I, Mary T Hancock, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

It is entitled:
Cultivating Territories and Historicity: The Digital Art of Skawennati

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Cultivating Territories and Historicity: The Digital Art of Skawennati

A thesis submitted to
the Department of Art History
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Abstract

Skawennati Tricia Fragnito is a digital artist whose work emerged in the 1990s and continues to involve themes of colonialism through Internet communities and narrative. This study examines the artist’s Internet artworks, first looking at *CyberPowWow* (1996-2004) and *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace* (2008-) as virtual gathering places to discuss possibilities of using the Internet as an alternative place for First Nations and Native Americans to show artwork. In her Webworks, such as the *TimeTraveller™* (2007-) series and *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* (2000-2001), Skawennati reworks historical notions of the past to expose colonialism from the perspective of a Native character. The most recent body of work, *80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music*, is a series of freely-distributed music video project hosted on the video sharing Website *Vimeo* that was founded in 2004, that explores the historic colonization of network television and music in the 1980s by undermining notions of nostalgia and broadens perspective onto current electronic colonialism. Skawennati’s work keenly exemplifies digital art’s participating and expansive possibilities for understanding territory, distribution and sharing of “space.”
Acknowledgments

Writing this study would have been shallow without Skawennati’s generous assistance and communication with me. Having the opportunity to work with her in her Montreal Studio and correspond with her provided me with necessary first-hand information concerning her personal goals and desires, as well as the technical processes she used to create her digital art. I am extremely grateful and delighted that I had the chance to work with her on this study. Her contributions, especially of showing me what she has reworked that exists now in TimeTraveller™ and outmoded versions of work such as CyberPowWow that is no longer available on the Internet. Experiencing the CyberPowWow chat space was invaluable, because without her providing me with access to this once-interactive chat site, I would not have been able to fully comprehend the dialogue and viewing procedures.

The possibility of visiting her studio was realized through funds provided through the Graduate Student Governance Association Research Fellowship, without which I would not have had the finances to support my visit to Montreal. This fellowship gave me the opportunity to supplement my research and to strengthen my understanding of the artist’s media and how her use of technology has led to multiple versions of works. It also facilitated our in-depth conversations about her work that continues electronically.

My committee members supported me through this process, contributing their expertise on contemporary art and conceptual guidance to strengthen my writing. My thesis chair, Kimberly Paice, has been an especially valuable member to my committee because of her patience and intellectual insights. Her availability and willingness to discuss my writing and revisions helped to make this procedure a positive and fruitful experience. Because of her, this
thesis is a sliver of the education I experienced during this process; she allowed me to explore multiple ideas while forming this piece of writing. She encouraged and guided my creativity in my research and writing. Jordan Tate was diligent in contributing to my education of the Internet and Internet art, and challenged me to draw deeper connections to other artists that strengthened my understanding of the medium. Morgan Thomas was also a valuable asset in encouraging my analysis of post-colonialism and work by Native people.

Finally, I would like to thank my family members and friends who have supported me through this process by providing much-needed moral support. Without their love and assurance these last few months would have been entirely overwhelming and seemingly impossible. I am especially grateful to my mother, Ellen Guerrettaz, who, despite fighting cancer during the last few months of my thesis writing, continued to give objective guidance, direction, and encouragement. Thanks, Mom.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ..............................................................................................................................................2

Chapter 1:  
*CyberPowWow* (1996-2004), *AbTeC* (2008- ), and Creating Communities in Virtual Space .................................................................................................................................8

Chapter 2:  
*TimeTraveller™* (2007-) and Narrative ..............................................................................................21

Chapter 3:  
*80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music* (2000-), Nostalgia, and Electronic Colonialism ..........................31

Conclusion ..............................................................................................................................................38

List of Illustrations .................................................................................................................................39

Bibliography ..........................................................................................................................................40

Illustrations ............................................................................................................................................44
Introduction

Skawennati Tricia Fragnito (b. 1969), known as Skawennati, is an artist and independent curator of Mohawk and Italian descent who was born in Kahnawake, Quebec.\(^1\) She currently resides in Montreal, where she creates online interactive Web works using a variety of software programs including the virtual reality game Second Life and the digital editing program Final Cut Pro. In addition to these digital programs, Skawennati uses the Internet and Websites, making her work broadly accessible to people with access to the Internet and computers. She works collaboratively with a team of software design contributors and participatory members to create and edit her works. Her first cyber project, \textit{CyberPowWow (CPW)}, is an online chat site and gallery that was conceived in 1996. Although it is no longer active, it was the foundation for the current version, \textit{Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC)} that launched in 2008. Since then she has created the interactive timeline \textit{Imagining Indians in the 25th Century} (2000-2001), which was a prototype to the more recent and as-yet incomplete virtual series \textit{TimeTraveller\textsuperscript{TM}} (2007-) and \textit{80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music (808080s)} (2000-). All of these works deal with colonialism and distribution of territories today. In fact, one might therein think her work in terms of “Neo-colonialism,” a period in which new modes of resource-collection, distribution of territories and informatization dominates a global, late-capitalist economy. Skawennati evidences both in her works because she involves historical issues of colonization in \textit{CyberPowWow} and \textit{TimeTraveller\textsuperscript{TM}}, and the colonization of mass communication through television broadcasting and hegemonic presence of MTV in the 1980s. These works all draw attention to sites of colonialism and territorialization and use digital means to explore alternatives, free distribution, and participatory culture.

\(^1\)I combined my research of First Nations with American Indian peoples for this study.
Review of Literature

To date, very little scholarship has been dedicated to Skawennati’s art. For this reason, interviews that I conducted in person and online were among my most valuable resources in this study. Most crucial was my visit to Montreal, where Skawennati showed me works in progress. This interview proved to be indispensable to my understanding of how she makes works, generally and specifically prototypes and uses of technological means that she has changed or discarded, such as TimeTraveller™ and CyberPowWow, that are no longer available or function and be experienced in revised ways. Having access to works and versions of works that are no longer available online was especially informative. I used an interview with the artist that was conducted by Sharita Towne, for the site “Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists” (2012).2 Numerous online statements by the artist provided descriptions of the artist’s objectives in creating her Webworks and usefully highlight issues and themes in works by Native people today, e.g. land ownership, and communal and individual identity.

Exhibition catalogues of recent group shows that include Skawennati’s work are the only published writings that directly concern her work. We Are Here! (2011) is a catalogue from the Eiteljorg show, also shown at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York, that includes an essay by Candice Hopkins about Skawennati’s series TimeTraveller™. Hopkins is currently a Director and Curator of the exhibitions program at the Western Front Gallery in Vancouver. In the essay, “A Wrinkle in Time: On Indians and the Future,” Hopkins analyzes Skawennati’s ability to let go of past injustices against Native people and focus possible futures. Another catalogue, Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years (2011), includes an essay by Sherry Farrell Racette that uses Jean Baudrillard’s theories of the simulacrum to consider

2 http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19142160162/skawennati-mohawk
TimeTraveller™ and provide insight into how digital art can serve Native American and Indigenous peoples, its exploration of historical and other modes of time, and simulacral qualities.

In theorizing Skawennati’s cyber works, I also referred to several excellent books on Internet art, digital media, and virtual reality as well as influential studies of broadcast television and the history of corporate control of mass communication, such as Global Communication: Theories, Stakeholders, and Trends, edited by Thomas L. McPhail (2010). This provided an analysis of the dominance of Western culture through MTV over the globe. I also used Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-First Century by Sankaran Krishna, to foster my understanding post-colonialism and how historical cultural dominance of majority cultures over minority has a lasting, sometimes unapparent, impact.

To understand the expansiveness of the Internet as a global distribution plateau and Skawennati’s usage of it in CyberPowWow and AbTeC, I relied on scholarship that details the Internet’s history and issues of access, including Rachel Greene’s book Internet Art (2004). Greene’s book provided me valuable information on the histories of Internet art, Websites, and of specific artists’ works, which helped me situate Skawennati’s work in digital and art history. Christiane Paul’s book, Digital Art (2008), discusses some of the programs that Skawennati has used including The Palace software that was used in CyberPowWow, and the hugely popular user-created virtual game Second Life, which influenced Skawennati’s TimeTraveller™. Paul’s historical overview of these how these programs developed and have been used informed my understanding of Skawennati’s choice of technologies and their distinct capabilities for rendering, e.g. humanoid digital characters or avatars as they are called by parties in Second Life. From the book Infinite Reality: Avatars, Eternal Life, New Worlds, and the Dawn of the
Virtual Revolution (2011) I borrowed explored theories of virtual communities and how cyberspace has and can be used for decentering analogous and physical constraints on community formation.

In addition to grasping the role of media in Skawennati’s art, my research also considered the issues raised in the display and dissemination of contemporary artwork by Native peoples using Lee-Ann Martin’s essay “Negotiating Space for Aboriginal Art,” in On Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (2002) that offered valuable insight into this history. Skawennati’s essay, “Five Suggestions for Better Living,” specifically examines problems in this history, such as separatist exhibitions of works that are only by Native artists and therefore they underscore authorship and ethnicity more than promoting discussion of works and material conditions of production experience and distribution. As an alternative, solo shows for Native artists would allow their works to be seen in-depth and in relation to specified works by unspecified communities of producers.

Chapter Descriptions

In the first chapter of this study, entitled CyberPowWow (1996-2004), AbTeC (2008- ), and Creating Communities in Virtual Space, I analyze CyberPowWow and AbTeC, and focus on how Skawennati has used these Webworks as virtual communitarian places. CyberPowWow was an online site that allowed artists to post their digital artwork and communicate with each other via chatting. AbTeC functions similarly, but has been updated. Instead of using avatars in online chatting, members have the opportunity to blog and post discussions on art and Native exhibitions. Additionally, CyberPowWow and AbTeC use the ostensibly borderless expanse of cyberspace as gathering and distribution sites.
In the second chapter, *TimeTraveller™ (2007-)* and Narrative, Skawennati uses a series of episodes in *TimeTraveller™* to construct narratives that re-examine historical and imagined possible future events, causing viewers to interrogate the reality of such events as they are conveyed through the work’s emphasis on fiction and narrative. *TimeTraveller™* uses “machinima,” real-time animations that result from intervening in video game engines. They feature Hunter as the protagonist, a Mohawk bounty hunter from the year 2121, who uses the virtual reality device *TimeTraveller™* to travel back in time. Currently there are six of ten episodes posted that follow a storyline, in which Hunter eventually falls in love with a woman from the twenty-first century. Skawennati uses this narrative to recreate historical events and imagine a future in which Natives are no longer a minority. Experiencing *TimeTraveller™* through the Internet allows viewers to engage with the series at their own pace and fill in the blanks between the episodes using their imaginations, causing them to question what is shown versus what is not shown as Skawennati transposes Hunter and Karakwenhawi through certain chosen events in time. This series exposes historicity of history and effects of colonialism from the perspective of a Native person.

In the third chapter of the study, *80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music (2000-), Nostalgia, and Electronic Colonialism* I focus on Skawennati’s collection of music videos that evoke nostalgia, but question it through its reworkings of music-videos of the 1980s by imposing the role of the Internet and democratizing of production via Websites such as and *Vimeo*. Because the theme of this work is thematically dissimilar from the other works I discuss in this study, I emphasize how it serves as a foil to expand understanding of post-colonialism explored in other

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3 Machinima is a portmanteau of the words “machine” and “cinema” and is a global distribution platform for sharing content and applications for manipulating game content.
works. The music video format of 808080s mimics that of MTV, a commercial network powerhouse that endorses Western mass culture onto its audience, thus exemplifying electronic colonialism. In this chapter I argue how 808080s positions Skawennati’s work not only in post-colonialism, but neo-colonialism.

Methodology and Conclusion

This study analyzes the roles of narrative, historicity, and distribution in Skawennati’s works. Hayden White’s innovative postcolonial approach to historiography informed my interpretation of Skawennati’s TimeTraveller™, specifically, allowing me to present it as a form of historical narrative and read it as emphasizing its own stature as a translation of a portrayal of history. My emphasis is put on roles of collectivity that Skawennati’s works explore. Thus, I use elements of Marxist Fredric Jameson’s theories of defamiliarization of nostalgia and history. Skawennati’s works CyberPowWow, AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, Imagining Indians, and 808080s all engage post-colonialism and material conditions of life using the virtual space to explain ways of rethinking these material conditions. Electronic colonialism from broadcast global distribution platforms on the Internet are also at issue in Skawennati’s art. Thus she explores how art is disseminated to various audiences and the history of mass communication and how they participate. My study is trans-disciplinary and geared toward expanding scholarship on colonialism, technology, and contemporary art using Marxist and post-structural understanding of art, colonialism’s history, and mass and global forms of communication.

Chapter 1: 
CyberPowWow (1996-2004), AbTeC (2008- ), and Creating Communities in Virtual Space

In this chapter I discuss Skawennati’s use of virtual Internet space in her Web works CyberPowWow (1996-2004) and Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) (2008- ), and how she uses them as gathering places for members to contemplate and share computer artwork. Skawennati created these sites as forums that offer Native artists an alternative to the traditional Eurocentric gallery or museum that has historically framed their art in stereotype and in separatist venues or ethnically-themed exhibitions. From its launch in 1997 until 2004, CyberPowWow members could visit the Website, partake in virtual chat discussions, and view and contribute to the online gallery. It was followed by AbTeC that uses blogs to inform its visitors of past or current projects like computer games and workshops. These works exemplify possibilities of online media, such as using cyber territory as an alternative space and the accessibility of artwork in online galleries. They combine pedagogical with imaginative experiences for participants. Keenly aware of limitations on ownership and issues of colonization on the Internet and on land, Skawennati used digital platforms that afforded her CyberPowWow and AbTeC members an alternate space to engage and distribute artwork.

CyberPowWow

In CyberPowWow, Skawennati created a database of art and essays by and for Native people. It is a Website consisting of a main home page and links to sub pages that include an online gallery, a library of electronic resources such as essays by Native post-colonial writers Paul Chaat Smith and Archer Pechawis, and a chat room for members. The home page features
the logo, a tessellated globe topped by three tepees connected by zigzags that symbolize electricity and mass communication (figure 1). It has a metallic appearance, rendered in grayscale with highlights and shadows, and is orbited by the words, “LONG LIVE CYBERPOWWOW,” which casually call attention to the imagined future of Website. At the top is the text, “Welcome to CyberPowWow An Aboriginally Determined Territory in Cyberspace”. The sparing use of text and imagery is reminiscent of earlier forms of Internet art of the same period. Because of its simple introductory design, inexperienced visitors would need to explore its sub pages to begin to understand CyberPowWow.

The logo, the main focus of the home page, is the first indication of the Website’s character. Its imagery reinforces Skawennati’s approach to creating the Website, to provide a place for shared communication and production among contributors. The electrically-connected tepees symbolize such communication because they are representational of Internet networking. Further, as Judith Ostrowitz explains in “Performing Race/ Imagined Space,” the zigzag design is often used to “indicate a thunderbolt of the type that accompanies visionary experience brought on by traditional spiritual practices,” thus, adding an epiphanic layer to the Website’s logo. ⁵ The teepees’ enlarged size and positioning over the globe indicates that this communication covers continental distance, so the enlightenment and sharing is international. The name CyberPowWow echoes this theme; it translates into an online gathering of Native peoples for socialization and celebration. Though the word “powwow” has origins in a Narraganset word that relates to shamanic practices, it is currently used to describe ceremonies

that are held approximately two thousand times a year in the United States and Canada.⁶
Powwows are occasions for meeting, for the performance dance of rituals, socializing, and
honoring Native traditions.

In CyberPowWow, Skawennati was able to establish a virtual powwow, though
membership access was limited. Joining took two steps: downloading The Palace software and
contacting Skawennati by e-mail for access to specific resources. The software that she used, The Palace,
allowed her to create a graphic, virtual environment of chat rooms. These rooms (figure 2) have graphic backgrounds and give access to instant messaging.⁷ Members could visit these rooms after donning graphic-representationals of stand-ins for themselves; as in video-gaming, such stand-ins are called “avatars.” Users could take on the form of a blue smiley face, or other icons. Skawennati’s avatar “xox,” is an image of the comic strip character Tank Girl, from the British comic Tank Girl, a silver-haired punk heroine with war paint and a feather (figure 2).⁸

For identification within the game, avatars bear nametags and could choose their own screen-
names. This allowed members to maintain anonymity, and take alternate identities in a virtual
place. Not only was CyberPowWow a fictional place for them, but so were the participants allowed imaginative unreal identities in the site.

The background images of places were made specifically for the CyberPowWow Website. Members uploaded their own images into the online gallery, using The Palace program. In turn, these images helped site the chat space. Jason Edward Lewis, a writer and co-curator of

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⁶ Wendell H. Oswalt, This Land Was Theirs: A Study of Native North Americans, ninth ed. (New York: Oxford, 2009), 50. The Narraganset (Narragansett) are a tribe from the Rhode Island area.
⁷ Skawennati discovered The Palace software at a Wired Woman conference held in 1996. The society was originally launched in Vancouver, B.C. by Emma Payne. In this conference, women networked with others and learned about current technological opportunities. More information can be found on their website, http://www.wiredwoman.com/.
⁸ Tank Girl’s character in the comic was lascivious and rebellious, an outlaw.
CyberPowWow and AbTeC, rendered one such background (figure 2). This screen shows a typical chat space layout, in the graphic-image backdrop and lists that show members who is active in rooms. At the screen’s bottom right is the chat box, with a welcome message by The Palace and a monologue by xox. The space in chat rooms, such as this one, is visually two-dimensional. Corporally “entering” the chat “room” is impossible, but such phrases help users position themselves within this realm as opposed to physical, three-dimensional space.

The metaphorical use of place to CyberPowWow’s chatrooms insistently refers to digital fictionalization of lost stolen lands. Before Europeans arrived in North America, Native peoples owned all of the land. In 1784, the First Nations people of Canada were “given” land in Ontario by the British government for their loyalty during the American Revolution. Over the decades, mostly in the 1800s, governments in the U.S. and Canada negotiated treaties with Native people to claim their land so they could expand Euro-American settlements. The amount of land the Native people owned dwindled so drastically, that by the 1990s, reservations represented only 2.5 percent of U.S territory. Further, land ownership on reservations is complicated. An individual may own the surface, but its subsurface could belong to a tribe, the United States, or a “private concern,” as described by the writer Fergus M. Bordewich. Internet domains, such as the CyberPowWow website, are similarly governed. In order for people to have Websites, they

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9 The chat room layout of figure 2 would have looked like figure 1, but the image was cropped to more specifically show the background image.
10 Describing web spaces is difficult because of their multi-dimensional, time-based nature. Words such as “window,” and “room,” are applied to these spaces to create a frame for relating and understanding.
11 Ibid., 39.
12 Oswalt, 36-39.
13 Ibid., 36.
must lease or buy the domain from a larger corporation. Whether the domain is bought or leased, larger corporations are also able to purchase these domains, too. This is parallel to the colonizing of physical land by a majority culture, making CyberPowWow’s Internet space similarly susceptible. Yet despite this parallel, CyberPowWow did not remain exclusive for the use of Native people. Skawennati describes in “A Chatroom is Worth a Thousand Words,” that it eventually warmed up to inviting non-Native collaborators. By the year 2001, the Native artists who were involved in CyberPowWow discussed and wanted to extend membership.

As Maureen Trudelle Schwarz discusses in Fighting Colonialism with Hegemonic Culture: Native American Appropriation of Indian Stereotypes:

The term postcolonialism does not apply to the current American situation due to the fact that—at least from a legal standpoint—the 2.4 million Native Americans currently living within the boundaries of the contiguous United States remain a conquered people because the governmental policies and practices used to keep them under control remain in place. These remarks how the effects of colonialism are still prevalent, and highlights a problem with thinking that colonialism is purely historical. Though it addresses aspects of the current situation in the United States and not Canada, it offers only a snapshot of how displacement is an ongoing part of postcolonial life. Robin Fisher explains in “The Border and First Nations History: A Canadian View,” that though the colonization process of First Nations people varied from that of the United States, the border “has been and continues to be important, but not as important as we think,” with the fact that in either country, people indigenous to the land were forcefully

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15 More information on domain names can be found in Julian Stallabrass’s book Internet Art: The Online Class of Culture and Commerce (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 102-104.
removed and replaced.\textsuperscript{18} Fisher explains that although Native people from America would often escape to Canada, believing it to be more lenient, that the interests of Native peoples were nonetheless neglected or negated during colonial settlement and enterprise.\textsuperscript{19} The Mohawk, of which Skawennati descended, were part of the Six Nations that made up the Iroquois and had territory in northern New York. After the American Revolutionary War, many of the Iroquois fled to Canada, and some Mohawk settled in reservations near Montreal.\textsuperscript{20} Despite the present situation, Skawennati has said that, “If we are [always] so concerned about getting back what we had, how are we going to participate in this land now, and how are we going to imagine our futures?” showing that there are more concerns to people who were once colonized, and are still experiencing the affects, than obsessing about the past.\textsuperscript{21}

However, focusing on the future does not mean ignoring the past or that Native peoples’ cultures and lives are no longer affected by colonialism. For example, though \textit{The Palace} was useful in establishing the \textit{CyberPowWow} alternate space, the hierarchical term “palace” connotes the elite bastions of rulers and colonizers rather than of Native peoples whose lands were usurped.\textsuperscript{22} The terminology conveys systems of European hierarchy, and this is problematic because Europeans and Euro-Americans were the colonizers. Nonetheless, Skawennati continued to use \textit{The Palace} because it was one of the only programs of its kind in the 1990s, and because

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 37-38.
\textsuperscript{20} Oswalt, 394-395.
\textsuperscript{22} Skawennati, interview with the artist via Skype, 19 Oct. 2012.
the people who worked there were, as Skawennati put it, “nice”.23 So, she worked to make *CyberPowWow* a Native environment by inviting Native artists to post their art and writers their essays. Eventually she stopped using the software to explore other technological platforms and so it is no longer possible to completely view the works through *CyberPowWow*.24 All of the work made for *CyberPowWow* was continuously available on the Internet from the late 1990s through the early 2000s.

Contextual information was available on the site’s “About” and “Library” pages and any visitor with access to the Website could gather detail on individual pieces by engaging in virtual chats with other members. Because the artworks were made using digital media they be could freely downloaded, shared, and disseminated. There are Websites that show images of work they have in their collection, but Websites such as *CyberPowWow* showed the work in the same media through which it was made, the computer. Archer Pechawis explains this distinction in his essay, “Not So Much A Land Claim,” written for *CyberPowWow 2K (CPW2K)*:

> But what differentiates CyberPowWow from the other "Indian art" sites on the Net? Hundreds can be found by typing a few words into a search engine. Typically these sites feature painting or sculpture by First Nations visual artists, digitized and displayed at 72 pixels per inch. Very few are made specifically for the medium. None feature the interactivity and community of the CyberPowWow Palace. In CPW 2K we see digital technology used not only to create artwork, but artwork created specifically for dissemination via digital technology. In this regard CPW 2K is unique.25

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23 Ibid. *The Palace* software is a type of Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML) that is a format for representing 3-dimensional interactive vector graphics, described as the “3D counterpart of HTML,” by Christiane Paul on page 121 of *Digital Art*.

24 It is still possible to read the essays, but one would need to contact Skawennati or *CyberPowWow*’s chatroom art contributors to see their work in full.

*CyberPowWow* was not the only Website at this time to show Internet art on the Internet; another well-known site is Rhizome, founded in 1996 by artist Mark Tribe ([http://rhizome.org/](http://rhizome.org/)). Similarly to *CyberPowWow*, Rhizome is an anti-hierarchical space for artists to post their Internet art. Yet, Rhizome began as a business organization and switched to non-profit status—though there are increased benefits for paying members—in 1998 to maintain the site and all it entailed. These Websites and others, such as SITO ([http://www.sito.org/](http://www.sito.org/), 1993), and The Thing ([http://www.thing.net/](http://www.thing.net/), 1991), served the digital communities as targeted spaces for showing and discussing Internet artwork, specifically (without the confusion of sifting through misleading images of paintings or sculptures translated into the Internet medium using engines such as Netscape Navigator). However, it is important to acknowledge that in the late 1990s, the early to mid-1990s, use of the Internet was still relatively new to wide communities, and Websites like *CyberPowWow* operated under close-knit communities. Internet art was available, considered experimental and in many ways was not-yet integrated into traditional institutions such as galleries and museums.

To endorse *CyberPowWow*, Skawennati took measures to display her works at galleries, such as the Oboro in Montreal that provided computers to introduce the Website to the general public. The first such launch was titled *CyberPowWow* (April 1997), the second

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27 Rhizome, “About,” accessed 2 November 2013, [http://rhizome.org/about/](http://rhizome.org/about/). Paying members have access to full records of individual artworks, can curate online exhibitions, and have the ability to comment on works. There is also an option for organization subscription.
29 Greene., 32-33.
30 A list of galleries that participated in the 2004 gathering can be found at [http://www.cyberpowwow.net/cpw04_sites.htm](http://www.cyberpowwow.net/cpw04_sites.htm), accessed 15 Oct. 2012.
CyberPowWow2 (April 1999), then CPW2K (April 2001), and most recently CPW04 (May 2004). Associated with each event, new artwork was posted in the online gallery; on the Website the art is organized under the title of the event when it was shown. CyberPowWow was not the only Internet community to host such events at this time, and artist and theorist of digital art Natalie Bookchin created the Website, http://bookchin.net/history.html, that provides a list of Internet art, texts, and events from 1999 to 2001.\footnote{Natalie Bookchin, “a story of net art (open source),” last modified 5 May 2001, accessed 3 November 2013, http://bookchin.net/history.html. This Website is expansive and gives insight to the numerous artists and events active during these years.} This list is expansive, and many Internet communities hosted such events. One benefit of such sites was that visitors could interact with others they had met online in person while also perusing their work on the computers provided.

**Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace:**

To a degree, Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (http://www.abtec.org/) is comparable to CyberPowWow; likewise it serves as a gathering agent, yet, it is more textually-dense than its predecessor. CyberPowWow’s Website design was basic, with minimal font and coloration; AbTeC’s is more involved. The home page is filled with text, design, and an image, drawing attention to context rather than the white negative space (figure 3). Beneath its bold, angular title is a paragraph that immediately introduces the site’s objectives. To the right is an image is of “Team AbTeC,” including digital artist Jason E. Lewis, filmmaker Loretta Todd, and game writer Beth Aileen Lameman, as they may appear in Second Life, the three-dimensional virtual
Some of the members of “Team AbTeC” have used the page’s graphic design as their clothing pattern.

What is not seen in the main webpage is AbTeC’s logo, the small symbol next to the URL. This logo appears to be a blue sphere with extruding red and orange spokes, resembling the design on the left of the home page. As described by Skawennati, this image is an abstract rendering of the inside of a tepee, from the perspective of gazing at the sky through the smoke hole. The spokes are the tops of the poles that are the tepee’s base structure, and the blue is the sky. The imagery is not easily identifiable and people would know this is what it represented only if they had either seen the inside of a tepee or been informed. Unlike CyberPowWow’s easily identifiable three-tepee logo, AbTeC’s ambiguous emblem gives it an air of exclusivity that may not register in all audiences. Skawennati uses this logo to appeal to a more specific community of Native people. Unfortunately, because the logo is not strongly featured on the website, this connection may be lost. This does not hinder the nature of the Website, but gives reason to the otherwise random graphic design.

AbTeC is an online community, or group of people with collective interests, and Skawennati is its Network Coordinator and Community Liaison. The other Project Leads are Jason Lewis, who conducts research for new projects and Celia Pearce, a game designer. AbTeC’s crew also includes a Project Team, Research Assistants, and Project Affiliates. All of these people work together to add to AbTeC’s compilation of projects, documents, and blogs dating back to the Website’s launch in 2008. In the blog sub-page, users can contribute to the

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32 There are more members of Team AbTeC, and information about the team can be found on the subpage http://www.abtec.org/people.html.

33 AbTeC’s logo is also visible on Skawennati’s webpage, http://www.skawennati.com/.

34 Skawennati, interview with the artist via Skype, 19 Oct. 2012.
community by posting videos, articles, and advertising workshops in computer graphic design. People can browse past posts and comment, increasing dialogue. AbTeC has similar function and design structure as another website, Turbulence, (http://turbulence.org/, 1996-), that advertises Internet art, yet contrastingly Turbulence does not offer space for outside commentary that can be communally appreciated. Its users may not feel they need to digitally comment, but the contrast of AbTeC having the blog available shows the creators’ desire for communal discussion when making the site.

The importance of encouraging a sense of community through discussion is seen in both CyberPowWow and AbTeC. Both Websites allowed visitors to interact with one another, in chat or blog form. The desire to have a place for Native people to interact and establish community is tied to the lack of actual space to do so, to colonialism and displacement. If the Internet is to be seen as territory and understood through a real-estate model of space, then Skawennati lays claim to the virtual territory by modifying it for the benefit of her participants, her online colony. Yet, if the computer, as a technology is an extenuation of the central nervous system, as described by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore in War and Peace in the Global Village, then this colony exists most importantly within the mind. If these Websites were purchased or invaded the greatest damage would be psychological as opposed to physical and psychological.

Nonetheless, the production of AbTeC and CyberPowWow gave Skawennati and her co-curators the possibility of a new type of gallery that they could govern and use to display works

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36 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, War and Peace in the Global Village (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2001), 35. In this book, the authors discuss the role of technology over time, from Medieval armor to fashion to the computer, as weapons that assist in adaptation. The computer is described as the “most extraordinary of all the technological clothing ever devised by man, since it is an extension of our central nervous system,” 35.
that might otherwise be neglected by the art world, art by Native people. Native art is shown in few galleries and museums, and is usually organized by its maker’s ethnicity, so it is not exhibited for its own merits or characteristics. Although the number of galleries and the amount of Native art that is shown in them has increased, it is still excluded from most mainstream art galleries. In Lee-Ann Martin’s essay “Negotiating Space for Aboriginal Art,” she describes this problem and its cause. During European colonization of the U.S. and Canada, Europeans happened upon Native civilizations and their artifacts. These various objects were collected and brought home as exotic treasures. Since Europeans thought of Natives as being less civilized, they were called “Primitive.” Their art was relegated as “other,” meaning that it was other than the European mainstream, and was collected and fetishized. Skawennati similarly collected work and people through CyberPowWow and AbTeC, minus fetishization.

The desire to take virtual space is also seen in the work of other artists, such as Adriene Jenik and Lisa Brenneis’s, Desktop Theater (http://www.adrienejenik.net/desktoptheater.html, 1997-2002). In this series, Jenik and Brenneis used The Palace software as a performance space where they would interrupt chat rooms to enact scenes such as Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot,” by placing their avatar figures and texts “from a word processing program at well-placed intervals,” as described in Jenik’s Website. Jenik and Brenneis planned their performances, but they would also improvise in the chat spaces to cause people to react to the theatrics they would implement. These enactments challenged the chat space visitors by causing them to step out of

38 Martin, 239.
their situations and conversations within the spaces and consider Jenik and Brenneis’s involvements. *Desktop Theatre* contrasts to *CyberPowWow* and *AbTeC* in that the artists invaded already formed chat spaces whereas Skawennati constructed the space as a place for people to convene. Yet it is comparable to *CyberPowWow* and *AbTeC* because they caused people to come together within the chat space, Jenik and Brenneis’s through discussion of the theatrics and Skawennati’s through digital art and documents.

In both *CyberPowWow* and *AbTeC* Skawennati developed alternative places for Native people to show and discuss work by Native, and non-Native, people. These artworks show the effects of colonialism, of need for additional place because of territorial usurpation. These works are post-colonial in the more traditional sense of the term, in that they are after colonialism while also indicating it. In the next chapter I discuss Skawennati’s collection of short stories in *TimeTraveller*™, a series that follows Hunter, a twenty-fifth century Mohawk bounty hunter in his adventures through time. I will discuss Skawennati’s use of narrative to rework historical events and how the form of the digital series affects the viewer’s understanding of the content. In this work, Skawennati shows the viewer her interpretations of colonial events, and provides them a possible future for Native people in which they are no longer colonized, but are in the midst of cultural resurgence.
Chapter 2:
*TimeTraveller™ (2007-) and Narrative*

This chapter focuses on the roles of narrative of Skawennati’s series *TimeTraveller™* ([http://www.timetravellertm.com/episodes/](http://www.timetravellertm.com/episodes/)), and how this body of work uses short stories to recount historical events and imagine possible futures for Native people. In *TimeTraveller™*, Skawennati tells the story of a fictional character, known as Hunter, who is a Mohawk of the twenty-fifth century, who travels through time using a device that resembles sunglasses. To introduce viewers to his perspective of the virtual timeline, the game uses brief, five- to ten-minute-long, episodes, known as “machinima.” A portmanteau of “cinema” and “machine,” the term refers to computer graphic-generated scenarios, little films that punctuate the temporality of games, and that have been used in video games since the mid-1990s. Skawennati harnesses these filmic sequences to track the overall narrative that follows the character development and budding love affair between the main character and Karahkwenhawi, a young woman from the twenty-first century. Her use of narrative in the series weds the educational tone of *TimeTraveller™* to popular entertainment. In this chapter, I argue how Skawennati uses narrative to explore issues of colonialism and the project of rewriting, rethinking, and restaging history as a non-linear and non-naturalistic or necessary flow of time. Further, the device allows her to highlight colonialism’s impact on the make-up of minority and majority populations.40

The *TimeTraveller™* episodes are embedded in the *TimeTraveller™* Website that advertises with the tagline, “Immerse Yourself in History,” above an image of the digitally

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40 Hopkins, 54. Although Powwows were banned in the late 19th century, the ban was lifted through amendments to the federal Indian Act. The first gathering since the ban was held in Wikwemikong on Manitoba Island in 1960.
rendered sunglasses (figure 4).\textsuperscript{41} The Website was designed to imitate commercial advertisement for the device (figure 5), if only as a prop, using the Linden currency of the virtual reality avatar-game Second Life. Using Linden, virtual money that is exchanged for actual, physical money, players purchase props, skins, furniture, and other miscellaneous items for the user’s avatar, the virtual representation of the user.\textsuperscript{42} Eventually, as Skawennati projects, Second Life users will likewise be able to purchase \textit{TimeTraveller}\textsuperscript{TM} sunglasses, suits, and weapons in the SL world, although the glasses will function only as prop in that venue.\textsuperscript{43} The commercial design of the Website, of the possibility of purchasing time travel, is a critique of society’s consumerism, as explained by Skawennati.\textsuperscript{44} Skawennati advertises these glasses on the Website for purchase, and because the Website is accessed in actual space but the glasses are not, she mocks users’ temptations for purchasing material goods, even those that do not physically exist. However, since the glasses will be available for purchase in Second Life using Linden, the consumerist criticism will be lost to Skawennati’s marketing of the prop because people spend their physical money in exchange for virtual property. The sarcastic nature of the advertisement will read as apparently insincere to users of the game. Further, the exchange of real-life currency for Linden carries economic rules of exchange from the actual, physical world to the virtual, SL world, and Skawennati is a consumer of both.

As Skawennati suggests with \textit{TimeTraveller}\textsuperscript{TM}, the Second Life software allows its users to create virtual environments, including ones that may imitate historical and possible future

\textsuperscript{41} Skawennati, “Episodes,” \textit{TimeTraveller}\textsuperscript{TM}, accessed 17 March 2013, \url{http://www.timetravellertm.com/episodes/}.

\textsuperscript{42} In virtual reality, skins are alternate appearances a user can choose for his or her avatar. Choosing a different skin can be as simple as changing coloration or as complex as transforming from a human to a dinosaur.

\textsuperscript{43} Skawennati, interview with the artist by the author on January 5, 2013.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
settings. \textsuperscript{45} In each episode the viewer is temporarily transported to a specific time and place, beginning with Montreal, Canada in the year 2121, in the first episode (figure 6). Here, users first meet the character Hunter, a spiteful, badass bounty hunter with a tall, muscular build and a dread-lock Mohawk. \textsuperscript{46} He flies through the neon-illuminated, deserted streets of Montreal in a jet pack before arriving at a storage unit where he settles in to play a round of TimeTraveller\textsuperscript{TM}.

Hunter’s unit is minimally decorated yet prominently displays a Blade Runner (1982) poster that meshes well with Hunter’s renegade cyber personality. It also draws attention to the idea that the game’s rendering of the future indebted to post-apocalyptic genres where Blade Runner is a filmic icon. In the movie Blade Runner, a police special operative Rick Deckard is charged with the task of removing replicants, humanoid robots created by humans that were banned from Earth and were used instead for darker tasks in other, off-world colonies. This dystopian future connects to TimeTraveller\textsuperscript{TM} because the replicants, similarly to Native peoples in the past, were valued for their services while they were also feared. This poster even reappears in Karahkwenhawi’s room in Episode 5.

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\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. Skawennati mainly used the Second Life virtual game system and Final Cut Pro to film TimeTraveller\textsuperscript{TM}. With her team, including Jason Lewis, Nancy Elizabeth Townsend and other AbTeC members, she used the software to design the avatar-actors and the setting. Her team members worked to create custom items, such as the sunglasses, specifically for the series; other items, such as Hunter’s mohawk and basic building forms called “prims” were provided or could be purchased in Linden. Such graphics were used to create the characters, their props, and the setting. Once this is finished, she and her team enacted the script by moving the avatars and changing their facial expressions through Second Life controls. These controls, such as walking and smiling, are signaled using the computer’s keyboard or mouse. The visuals are then synced with prerecorded audio readings of the script. The audio and visuals are pieced together using Final Cut Pro.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. The dread-lock mohawk was already available for purchase in Second Life. Skawennati decided to use this version of the mohawk rather than a traditional style because she felt it was more multi-cultural.
Skawennati is not the only artist to use Second Life or similar programs to make artwork. An example of a contrasting work is *The Wanderer* (2012), by artist Nicholas O’Brien. *Wanderer* is an interactive video game piece O’Brien constructed in which the participant explores the space he created as a headless, bodiless coat, mimicking the sublime romantic artist-genius Caspar David Friedrich in his well-known painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), which is known for its central figure, possibly a self-portrait of the artist, whose contemplative approach to the landscape and future leads him to turn his back to viewers.47 In O’Brien’s *The Wanderer*, users wander a green and rolling landscape without a pragmatic mission. The virtual landscape includes gravestones, sign-posts, classical ruins that are signs of civilizations that once were, or what these ruined civilizations would resemble in virtual reality. Both this video work and *TimeTraveller™* show representations of the future, but O’Brien’s version is Romantic rather than deliberately politicized. Players of *The Wanderer* may infer narrativity as they make connections between ruins and gravestones. In *TimeTraveller™* time has a more and explicitly purposeful quality and is used to show the resurgence of Native cultures, e.g., in Episode 4.

In the *TimeTraveller™* narrative, the viewer initially follows Hunter in his excursions, beginning with two representations of the Sioux massacre in Minnesota in 1862 that tell the event from alternative perspectives, the latter being Hunter’s as he sees it through the device. In the first two episodes, the viewer begins to see Hunter’s character develop as he becomes less interested in killing and more interested in understanding the effects of violence. In Episode 3 Skawennati portrays one perspective of the Oka Crisis land dispute in 1990 between Mohawks

and the town of Oka, in Quebec. She does not delineate the details of the entire dispute, but rather how a group of Mohawks react to it. In this episode, Skawennati introduces Karahkwenhawi, Hunter’s future love interest whose perspective we follow for the next few episodes. In Episodes 4 and 5, the viewer sees the story through the eyes of Karahkwenhawi, now in her twenties, who accidentally comes upon the TimeTraveller™ sunglasses when Hunter experiences a glitch in the time travel continuum and drops them in front of her before phasing out to another time. The glasses take her to Hunter who awaits her in a huge stadium powwow in Winnipeg, Canada in 2112. Here, Hunter observes as Karahkwenhawi acts as a performer, and the powwow host gives an elaborate speech explaining the resurgence of Native cultures. Episode 4 is pivotal in the work because of this notable oratorical event, which outlines a possible future in which Native peoples have forged a coalition, become a prosperous majority and maintained their own cultural identity.

Here, too, the episode offers detail about the character Karahkwenhawi, a college student working on an essay about Kateri Tekahkwitha, a zealously Catholic Algonquin-Mohawk saint.\(^{48}\) This heroine is shown to be adventurous and determined. Despite her initial shock of seeing Hunter, the man from her past who took care of her after her mother was arrested directly after the Oka Crisis, magically appear and disappear in thin air, she quickly explores the time travel-inducing sunglasses, sans hesitation when a screen appears on the lenses that controls the date and place of destination. Karahkwenhawi’s lack of apprehension, comparable to a person well-versed in video gaming who discovers a new game, encourages her TimeTraveller™ skills. Karahkwenhawi is technologically literate and independently acting. Even before having used

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\(^{48}\) Kateri Tekahkwitha was canonized in October of 2012, after the episode’s creation. In this episode Skawennati expresses the conflicted feelings of Tekahkwitha as being a “traitor,” to the Mohawk people through Karahkwenhawi’s conversation with her mother.
the glasses in the course of the game time-line, she readily recognizes them as plot device in the
game, and this leads her to take them up and use them without hesitation. Skawennati’s portrayal
of the female lead, as a strong and independent woman, contrasts with the victimized portrayal of
Native women that is typical of Hollywood. In Maryann Oshana’s essay, “Native American
Women in Westerns: Reality and Myth,” she explains the various roles of Native women in their
societies, ranging from warriors to council members, and contrasts these examples with how they
are portrayed in popular culture as primitives who lack technical savoir-faire and play limited
gender-typed roles in their own cultures. This contrasts with how Skawennati portrayed
Karahkwenhawi and Hunter’s relationship. Although in Episode 3 Hunter is charged with the
responsibility of taking care of the child form of Karahkwenhawi, she is not merely portrayed as
an object of desire. When she is shown as a mature woman in the later episodes, she takes an
active role in finding and reuniting with Hunter. She also pursues her own goals, such as
completing her paper, which also shows her as being invested in her education. By presenting
both Hunter and Karahkwenhawi as strong individuals, she shows these future Mohawks as
active members of society.

The overlapping use of time, that these episodes position the viewer initially in the
twenty-second century and eventually intersect with what could be present day is dizzying in that
this series is recording history as it is recounting it. Skawennati’s interpretation of the past and
the future betray an idea of current values because of what Skawennati projects as being the
future. In *TimeTraveller™*, Skawennati’s future offers more optimistic views of the future than
movies such as *Blade Runner*. In contrast, *TimeTraveller™* does not situate machines or the
admixture of human and technology in subjective as threat. Instead the work embraces
technology as means of connecting people and forging political communities.
Still, the work’s very focus on time travel as core of *TimeTraveller™* insistently points to the narrative as being fictional, imaginative and unreal. However, as well-known historiographer Hayden White explicates in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, the notion of reality is itself mistaken with meaning, that whereas reality is found, meaning is constituted. By this stroke, he underscores that events are real, but when historically recounted they are revealed as constructed. Thus, narrativizing history, what is communicated about events through language, depends on formed meanings and not on events themselves. So whether a narrative is historical or imaginative, or both, neither one is more real than the other. The use of narrative merely confuses the “real” with the “true,” and the truthfulness of the events that are recreated in *TimeTraveller™* has the specific function of tying the fictional to the historically-relevant narrative. Although the characters and the device of time travel are equally imaginary, the interplay of these elements with historical events creates the possibility for users to see the history of colonialism as narrativized and constructed, not truthful, but contaminated.

White also describes narrative as something that constitutes spectacle. Likewise the *TimeTraveller™* series emphasizes the spectacular quality of relationships between characters and users as mediated by technology, images, and story-telling. Each of the episodes has a beginning, middle and end, much like traditional narratives. Yet, the work avails itself of the deconstructive means of unveiling their own irreality, which White explains as efforts “not only to narrate but to give events an aspect of narrativity,” even as events are knitted together in story-

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form. Thus it is important to note that even though Skawennati has reenvisioned these historical events, they too are a rendition of history and not history itself.⁵⁰

Once completed, TimeTraveller™ will comprise of ten episodes. More developed than Skawennati’s earlier series, Imagining Indians in the 25th Century (http://www.imaginingindians.net/, 2000-2001) that similarly explored past and future events with a virtual timeline.⁵¹ This earlier series focuses more on chronicling than on the elasticity of narrative. In Imagining Indians, Skawennati introduces Katsitsahawi Copozzo, a virtual paper doll woman from the year 2000. Users can click on the image on the splash page (figure 7) and are then brought to a page (figure 8) that gives background information on Katsitsahawi and explains that if the participant wishes to continue, s/he must explore the timeline by clicking on her journal, but needs to start with a link to “the year 2000,” on the timeline.⁵² From there, she can explore the past or future, read each figure’s journals about events, such as the story of Sacagawea and the Lewis and Clark expedition (1806) and of Pocahontas going to England (1615). As in TimeTraveller™, the timeline expansively imagines characters and events in the future. For example, users encounter Chacotay, a space explorer on the starship Voyager from 2374, and a woman visiting a powwow in 2273, whose costume closely resembles one of the jingle dancers’ in TimeTraveller™ Episode 4 (figures 9, 10).⁵³ Skawennati not only recycled

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵³ Chacotay’s character was derived from a character in Star Trek who had native characteristics from mixed native cultures (Maori tattoos and a Plains Cree sacred bundle) that Skawennati was nonetheless excited to see on television because he was a native person positioned in the future, in outer space, and this is rare for media. This is described in Skawennati’s essay, “Ohmygod! The Bad Guy is Native??,” Fuse Magazine 25 no. 4 (2002): 37-38.
events from *Imagining Indians* in *TimeTraveller™*, such as the powwow and the Occupation at Alcatraz in 1969, but also repurposed clothing and characters.

As with *CyberPowWow* to *AbTeC*, the development from *Imagining Indians* to *TimeTraveller™* shows how Skawennati had begun embracing increasingly complex means. In *Imagining Indians* Katsitsahawi is flat; she is visually two-dimensional and her personality is static. The participant reads her journal, but there is no beginning, middle, or end to the events. Although *TimeTraveller™* is not yet finished, the viewer’s anticipation of romance builds as they develop connections with the characters. Whereas clicking on links, such as “Look at me,” and “Read my journal,” in *Imagining Indians* engages users, in *TimeTraveller™* the narrative is more visually and narratively spectacular. In both works, Skawennati re-presents historical events from the perspective of Native characters whose unhappiness with historical events is countered with hopes for possible futures artist reworked historical, colonial events and envisioned a world of resurgence.

The works discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 share distinct involvement with historical colonization of Native people and how that colonization has created problems for these people in terms of place, in creating a virtual arena for them to communicate and by showing them as active members of history and the future. In the next chapter, I examine Skawennati’s series of videos posed on *Vimeo*, titled *80 minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music*, that showcases various people as they enact pop music from the 1980s. This series is unlike Skawennati’s other works such as *CyberPowWow* and *TimeTraveller™*, in how the focus is not on historical colonization of Native people. Instead, in *808080s*, she involves people who grew up during the rise of the music channel MTV to create her own shortened music videos. The format of Skawennati’s music videos is comparable to the music video commercials shown on MTV, an internationally
broadcast network that encourages its audience to partake in Western commercialism. For this reason, 808080s is representative of electronic colonialism.
Chapter 3:
80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music (2000- ), Nostalgia, and Electronic Colonialism

Skawennati’s collection of music videos, 80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music, is a developing series that focuses on aspects of popular culture, but that does not directly allude to the colonialization of land and Native peoples that surfaces in much of her art. These videos, begun circa twenty years after the decade’s music they enact, offer a skewed reconstruction of 1980s pop-rock music culture posted on Vimeo, a Website that makes her work widely accessible to Internet users. Of the work’s eighty-odd music videos, seventeen have been posted on the video-sharing Website Vimeo, which offers a user-based reorientation of video culture. On Vimeo, users are able to post, view, and comment on videos. Thus, the site functions as a seemingly democratic and participatory venue. Still, there is no guarantee that users are who they say they are or that they are not simply workers or programs used by corporations to further their own agendas. Although Skawennati addresses the popularity of 1980s music culture with this body of work, the individual videos are largely devoid of seductive and nostalgic dimensions. In fact, the videos seem mostly to render the period videos affectless and this factor draws attention to cultural era in which the medium of video had a specific role as the music video television channel MTV came to dominate image culture and the music industry. Skawennati’s work shows video’s peculiar role in the history of corporate broadcasting, as exemplified by MTV’s

54 The total number of projected videos for the collection is eighty. In an interview with the artist conducted on January 5, 2013, she described that she may leave 808080s unfinished because she decided to focus on other works.
emergence and swift rise to cultural hegemony via the medium of video shown on television. In this chapter, I am attentive to how the series 808080s draws attention to video’s role in how corporations, such as MTV, colonized everyday life through music television.

Notes on the Videos

Skawennati’s Vimeo page features an image of an audiocassette, which seems to be a kind of visual gimmick that refers to 1980s media and tape culture. A banner reads, “80 MINUTES, 80 MOVIES, 80S MUSIC: SKAWENNATI.” (figure 11). The featured music videos sample popular songs of the 1980s, such as “Come on Eileen,” (Dexy’s Midnight Runners, 1983) and “West End Girls,” (Pet Shop Boys, 1986), yet the actors perform without the appurtenance of the iconic fashion of the decade. The resulting fashion-to-music discord in Skawennati’s works tells viewers that the videos are not truthfully archival. They do constitute an archive, but not one that purports to be historically accurate. In fact, the videos emphasize an amateur aesthetic that is unlike the high-gloss, heavily-stylized videos of David Bowie or The Buggles. They have been recorded in typically-neutral settings, some more private than others, but none seems professionally-designed or staged. Moreover, although the videos are visibly choreographed, the lighting is unfiltered and the camera work is rough. These formal qualities and the disjunctive cinematic flow that results, reminds viewers that there is no seamless blending of these videos with works of the past. If anything, Skawennati’s videos use the alienation effect to underscore the absence of the 1980s, akin to what Hayden White says

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56 In “Global Issues, Music, and MTV,” Thomas McPhail explains that MTV has channels worldwide, and that although other countries show music videos indigenous to them, the top music videos are American. Thomas McPhail, “Global Issues, Music, and MTV,” in Global Communication: Theories, Stakeholders, and Trends, 3rd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 236.
happens when things are left out of story-telling: he explains that sometimes what is not said in a narrative is more important than what is said because, when compared in the negative, the narrative can show a connection to what the documenter finds to be significant.\textsuperscript{57} In 808080s, Skawennati emphasizes the fact that her videos are \textit{not} acting or functioning as music-videos of the 1980s did. Their emphatic alternative styling and choice of distribution venue both contribute to this endeavor.

\textbf{Anti-Nostalgia and Representation of History in 808080s}

In this series, Skawennati portrays reworking of historical videos that had a crucial role in an historical decade that continues to resonate today as venues in nearly every city in the US continue to host eighties dance nights that are dedicated to the original videos. If only for this reason, the work begs the question of whether the artist is engaging in similarly nostalgic activity with the series. To boot, the project was partly created so that people could reenact fantasies of being 1980s rockstars. Overall, however, the series shuns the nostalgic uptake of well-known tropes in period videos.

Nonetheless, the view that 808080s does in fact involve a longing for the 1980s, was touted by Curators of \textit{I Am A Music Video}, a recent group exhibition that was held at the Dalhousie Art Gallery in 2006. In literature that accompanied the show, they described 808080s as a “project that allows Generation X-ers to finally have that moment in the spotlight [they] have yearned for from the moment [they] were introduced to music videos,”\textsuperscript{58} and they compared other artists’ videos to a juke-box, further distancing the medium of video from being

\textsuperscript{57} White, 14-15.
politicized for its specific role in the 1980s. But these videos are not what Fredric Jameson describes as “Nostalgia films,” in his now-famous book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). To him, nostalgia films represent “the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image,” meaning that they take up and use tropes from past works, such as period styles or associated values to exploit connection to a time period rather than to the past itself. In contrast, Skawennati’s videos purposely and apparently fail to offer convincing reconstructions.

Further, as Jameson explains, the notion of nostalgia is highly dependent on the idea that people grasp their current time and culture in relationship to the past. Jameson writes that, “the sense people have of themselves and their own moment of history may ultimately have nothing to do with its reality,” and that even as people play into Skawennati’s nostalgia of 80s music, they may have a “false consciousness” of their present time. These people know their own lives, but not necessarily how they configure within the larger picture, of how their existence impacts others and how their actions affect the future. People are unable to mentally or physically step outside of their own experiences and times to assess them during the present, so reflecting on the similarly relative past is complicated because there is not enough distance from it to have greater clarity. The nostalgia 8080s possibly invokes is then dependent on how the individual viewer regards the past, or the pastness of the past, meaning reconstructions of it

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61 Ibid., 18
62 Ibid., 280-281.
through media rather than the past itself. The *808080s* music videos were created partly as a way for people to enact youthful fantasies of being 1980s rockstars, as expressed by the artist:

> I always thought of it as a project to let one's inner rock star out. It is certainly about desire—wanting to be a rock star, or to look like one, or to be famous, or to know how to play an instrument, or to have the confidence to perform, as well as other stuff; it's about growing up—overcoming that desire, or the desires changing.  

The work does not function nostalgically, then, but as a springboard for viewers and performers to explore fantasies and desires through performance and video. The practice of computer users posting their own renditions of music videos on Internet sharing sites is very common today, but Skawennati’s *808080s* collection links this activity to the playful resistance that such performances may include.

**The *808080s* Collection and Neo-Colonialism**

As I noted at the start of this chapter, the *808080s* explores colonialism in terms of mass-cultural means of domination. On this matter, she has written about colonialism and cultural assimilation, of larger cultures absorbing smaller cultures. In her essay, “Five Suggestions for Better Living,” Skawennati explains that, “Technologies and customs brought to us by Europeans—such as writing, law and a thing called art—did not serve to assimilate us. Instead, we absorbed them and have learned to use them to our advantage,” that Native peoples have used these customs to preserve their cultures.  

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63 Skawennati, e-mail interview, August 25, 2013.
likewise emphasizes how mass cultural techniques can be used for non-commercial, playful, and personal aims by individuals.

The short music video format mimics the music video commercials shown on MTV, the world’s largest television network, which began in the 1980s. The music videos shown on MTV were commercials to promote music artists’ new albums, and simultaneously advertised clothing products, cars, and real-estate. The artists featured were mostly American, yet by the year 2010, over eighty percent of MTV’s total audience, mostly teens and young adults, was outside the United States. Even though the MTV channels in these other countries feature music by local artists, Americans dominate the Top Ten charts of favored music. MTV is an example of electronic colonialism because it is through this international network that teens and young adults take part in Western commercialism. Through the music videos and commercials featured on MTV, they buy into mostly American music and products. This commerce paid the musicians, but also MTV and its parent Viacom, because musicians had to pay to have their work shown on the influential music network.

mocks such commercialism, using and reworking Western pop music from the 1980s, and uses the free mode of distribution, Vimeo. Of course, Vimeo is not devoid of commercialism and offers paid packages users can purchase in order to avoid advertisements and pop-ups. Skawennati’s use of Vimeo adapts music video distribution her own. This also connects to the apparently democratic nature of distribution channels such as Vimeo, because users choose what they post. However, they are limited by digital space to download their videos, and must buy better packages to show more videos. With MTV today, shows that get

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65 McPhail, 235.
66 Ibid., 236.
better ratings are continuously shown past the first television season because more viewers are watching, and more viewers watching means more profit for MTV, because the audience will buy what is advertised during commercials.\footnote{McPhail, 238.} If viewers enjoy a particular show more than others, they are more likely to see the commercials as well. However, the audience does not choose what shows or music videos MTV will pilot, and so it is a system of network hierarchical propaganda.

808080s contrasts with Skawennati’s works CyberPowWow, AbTeC, Imagining Indians, and TimeTraveller™ in how she did not choose focus on primarily Native history in this video project. Instead, the focus of her work is on people who grew up with MTV, people who were once part of MTV’s targeted audience of teens and young adults but who have matured past it, and yet are connected to music commercialism because they still want to emulate the pop stars that MTV has advertised.

As with Skawennati’s other collections, CyberPowWow, AbTeC, and TimeTraveller™, she reworks part of history in 808080s. Finally, however, the thematic content of 808080s is linked to themes in CyberPowWow and TimeTraveller™ because of its focus on Western domination of network broadcasting. In conjunction with CyberPowWow and TimeTraveller™, this series functions to reveal a broader understanding of post-colonial culture because it incorporates neo, electronic colonialism.
Conclusion

Skawennati’s works, CyberPowWow, AbTeC, TimeTraveller™, Imagining Indians in the 25th Century, and 80 Minutes 80 Movies 80s Music, are projects that engage with many aspects of colonialism. Works such as CyberPowWow and TimeTraveller™, are imaginative renderings of the colonization of Native peoples that emphasize the potential for shifting from historical narratives about colonized peoples. Her projects show different facets of colonialism, whether involving Native peoples or mass culture.

CyberPowWow and AbTeC, both Websites tailored to encourage human connections, are collections of conversational devices, electronic posts of and about artworks and peoples reactions to them. These Websites were designed with Native people in mind, as means for giving these people places to communicate across geographical boundaries as well as for them to post and share their artwork. At the time CyberPowWow was imagined, Skawennati, among numerous other producers, considered their art works to be underrepresented in the Euro-museum sphere. Through CyberPowWow and AbTeC, Skawennati gave people a place where they could create and discuss such art and other contemporary issues. The establishment of place is integral to these Websites because Native peoples in the United States and Canada were deceitfully robbed of actual territory in the 1800s. Skawennati and her coworkers worked to amend these physical and society-constructed limitations through CyberPowWow and AbTeC. For this reason, these works show the human need for places that encourage artistic and vocal validation. Skawennati reinvents history to show how minority and majority cultures are not fixed and mediums and technologies may be crucial in rearticulations of marginalization and how it functions.
List of Illustrations


2. Screen capture of a chat space designed by Jason E. Lewis used in CyberPowWow, c. 2011, image courtesy of Skawennati, October 2012.


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42

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Fragnito, Skawennati T. Interview by the author. 4-5 January 2013.

Fragnito, Skawennati T. Interview by the author via e-mail. 25 August 2013.

Figure 1
Skawennati
Screen capture of *CyberPowWow*'s home page
c. 2006, taken 10 October 2012
http://www.cyberpowwow.net/
Figure 2
Screen capture of a chat space designed by Jason E. Lewis used in CyberPowWow
c. 2011
Courtesy of Skawennati, October 2012.
Figure 3
Skawennati
Screen capture of AbTeC’s home page
2008, taken 12 October 2012
http://www.abtec.org/.
Figure 4
Skawennati
Screen capture of *TimeTraveller™*’s home page
c. 2007-2012, taken 18 February 2013
Figure 5
Skawennati
Clipped screen capture of *TimeTraveller™*’s “Store” page
C. 2007-2012, taken 18 February 2013
http://www.timetravellertm.com/store.html
Figure 6
Skawennati
Screen capture of still from Episode 1 of *TimeTraveller™*
  c. 2007, taken 18 February 2013
  http://www.timetravellertm.com/episodes/episode01.html
Figure 7
Skawennati
Screen capture of *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century’s* splash page
http://www.imaginingindians.net/
Figure 8
Skawennati
Screen capture of *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*’s home page
http://www.imaginingindians.net/home2.htm
Figure 9
Skawennati
Clipped screen capture of “2273 Pow wow,” *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*
http://www.imaginingindians.net/2273-mirror.htm
Figure 10
Skawennati
Screen capture of still from Episode 4 of *TimeTraveller™*
c. 2011, taken 17 January 2013
Figure 11
Skawennati
Screen capture of *80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music* home page
c. 2000, taken 18 February 2013
*Vimeo* LLC, 2013