Labyrinth, http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0037.html (accessed May 2, 2012).
- 9 Haas, "Wampum as Hypertext," 92.
- 10 Doxtator, "Inclusive and Exclusive Perceptions of Difference," 45.
- 11 Vine Deloria, Jr., God Is Red: A Native View of Religion (New York: Putnam, 2003), 62.
- 12 Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew. "Hysterical, Auto-cannibalist Culture versus Trans-temporal Interwoven Identities," in *The Multiple and Mutable Subject*, ed. Vera Lemecha and Reva Stone (St. Norbert, MB: St. Norbert Arts Centre, 2001), 22.
- 13 Doxtator, "Inclusive and Exclusive Perceptions of Difference," 43.

- 14 Dot Tuer, "Embodying the Virtual: Hybrid Subjectivity in Cyberspace," in The Multiple and Mutable Subject, ed. Vera Lemecha and Reva Stone (St. Norbert, MB: St. Norbert Arts Centre, 2001), 40.
- 15 Tuer defines hybrid subjectivity as "an apprehension of the self that is struggling to bridge the natural and artificial, the sensory and the constructed." I would suggest that Indigenous artists manifest apprehension of a "cultural" self in this context.
- 16 Doxtator, "Inclusive and Exclusive Perceptions of Difference," 37.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 David Garneau, "Necessary Essentialism and Contemporary Aboriginal Art," paper presented at the Essentially Indigenous? Contemporary Native Arts Symposium, National Museum of the American Indian, May 5, 2011. Text sent to author October 2011.
- 19 Doxtator, "Inclusive and Exclusive Perceptions of Difference," 35.
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