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Inhabiting Ustopia: Science Fiction in Film, Performing Arts, and Digital Media

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Part III
The Future Is Now: Contemporary Ustopians

Chapter 13
Technologies of Survivance: The Indigenous Futurist Work of Cannupa Hanska Luger and Skawennati

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Preston Taylor Stone

Abstract Since contact, colonial visions of the future have excluded the Native. Indeed, since Natives have often been forced into compromises between cultural loss/revival, technological exclusion/integration, sociopolitical marginalization/empowerment, Indigenous people's lived reality has been characterized by ustopia. However, as Lakota journalist Nick Estes' eponymous monograph declares, "Our [Native] history *is* the future." This chapter convenes the mythic and reverential work of artists Cannupa Hanska Luger (Lakota) and Skawennati (Kahnawakeronon), who problematize colonialist futures absent of Indigenous cosmology. In their place, Luger and Skawennati imagine future terrains celebrating Indigenous life: Luger's *Watȟéča* character embodies the scavenger, whose technology destroys death and shelters the living "from the intricacies of death's omnivorous annihilation;" and Skawennati's *She Falls For Ages* retells the Haudenosaunee creation story using machinima, territorializing a decolonized Indigenous cyberspace. I argue that each artist crafts a compelling vision of Indigenous futurist cosmology by interweaving traditional knowledge and futural landscapes. The artists' illuminating ustopiae challenge and reshape Western epistemologies of temporality and spatiality. That is, through their art, Luger and Skawennati demonstrate that Indigenous futures are not only adaptations or responses to colonial impositions but innovative, visionary expressions of futurity in their own right. The artists construct decolonial technologies of survivance, asserting Indigenous agency, resilience, and creativity.

Keywords Technologies of survivance · Indigenous futurism · Skawennati · Cannupa Hanska Luger · Digital sovereignty

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13.1   As Introduction, Compromises: Loss/Revival, Exclusion/Integration, Marginalization/Empowerment

Since contact, Indigenous people have been excluded from colonial visions of the future, their lived realities often characterized by *ustopia*. This exclusion has over the centuries forced communities into a series of compromises between cultural loss and revival, technological exclusion and integration, and sociopolitical marginalization and empowerment, each of which I detail below. In each case, it has meant the future constantly oscillated between the dystopic and the utopic—a condition this collection identifies with Atwood (2012)'s *ustopia*.

Indigenous languages, for example, continue to face disappearance or severe endangerment due to colonial policies that restricted or suppressed their use. The residential schooling systems in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand uniformly banned the speaking of Native languages, physically and psychologically punishing children who had already faced traumatization resulting from their abduction and enrollment in the schools. This trauma was compounded when, if children were lucky enough to return to their tribal communities, they had little means of communicating with their families. Some psychologists refer to this compounding event as re-traumatization (O'Nell 1996; Duran 2006; Kirmayer et al. 2014). In her famous 1921 book *American Indian Stories*, Yankton Dakota Zitkála-Šá (Gertrude Bonnin) (Zitkala-Sa 1921) gives first-hand recollection of re-traumatization when, in the autobiographical sketches, she returns to her reservation after boarding school and experiences a profound sense of cultural loss, alienation, and disconnection from her family. Given the systemic emotional trauma, physical and sexual violence, and state-sponsored death faced by attendees of these schools, two-spirit Cherokee poet and scholar Qwo-Li Driskill (2005) correlates these schools to the concentration camps of the Holocaust (p. 12).

Contrary to these existential horrors, the revival of Indigenous languages has in recent decades become a coordinated and ubiquitous project among many tribal communities. In 1982, the first Kōhanga Reo ("language nest") was established in New Zealand/Aotearoa, providing Māori-language immersion for preschool children (Farquhar and Laws 1991). Five years later, Māori became an official language of the country with the establishment of the Māori Language Commission (Nicholson and Garland 1991). The Office of Hawaiian Affairs was created after the 1978 constitutional convention rewrote the state's constitution, which newly codified Hawaiian and English as official languages of the state. In 1983, the first Native Hawaiian Pūnana Leo ("nest of voices") preschool was established, modeled after the Māori Kōhanga Reo (Kahikina 2005). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the Cherokee Nation, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians all established language preservation and revitalization projects, including immersion schools (Lizette et al. 2003; Peter et al. 2003; Albee 2017; Morrison 2020). These are just a few examples of language revitalization efforts in Indigenous communities since the 1970s.

There remains a clear digital divide in most settler colonial nations. Many rural Indigenous communities have limited access to modern technology and the Internet, which exacerbates educational and economic disparities. Native college students may have to drop out as a result of costs related to studying at a university even when those universities cover mandatory fees and tuition. Alina Sierra (Tohono O'odham), for example, dropped out of University of Arizona's main Tucson campus when, despite receiving grants to cover tuition and mandatory fees, she was still unable to afford Internet access and the hour-long bus commute to campus (Sy and Jackson 2024). One researcher noted of the COVID-19 pandemic's enhancement of the digital divide in Canada's rural and Indigenous communities lacking high-speed Internet access: it "affects their residents' ability to participate in an online work and learning environment" (Koch 2022, p. 89). Simultaneous to these problems, projects like CyberPowWow (1996) leveraged technology and the Internet to convene Indigenous gatherings online. CyberPowWow was first envisioned by the artists collective Nation to Nation (Skawennati, Ryan Rice, and Eric Robertson) and took place online and at various "Gathering Sites" from 1997–2004. More recently, the First Nations Development Institute's digital storytelling toolkit (Jakober and Kovalcheck 2023) offers best practices and sample stories for blogs, websites, social media platforms, and other digital environments all aimed at nonprofit tribal communications teams.

While there is a move toward empowerment and representation in national governments, with individuals like Deb Haaland serving as the first Native American cabinet secretary or the 12 current Indigenous members of the Canadian House of Commons, there is a well-documented history of upending sociopolitical might through a politics of disenfranchisement. In 2007, without any prior consultation with Aboriginal peoples, Australia's Northern Territory Intervention suspended the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 in order to target Aboriginal communities with policies of compulsory income management, increased policing and military presence on Aboriginal land, and control over land through compulsory leases (Challenor 2020, p. 23). In a case of extremely dark irony, 2007 was also the year incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued the official formal apology to the "stolen generations" who had been abducted from their communities and placed in missionary schools. In 2023, with a participation rate of 89.82%, Australians rejected the constitutional amendment through state and national referenda that would have installed an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, a representational body to the legislative and executive government bodies of the commonwealth on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (McGuirk 2023; Australian Electoral Commission 2023). Legislation in the U.S., Canada, and Australia have introduced stricter ID requirements for voting that disproportionately disenfranchises Native peoples (Orr and Arklay 2016; Pal 2017; Movement Advancement Project 2022). The populations of U.S. territories like the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and Samoa have effectively no representation in national politics despite all being U.S. citizens.

These constant oscillations between cultural loss/revival, technological exclusion/integration, and sociopolitical marginalization/empowerment are, in total, representative of an obvious ustopian reality for Indigenous peoples. On the one hand,

increased visibility and political influence of Indigenous leaders may signal a uto-
pian vision of inclusion and recognition of Indigenous rights. However, on the other
hand, systemic barriers like the digital divide, increased likelihood of poverty or
addiction in tribal communities (McCloskey 2023; Komro et al. 2023), and voter
suppression tactics like the most recent efforts in North Dakota to disenfranchise
Natives living on reservations without street addresses (Brakebill v. Jaeger 2018;
Schaeffer 2019) perpetuates a dystopian landscape of seemingly inescapable exclu-
sion and marginalization.

   With the above as significant preliminary context, I now spend the remainder of
the chapter on the art of Cannupa Hanska Luger and Skawennati. Given that Luger
and Skawennati have different tribal affiliations, I employ a pan-Indigenous meth-
odology of qualitative analysis throughout, or what Titherington (2021) calls
"remixing," a technology of hybridity that functions as "a strategy of survivance."[1]
In short, this means that, as above, I move between and across multiple geographies
and tribal cosmologies, staging an integrative collaboration between worlds, peo-
ples, and cultures. While Luger and Skawennati's tribal affiliations are intrinsically
tied to how their art came to be and functions in the world and thus will no doubt be
part of the examination herein, I read across these differences to interpret their tech-
nologies of survivance. In all, remixing as a method of analysis is a rhetorical form
of syncretic solidarity rather than a collapsing of Indigenous expression into a mish-
mash of "fugitive poses" (Vizenor 2000).

   Luger's Watḣéča character and Skawennati's *She Falls For Ages* offer powerful
visions of Indigenous futurist cosmology that challenge and reframe colonialist per-
spectives using *technologies of survivance* (Titherington 2021). Watḣéča embodies
resilience and survival, using traditional knowledge and textiles to protect and sus-
tain life against the omnipresent threat of death. By integrating Indigenous under-
standings of life and death, this character disrupts Western narratives of technological
advancement, which emphasize efficiency in a linear progression toward an inevita-
bly innovative future. Rather than transcending death through technology, that is,
Watḣéča coexists with and learns from the broader ecological and spiritual implica-
tions of death. Similarly, Skawennati's *She Falls For Ages* reimagines the
Kanienkehá:ka creation story in a futuristic digital medium, asserting the continuity
and ongoing relevance of Indigenous knowledge. The piece utilizes machinima
technology to codify ancient narrative into the contemporary and a distant future
digital context. Skawennati thereby not only preserves but revitalizes Mohawk sto-
rytelling by highlighting its enduring ability to adapt in new media landscapes. Both
artists interweave traditional knowledge with futuristic environments, crafting
decolonial technologies of survivance that assert Indigenous agency and envision
vibrant, digitally sovereign futures. In detailing the pieces' elements and impact,
this chapter's analysis explores how Luger's and Skawennati's art create ustopiae

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[1] Survivance is a portmanteau of survival and resistance, coined by Gerald Vizenor in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1999).

that imagine blended Indigenous futures that use ancestral knowledge to navigate and resist ongoing threats of cultural erasure and ecological destruction.

13.2   Cannupa Hanska Luger's *Watȟéča*

Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandin, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Lakota heritage) was born on the Standing Rock Reservation and is an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold. A 2022 Guggenheim Fellow as well as the 2020 Creative Capital Fellow and 2020 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow, he received his BFA in studio arts from the Institute of American Indian Arts and now resides in New Mexico. His work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, Kunsthal KAdE, and the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. He writes that his aim is "to lay groundwork, establish connections and mobilize action—to challenge the systemic conditions of colonialism while making space for urgent and emergent Indigenous narratives" (MAH 2023). These emergent narratives are the subject of this analysis.

> Luger's *Future Ancestral Technologies* speculative fiction series looks to customary practices in order to move culture forward. It actively incorporates science fiction theory, storytelling, Indigenous technologies, contemporary materials and the detritus of capitalism to present time-bending landscapes and to prototype new myths. (MAH 2023).

While the series features several characters, including the "monstrous forms that defy monstrous characterization" Muscle, Bone & Sinew, I was immediately drawn to the towering figure of Watȟéča when I saw an exhibition first-hand in Santa Cruz (MAH 2023; Luger 2024). Dressed in specially made regalia, the two figures of Watȟéča stood in stationary mannequin form around the room while several video screens depicted a figure dressed in the two sets of regalia—Coyote and Buzzard—in a variety of "imaginal future terrains" (Luger 2023a, b, 2024). The exhibit is given poetic explanation on the walls of the room:

> There is a valuable lesson in the nature of the scavenger.
>> They thrive by destroying death. Immune to the diseases of rotting flesh.
>> A final dance for living bodies is to be torn apart completely.
>> Scavengers transform endings into beginnings, celebrating life after death.
>> A pivotal component to rejuvenate life's cycles.
>> Sheltering the living from the intricacies of death's omnivorous annihilation.
>> Nothing shall be wasted by the scavengers because to them nothing is waste.
> (Luger 2024).

In this passage, the scavenger is teacher, dancer, protector, recycler. While Watȟéča is not mentioned in the poem, it is implied that the characters Watȟéča (Buzzard) (2023a) and Watȟéča (Coyote) (2023b) derive from the scavenger's role in "transform[ing] endings into beginnings, celebrating life after death."

Do the ustopiae reveal themselves here, in the scavenger's dance? The poem imagines the scavenger not just in its simplistic, evolutionary form—that is, entirely controlled by its instincts—but instead, in an ecological form—that is, contributing

to a wider system of cyclical processes. We ought to see in the rejuvenation dance, then, a connotation of ustopia. In other words, the dystopic connotation of death, dying, destruction, and waste is usurped by this destroyer of death, the scavenger. As teacher, the scavenger is evidence of its own technologies of survivance—methods of survival and resistance. In its rejuvenation dance, the scavenger reverses the negative connotation to a positive one: not death, but "life after death;" not "endings," but "beginnings;" not "annihilation," but rejuvenation; not wasting, but (re)cycling. The scavenger lives in the ustopia: it is surrounded by death (dystopia), but it nonetheless transforms and destroys it (utopia).

Whereas "the detritus of capitalism" risks disappearing into oblivion, the scavenger (and Watȟéča by proxy) assigns "ultimate value to what is on the brink of vanishing" (Luger 2024). The very word *watȟéča* in Lakota refers to the leftovers taken home after a shared feast. In its very name, then, Watȟéča dances the dance of rejuvenation, of making something new from the scraps leftover. To that end, the regalia for both Watȟéča (Buzzard) (2023a) and Watȟéča (Coyote) (2023b) was actually built from scavenged materials. In his estimation, Luger feels that the Indigenous experience is reflected by the scavenger: "surviving off leftovers" (Luger 2024). Language, land, culture, and religion may have been demonized, stolen, or thrown away by colonialism. Yet, Indigenous people survive and resist this at every moment. Watȟéča projects this ethos into the future. The scavenger becomes the mythic teacher who models a "critical technology for future survival" (Luger 2024). Thus, it is not a dystopian present or future for Indigenous people, but a ustopian continuum bolstered by technologies of survivance gifted by this ecological and spiritual teacher.

In his descriptive artist statement, Luger writes that he "activates speculative fiction as a methodology, a practice, a way of future dreaming, rooted in an Indigenous continuum" (MAH 2023). The seemingly paradoxical title of the series, *Future Ancestral Technologies*, demonstrates the way Luger practices speculative fiction: the future and the past (ancestral) are in a continuum. Whereas Western beliefs of technological innovation rupture with the past, which it deems primitive or at the very least incomplete, Luger's "Indigenous continuum" rejects this rupture. Watȟéča combines futural and ancestral, employing the technologies of survivance gifted by the scavenger. Indeed, technologies of survivance are, by their very nature, ustopic. *Survivance* is a portmanteau of "survival" and "resistance" (Vizenor 2000). Rather than being victims of the settler colonial dystopia, Indigenous resistance dreams of a future utopia. Watȟéča embodies resilience and survival by using traditional knowledge to protect and sustain life against the omnipresent threat of annihilation. At the same time that it employs ancestral knowledge, Watȟéča exists in the futural imaginary. It is by integrating Indigenous cosmology, emphasizing the ecological nature of the scavenger, that Luger's Watȟéča (Buzzard) and Watȟéča (Coyote) come to be important for the future. The dream of the future is "rooted" in the "blessings and lessons of the scavenger" (Luger 2024).

In the videos of *Watȟéča* (Buzzard) and *Watȟéča* (Coyote), each figure (Images 13.1, 13.2, 13.3, and 13.4) is embedded in imagined future lands, engaging "in land-based performative actions to pledge accountability to the land and waters affected

Image 13.1 *Watȟéča* (Buzzard) regalia, made from scavenged materials, worn and performed in context. Cinematography by Gabe Fermin. Copyright Cannupa Hanska Luger (2023a)

by resource extraction and industry" (WAH, 2023). The "mythic and reverential perspective" Watȟéča engenders is not in isolation from the landscape (Luger 2024). On the contrary, it is in *hyper-attunement* with its surroundings—figures perform reverential choreography in each cinematic video, and the cinematography itself unifies Watȟéča with the sky, land, and water.

While the scavenged and repurposed materials of the regalia may be characterized as Indigenous futurist in and of themselves, embodying these within their contexts is extremely important. There is a long history of museums stealing and showcasing Indigenous art and material culture, including textiles, in glass vitrines on pedestals, completely void of and isolated from proper context (Kreps 2008; Sleeper-Smith 2009; Townsend-Gault 2011; Eyre 2016). *Future Ancestral Technologies* resists this history in its form and curation: whereas the regalia of each character is placed in the space, the dynamic attraction for the exhibit is the large video projections in which the regalia is worn by someone performing in the proper contexts. *Hyper-attunement*, then, is not just a part of the practice of Indigenous

Image 13.2 *Watȟéča* (Buzzard) in the context of a distant mountain range amid yellowed wild grasses and dark bushes. Cinematography by Gabe Fermin. Copyright Cannupa Hanska Luger (2023a)

Image 13.3 *Watȟéča* (Coyote) regalia, made from scavenged materials, worn and performed in the context of a graffiti-adorned tunnel, playfully balancing above an animal skull. Cinematography by Gabe Fermin. Copyright Cannupa Hanska Luger (2023b)

Image 13.4 *Wathéča* (Coyote) in close-up with animal skull. Cinematography by Gabe Fermin. Cannupa Hanska Luger (2023b)

futurism for Luger's series, but a curatorial ethos that prompts "empathic response and community catharsis" (WAH, 2023).

Wathéča reflects the constant oscillations between cultural loss/revival, technological exclusion/integration, and marginalization/empowerment that characterize the Indigenous experience. As I explain in the introductory section, these oscillations create a ustopian reality, where elements of utopia and dystopia coexist. Wathéča's coming into being references cultural loss, but the character's representation of ancestral knowledge projected into the futural imaginary represents cultural revival. The use of scavenged materials in the regalia may seem to be the remnants of a culture that has been marginalized and disrupted by colonial forces. Yet, these materials, repurposed and given new life, reflect the fragments of culture that have survived despite systematic attempts at annihilation and erasure. Despite the scavenger's connotation with death, destruction, or waste, Wathéča mythologizes a future in which an Indigenous ethos is embedded in material and cultural life. While technologies of survivance may be read as a metaphor, Wathéča's futuristic regalia and imagined future terrains in the video projections highlight technological exclusion-turned-integration. Luger's own poetic synopsis grants Wathéča the symbolic representation of marginalization-turned-empowerment.

The videos show Wathéča as a reclamation of cultural identity. In Buzzard's video, high-pitched accordion-like chords mimic birdcall or windchimes, but with a futuristic, digitized, almost metallic ring. This ringing is interspersed with quick fluttering like whirring bird (or drone) flight. The wind blows through the hanging fabric that make up its characteristic wing feathers. Its mallet suggests a reverence or ceremony in its movements, a Buzzard choreography. Movements are smooth in the arm/wing and when the body rises from the landscape, but it becomes sclerotic and jittery when walking. A single shot may contain frames in which Buzzard is

multiplied across the landscape, flashing and disappearing like teleportation. Altogether, these elements fuse traditional imagery with futurism, reflecting the ongoing struggle between cultural loss and revitalization. The ceremonial choreography and reverence for naturalistic movements seem to reference what has always been jeopardized by the settler colonial culture that places Indigenous reverence for the natural world and ceremony into an infantile category of primitivism. On the other hand, the futuristic terrain, metallic ringing, and the fragmented, teleporting presence/absence across a single shot clearly refuse to place the mise-en-scène in a past setting. Combined with the more "traditional" elements, the video visualizes revitalization.

Coyote's video is much more playful, using movements that mimic the smoother, sneaking steps of predators as well as the jollier, skip-like trot of canines. The cinematography engages zooming throughout to reveal distance and intimacy as well as personality. Close-ups show the regalia's individual elements and slowly zooming out reveals the environments of shadowy tunnels as well as crevices in the landscape or holes being dug in the ground. There are several vast landscape shots that are still except for Coyote's trotting. This is different than the extremely quick zooming in that emulates a Pedro Almodóvar film; These feel like Coyote being caught in the act of chewing bones, digging holes, crossing the desert landscape behind trees amid snow, dirt, and other flora. These moments of quick zooms also reveal the personality of Coyote as suspicious and calculated, as catching him sometimes prompts him to hide. Coyote's interest in a dead flower, an animal skull, a large bone, and the acts of playing and hiding give the droning, metallic music that oscillates between crescendos and decrescendos a different thematic tone. While they remain cold and futuristic like the landscape, the music becomes more like the water in the tunnel or the dark shadows that are epiphenomenal to Coyote's sense of play. Coyote's movements, characterized by suspicion and playfulness, reflect the adaptability and resilience required to navigate a world of persistent marginalization, where Indigenous identities are often relegated to the background or "fugitive poses"—representations of victimry. As Coyote crosses large landscapes, curiosity and vigilance are integral to the ability of adaptation in the face of constant surveillance. Like Buzzard's video, the cinematic and sonic storytelling place Indigenous narratives in a futuristic techno-scape, transforming technological exclusion into integration. Also, like Buzzard, Coyote is deeply connected to the natural world and with remnants of life—a dead flower, a skull, a bone—but reveres and plays with these dead elements rather than scrapping them. We learn the way Coyote preserves and perseveres, resisting any lament of victimry surrounded by the wintery landscape of death. Instead, Coyote explores and revels in exploring the dystopian setting and constantly interacts with the spectator, as if prompting us to join in the play.

Integrating ancestral knowledge and futural landscapes, Luger's work celebrates the technologies of survivance we learn from the scavenger. The scavenger's hyper-attunement to the land represents an enduring engagement with adaptability, an engagement required when one exists amid the omnipresence of death and detritus. Luger's work is a compelling Indigenous futurist vision that plays on the ustopian

nature of Indigenous life, dreaming in an ecological ethos where nothing is waste and every ending is a beginning.

13.3 Skawennati's *She Falls For Ages*

It is no understatement to say that Skawennati (Kahnawakeronon Mohawk) is one of the best and most important Indigenous artists of the present. She has been at the forefront, with her co-director (and partner) Jason Edward Lewis, of new media and indigeneity. Her images and films made in virtual environments are called machinimas or machinimagraphs[2]; however, she also works in textile and sculpture. She was born in Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory and now resides in Montreal. She holds an Honorary Doctorate from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and was recipient of the 2011 Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship, the 2022 Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions Grant, and was the 2019 Indigenous Knowledge Holder at McGill University. Her work has been collected by the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the Thoma Foundation (Skawennati 2024). Under her co-directorship, the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) at Concordia University has put together over 15 projects dedicated to Indigenous presence in virtual spaces. Among these are the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF), which partnered universities and community organizations to develop workshops, residencies, symposia, and an archive of visions for Indigenous futures (IIF 2024). AbTeC originally developed from the CyberPowWow project (1997–2004), which connected through graphical chat rooms visitors of an online Powwow to see work by emerging and established Indigenous creators (AbTeC 2024; CyberPowWow 1996). The ImagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival awarded her project *TimeTraveller*™ the Best New Media award in 2009 (IMDb 2009). In 2020, she co-founded the first Indigenous artist-run center in Québec, daphne; was featured in *Vogue* magazine; and was awarded a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (Allaire 2020; Dunlevy 2020a, b).

Most of Skawennati's individual work draws on oral and cultural traditions to visualize a vast future of Indigenous survivance. In this way, her work is literally a technology of survivance, as it instrumentalizes new media to represent First Nations histories with a characteristic science fiction flair. In Skawennati's (2017) *She Falls For Ages*, the Mohawk creation myth is retold within a futuristic ustopia. In Karonhiá:ke (Sky World), things are seemingly utopic, but something is afoot.

In the original Kanienkehá:ka (Mohawk) story, the guardian of the Celestial Tree, which gave light to all of the universe, flies into a rage when he discovers his wife is pregnant. When he uproots the tree, his wife peers into the hole down onto the world below, covered in water. Then, he pushes her, and she falls for ages before

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[2] Machinima and machinimagraph are both portmanteaux of machine and cinema and machine and photograph, respectively.

landing on the backs of geese, who place her on the turtle's back. There was no land, so Sky Woman, as she is now known, recruits small mammals to swim down to the bottom of the water and retrieve dirt. She plants seeds in this mud, and it begins to grow and grow until it becomes the landmass we call home today (Mohawk 2005; Ionataié:was 2016; Lalonde 2017). According to Mohawk (2005), the guardian thrusts his wife into the chasm created by the uprooted tree because he fears she was scheming to prevent his vision from coming true (p. 11). Other versions of the story give no real reason why he does so, and some say that Sky Woman fell or jumped into the chasm because she knew her destiny.

The setting represents ustopia quite well. While Karonhiá:ke may seem like a utopic place—several versions mention that its citizens never feel sadness or experience inequality (Ionataié:was 2016; Lalonde 2017)—the necessity of Otsitsakáion and her brother Tehahontsihsónkhwa to be hidden away for their entire childhoods and the anger of Rarón:tote suggest otherwise. In short, the original source material blends utopian ideals and dystopian tensions. Skawennati's retelling does the same. In *She Falls For Ages*, Otsitsakáion and her brother must be isolated from the world because of their powers of telepathy and telekinesis, respectively. It is not until they are adults, having been trained by their uncle to harness their powers, that they are allowed to leave home. Even still, Ístah resists the invitation to Rarón:tote's soiree. The place of eternal happiness harbors secrets and discord: Otsitsakáion and Tehahontsihsónkhwa's uncle discovers he will soon die; when Rarón:tote realizes Ístah has kept her children from appearing at his celebration of the 3000th anniversary of the Celestial Tree, he sends his messenger to fetch them. Rarón:tote in Skawennati's version is also the guardian of the Celestial Tree, but the tree is facing severe endangerment. While the tree provides all of the light to the world, its flowers are dimming and flickering. It is for this reason that Skawennati's Otsitsakáion must travel to the turtle's back and create a new world. She volunteers rather than be pushed into the chasm. Otsitsakáion means Ancient Flower, we are told by the narrator at the very start of Skawennati's version. Given that she takes the seeds from Karonhiá:ke to the turtle's back, we understand by the end of the story that her name is her destiny (Skawennati 2017).

More than the story's source material and Skawennati's narrative retelling in the distant future, the use of machinima juxtaposes traditional mythology with a science fiction environment that enhances a sense of ustopia. Like Watȟéča, Skawennati's use of advanced technology and futuristic setting as backdrop for the story links the distant past and the distant future in an Indigenous continuum that challenges linear, Western notions of progress that erase Indigenous peoples. As I suggest above, this integration of ancestral knowledge with futurism is literally a technology of survivance, as Mohawk storytellers like Skawennati not only survive but actively shape their destinies in a world that often seeks to marginalize them.

While the source material and the characters themselves may be humanoid, Otsitsakáion's recruitment of geese, a turtle, a beaver, a muskrat, and an otter to land safely and then create the continents suggests a decentering of the human. In the Western rationalist tradition, it is human ingenuity and intellectual prowess that meets challenges with solutions. In *She Falls For Ages*, Otsitsakáion relies on the

non-human kin of her surroundings. Indeed, it is the turtle who actually calls out to the other animals after Otsitsakáion asks if it has any ideas about how to find land for planting the seeds. The machinima form is not epiphenomenal to the Indigenous epistemologies Skawennati's art continually references, either. As Lewis et al. (2018) write, "[a]s we manufacture more machines with increasing levels of sentient-like behaviour, we must consider how such entities fit within the [non-human] kin-network." (p. 2) Foregrounding relationality as a value and practice, the "computational biosphere" is met with reciprocity and respect, as well. (Lewis et al. 2018, p. 2) Moreover, land-based relations are vital to the Internet and virtual spaces; cyberspace is not actually landless (Morford and Ansloos 2021). The very center of AbTeC's ethos is maintaining Indigenous sovereignty in digital spaces (AbTeC 2024). More literally, all technology functions as a result of land-based infrastructures. This notwithstanding, machinima as Skawennati employs it is one iteration of this digital sovereignty, as it is where the representation of futuristic technological landscapes not only includes but centers Indigenous storytelling and Indigenous epistemologies.

More than resisting cultural erasure, *She Falls For Ages* also resists ecological destruction. Skawennati's decentering the human takes on a new resonance when we remember that the Celestial Tree, which provides all the light to Karonhiá:ke, is under threat. The tree comes to symbolize the fragility of our ecosystems and the need for their protection. This, coupled with the necessity for Otsitsakáion to create a new world, underscore themes of ecological crisis (and renewal). Otsitsakáion working with non-human kin points to the necessity of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to create and sustain life on the turtle's back. By embedding ecological concerns within the mythological narrative, Skawennati draws attention to the importance of environmental stewardship and the consequences of ecological neglect. We leave the experience reevaluating our relationship to the natural world, to the future, and to our past—all through a lens of Indigenous cosmology. The vision of the Indigenous future Skawennati's work gives is one of sustainability, respect, and reciprocity.

13.4   Conclusion, in Brief

Nick Estes (2019) argues that Indigenous history is inherently oriented toward the future. This perspective challenges the colonial narrative that relegates Indigenous peoples to the past. Estes contends that Indigenous histories are not static but dynamic, continuously evolving and influencing future possibilities. This future orientation is a form of resistance against colonial erasure, asserting that Indigenous peoples have always been, and will continue to be, vital actors in shaping any future.

For Indigenous peoples, ustopia reflects the tension between cultural resilience and the ongoing impacts of colonial oppression. It highlights how Indigenous communities continue to thrive and adapt, even as they face significant challenges. In examining the works of Cannupa Hanska Luger and Skawennati, this chapter has

illuminated how these artists utilize Indigenous futurist cosmologies to challenge and reframe colonialist perspectives. Through their respective creations, Watȟéča and *She Falls For Ages*, these artists have crafted ustopian realities that navigate the oscillations between cultural loss/revival, technological exclusion/integration, and marginalization/empowerment. Luger's Watȟéča character, rooted in the lessons of the scavenger, embodies resilience and survival, transforming remnants of the past into a vibrant future. Skawennati's retelling of the Mohawk creation myth through machinima not only preserves but revitalizes Indigenous narratives, integrating ecological and cultural concerns into a futuristic setting. Together, their works represent powerful decolonial technologies of survivance, asserting Indigenous agency, creativity, and sustainability in both contemporary and future landscapes. This analysis underscores the significance of these visionary expressions, demonstrating that Indigenous futures are not merely reactive but are proactive, innovative, and essential to a comprehensive understanding of modern and future societies.

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