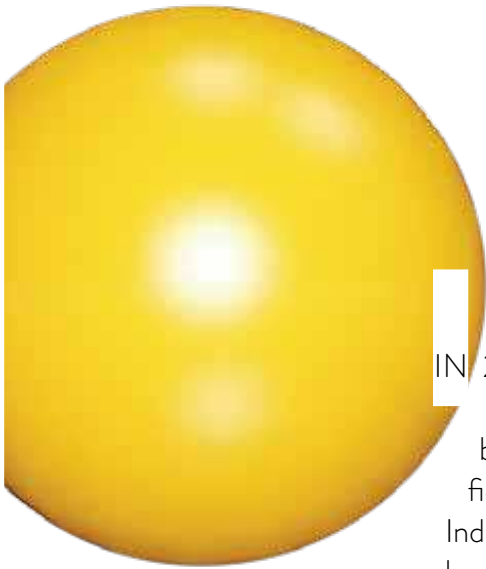


THE ADVENTURES OF AN AVATAR AND HER REAL GIRL

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IN 2003, ANISHINAABE SCHOLAR Grace Dillon coined the term “Indigenous Futurism” to refer to a burgeoning movement that invokes the use of science fiction and new media to consider how traditional Indigenous perspectives can be envisioned in the present and, more significantly, in the future. Dillon breaks down the concept into several sub-genres, including “Native slipstream,” which she defines as “a species of speculative fiction within the sf realm, [that] infuses stories with time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, and alternative histories. . . . Native slipstream views time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream. It thus replicates nonlinear thinking about space-time.”¹ We can observe the notion of slipstream in Skawennati’s work through her use of time travel, resulting in new combinatory narratives in which Indigenous traditions are a catalyst towards conceiving a future imaginary. This way of thinking breaks from the Western tradition of recording history as a relatively linear trajectory of events. Skawennati destabilizes and counters this structure through her fluid use of time, with past, present, and future intermingling and layering within individual narratives. Much of the work that Matthew Ryan Smith has selected for *Skawennati: From Skyworld to Cyberspace* has a strong narrative component and

highlights the potential of combining traditional storytelling with digital media as a way to pre-record a future history.

Perhaps what is increasingly appealing to Indigenous artists and writers working in the sci-fi genre is the resonance between Indigenous conceptions of time as circular, cyclical, or fluid and the theories that form the basis of science fiction. Skawennati credits sci-fi tropes for providing a means to articulate how she wants to imagine herself, Indigenous people, and all of society in the future. Although she has enjoyed reading and watching science fiction since her formative years, Skawennati has become increasingly aware of its dearth of Indigenous representation. It is apparent to her that when most writers, artists, and filmmakers envision the future, this future does not include Indigenous communities. Moreover, although there are many images—both real and imagined—of Indigenous people in visual culture, such images are primarily historical and any contemporary depictions are extremely limited in scope. This imbalance not only leads to the misconception that Indigenous populations exist only in the past, but also promotes stereotypes of what Indigenous people can or should be. Throughout her practice, Skawennati has been consistent in her message that it is vital for Indigenous people to envision themselves in the future and to understand how their knowledge, histories, and traditions can be carried forward in meaningful ways.

Skawennati's use of time travel to intermingle historical and futuristic narratives in an attempt to counteract existing negative stereotypes can be attributed to her interest in how time is articulated in science fiction. For example, the following passage from Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* describes a moment of contact between humankind and an alien race of overlords in which time is revealed as fluid, the distant future colliding with the past.

When our ships entered your skies a century and a half ago, that was the first meeting of our two races, though of course we had studied you from a distance. And yet you feared and recognized us, as we knew



that you would. It was not precisely a memory. You have already had the proof that time is more complex than your science ever imagined. For that memory was not of the past, but of the future—of those closing years when your race knew that everything was finished. We did what we could, but it was not an easy end. And because we were there, we became identified with your race's death. Yes, even while it was ten thousand years in the future! It was as if a distorted echo had reverberated round the closed circle of time, from the future to the past. Call it not a memory but a premonition.²

Although Skawennati was in high school when she first read *Childhood's End*, this passage in particular resonated with her while she was working on *She Falls for Ages* (2017), a sci-fi retelling of the Haudenosaunee Creation Story. As is frequently the case with stories passed on through oral tradition and told across numerous communities, many versions of the story exist. However, there is a universal narrative element that describes the moment when the Celestial Tree is uprooted and Sky Woman either falls or is pushed through the resulting hole. In some versions she grasps at the ground as she tries to prevent her fall, coming away with handfuls of the plants and seeds that will form the basis for agriculture in what will ultimately become the new world. She then falls through the cosmos to the world below still covered entirely by ocean. The sight of Sky Woman falling is of great concern to the water animals and birds, who create a place for her to land by bringing soil from the bottom of the ocean and depositing it onto the back of a turtle. Geese catch her as she falls and gently deliver her to the turtle's back. The common thread is that Sky Woman is a passive victim of her fate. Skawennati, in contrast, presents Sky Woman (here called Otsitsakaion, meaning Ancient Flower) as having the agency to make her own decisions. In *She Falls for Ages*, the pregnant Otsitsakaion recognizes that the only way that her people can survive Sky World coming to an end is if she makes the selfless choice to leave. She volunteers to “be the seed of the new world,”

but also to carry seeds to the new world—seeds of beans, corn, and squash are safely held in a bundle that has been placed around her neck. She watches the Celestial Tree break free of its roots and then, to the wistful strains of 80s band Strange Advance’s song *Worlds Away*, Otsitsakaion turns, waves to her loved ones and the elders, and leaps purposefully through the hole. She is a brave explorer, an angel, an astronaut.³

Strong characters populate all of Skawennati’s machinima, the most noteworthy of whom is xox, Skawennati’s avatar, who is featured in many of the works in *From Skyworld to Cyberspace*. In *Words Before All Else, Parts 1-3* (2017-2018), xox delivers the first three parts of the Ohen:ton Karihwaterkwén, or Thanksgiving Address. Against shifting backgrounds of a shimmering pixelated urban landscape, the planet Earth, desert rain, and a waterfall, xox acknowledges the people, Mother Earth, and the waters respectively. In its entirety, the Thanksgiving Address expresses gratitude for all peoples, flora and fauna, the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars. It acknowledges the interconnectedness of all things, not only in the terrestrial world, but also between humanity and the cosmos. By using contemporary technology to draw on this ancient tradition, Skawennati creates a futuristic vision that folds temporalities into and upon themselves so that all moments coexist. As Wahsontiiio Cross describes in her essay, the Thanksgiving Address is a vital part of the Haudenosaunee spiritual tradition and identity. It is such a significant part of the cultural fabric that Skawennati has worked with it in the past. *Words Before All Else* is preceded by *Thanksgiving Address: Greetings to the Technological World* (2002), produced in collaboration with her partner Jason Edward Lewis.⁴ In this instance they provide an updated interpretation of the blessing, each in turn expressing gratitude for the technologies that enrich our lives by allowing us to share our stories across cultural and geographical distances. Skawennati and Lewis thank technology: computers, programming languages, and the Internet, which “allows us to be connected to each other forming a web across our Mother Earth.” Conversely, in *Words Before All Else*, it is xox who delivers the protocol in its



Becoming Sky Woman / La femme du ciel en devenir, 2016
Machinimagraph from She Falls for Ages / Machinimagraphie de Elle tombe pendant des lustres
Edition 2 of 6 / tirage 2 de 6



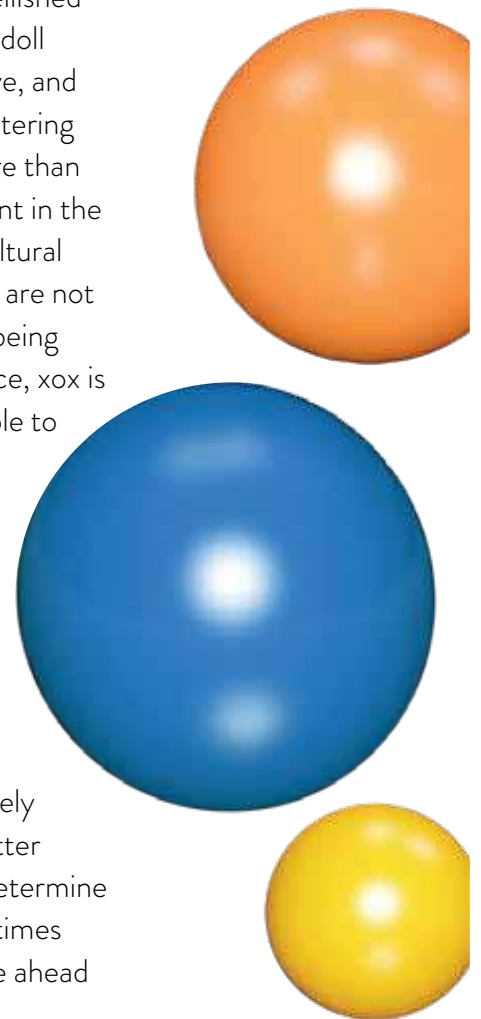
traditional form—the acknowledgement of the importance of the natural world and humankind’s place within it is delivered by an agent of the technological world. Skawennati’s choice to use her avatar to deliver the Thanksgiving Address speaks to the complexity of the connection that she and her avatar have developed.

Skawennati and xox have a symbiotic and highly nuanced relationship, a phenomenon supported by studies into the affinities formed between people and their avatars.⁵ Arguably, this kinship is particularly entangled as a result of its duration as well as the involvement of other technical contributors to Skawennati’s creative output. The dynamic between Skawennati and xox is most explicitly evident in *Dancing with Myself* (2015), which sets up a binary relationship between the artist and her avatar, each reflecting the other, similar but with marked differences. As Smith writes in his essay, Skawennati has suggested that she and her avatar want to be like each other. While Skawennati might wish to be as physically flawless and unencumbered by the realities of aging as her avatar, she also imagines that xox aspires to experience the full range of physical and emotional human desires and experiences, to taste, to love, and to feel the pleasure of flesh against flesh. It is a narrative that has existed for centuries, from the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea to the story of Pinocchio. Pygmalion’s love for his own creation, one more beautiful and perfect than any mortal woman, inspired the goddess Aphrodite to take pity on the poor artist and give life to the sculpture Galatea. Geppetto’s puppet Pinocchio, on the other hand, was granted the ability to walk and talk, but had to prove himself worthy in order to achieve his dream of becoming a real boy. In *Generations of Play 3D* (2017), Skawennati has created three doll-sized sculptures of xox in different media, including a 3D-printed model.⁶ In this doll-like form xox is more than the ones and zeros of computer code, but she has exchanged her ability to move and speak for an “in-real-life” form that remains dependent on Skawennati. xox has proven her worthiness, but can she ever be a real girl?

According to Schultze and Leahy, some people’s relationships with their avatars can become so intrinsic and intricate that they

don't always differentiate themselves from their digital persona.⁷ While it might be an exaggeration to suggest this with regards to Skawennati's relationship with xox, the avatar has stood in for the artist on at least one occasion. Several years ago, when Skawennati's busy schedule left her unavailable to deliver a lecture, she pre-recorded the talk through her avatar and xox delivered it to a live audience. This example illustrates the level of autonomy that Skawennati has allowed xox. Perhaps Skawennati can also be understood as xox's fleshy avatar.

Despite the close relationship between Skawennati and xox, it is not a closed circuit devoid of context. An avatar does not come into the world fully formed; rather, it is like a naked and unembellished Barbie waiting to be customized by its user. While a Barbie doll can only be dressed, an avatar's user can change its skin, eye, and hair colour; its height, as well as its clothing. However, by altering the physical appearance of the avatar, its user imposes more than mere aesthetic and fashion choices. As is particularly evident in the relationship between Skawennati and xox, there are also cultural considerations. As T.L. Taylor argues, "Identities and bodies are not constructed in a vacuum but are given meaning, as well as being supported or challenged, in social contexts."⁸ In this instance, xox is an embodiment of Skawennati's desire for Indigenous people to determine what they want to carry into the future and how they want to live. Schultze and Leahy posit that avatars are often used as a means to reflect the self, both current and future. However, xox embodies a more profound set of aspirations than those the artist has for herself. She draws on a multiplicity of past references, from traditional Mohawk culture to contemporary elements common to any girl growing up in North America in the 1970s and 80s, such as Barbie or *Star Trek*. Her work is at once intensely personal and created with the intention of envisioning a better world in which Indigenous people have greater agency to determine the future. Although Skawennati and her avatar xox are at times mutually dependent upon one another, together they forge ahead to effect real change in the offline world.



NOTES

1. Grace L. Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms," *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, ed. Grace L. Dillon (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 3.
2. Arthur C. Clarke, *Childhood's End* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1953), 205.
3. Otsitsakaion's angelic appearance is not a coincidence. In retelling her futuristic version of the Creation Story, Skawennati identified a strong connection with the narrative arc of Clarke's *Childhood's End*. Midway through the novel, the previously unseen overlords reveal themselves to humankind. The overlords, who are ultimately implicated in the end of life on Earth as we know it, have the appearance of devils as depicted in Western visual culture. Skawennati chooses to depict Otsitsakaion as a beatific counterpoint to these demonic beings because she is connected not with the end of life on Earth, but with its beginning.
4. <http://www.obxlabs.net/shows/thanksgivingaddress/> (accessed 20 August, 2019).
5. See Ulrike Schultze and Matthew Leahy, "The Avatar-Self Relationship: Enacting Presence in Second Life," *ICIS 2009 Proceedings*, 12, in which they develop a theoretical framework to conceptualize the avatar-self relationship, and identify twelve possible types of relationships across a telepresence-social presence spectrum.
6. The similarity of scale between Skawennati's 3D iterations of xox and Barbie dolls reflects how, as a child, Skawennati played with Barbie and was entranced by the pure potential that the doll possessed. She could do anything, be anything. It did not matter that her feet were permanently mutated to accommodate her tiny rubber stilettos or that she could not walk—Barbie could fly. The correlation between avatars and dolls is supported in Schultze and Leahy's study, where they suggest that although many users do not perceive Second Life as a game, they nevertheless engage with their avatars as an "object of play" (10).
7. In Schultze and Leahy's study, they found that "Virtually every participant in this study recounted instances when their avatar represented them and where they perceived no distinction between themselves and their avatar" (11).
8. T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds," *The Social Life of Avatars*, ed. Ralph Schroeder (London and Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2002), 56.