Speculative Design/Indigenous Futurisms

- Anna Shah Hoque, Carleton University

Conference Sponsor(s):

Faculty of Public Affairs

Partners:

Presenting sponsor:

Manulife
SLIDE - Let me tell you a story about living in a world run through AlternaVerse

You head out for the day, you stop and wait for the crosswalk to change, and in that instance, next to you appears a hologram of an Elder telling you a story of the street names that bear colonial markers forming the intersection of where you stand...you listen, and then you continue down the street, at the next intersection, you encounter another Elder...as you are about to enter your office building, you once again hear a voice and see the apparition of an Elder telling you about the building you are about to enter, the history of the peoples of the land that you stand on.

In this sense and the world you live in is shaped through your daily interactions with space, memory, and technology...each individual in this society has undergone optometric and auditory augmentation so that their vision and hearing is aided through a digital feed to see and hear personalized content working in tandem with RFID (radio-frequency identification chips) embedded in your phone, laptop, clothing, really any material object on you which has RFID enabled chips, grounding you to place and space.

In a 3-day or 72 hours period, the RFID is enabled once per interactions with the specific geo-enabled reader, which means that while you may vary your route...every 3 days you will hear the same Elders speak to you. You will hear stories, over and over again, you will face information overload and in the reflections around you, you will not see or hear stories that reflect you.

For every space you enter, you hear stories...in fact you are bombarded with alternate realities and narratives throughout your day...while the RFID chip is triggered once per new location, you do not have to stop to listen every time

BUT there are consequences, in the event you do not stop to hear the stories, you get demerit points. In this society, 10 demerits warrant a fine. More than 15 demerit points requires you to appear before the courts to explain why that pattern of behaviour has emerged...court appearances can result in a variation of penalties ranging from community service to time spent in prison.

PAUSE!

Sound extreme?

Well, I want you to pause for a second and think what it is like growing up and living in a settler society where the on-going violence of settler colonialism creates a pall of your every interaction.

SLIDE - Where systemic biases are a daily reality and there are no opt outs or demerit points instead you are faced with micro and macro violence in your everyday. Violent systemic biases and practices threaten you and yours. You cannot opt out of this reality.
You do not get only demerit points. You do not have your stories heard first...in fact, your stories are not reflected for you or non-Indigenous others to learn from unless you seek it out with great deliberation. What happens when the educational institutions you attend does not for the majority; address your needs, your stories, your community??

For individuals if the stories around you don’t show you a version of reality that you can identify with...what does that do to your sense of “self”?? Some very real outcomes emerge in the Canadian landscape...including impacts to quality of life, health conditions, literacy, and community growth for Indigenous populations.

SLIDE - And conversely what happens when it does reflect back so that it is recognizable? When the world around you prioritizes your stories, your experiences, your peoples, histories, and memories?

This spectacular example signals to a way for Indigenous stories and realities to juxtapose and override existing settler narratives. Providing a way to destabilize the linearity of time and space as constructed in settler narratives. A radically decolonized space that requires settler citizens to do something other than pay lip service to acknowledging specific past events but precludes interrogating on-going complicity in upholding settler structures.

This spectacular example allows you to imagine the disruption to spatial and temporal spaces and fosters conversations about Indigeneity that happen outside of settler boundaries of being ‘Aboriginal’ – they bring Indigenous stories to the mélange of the now...a complex and multi-layered “dystopic-now” because let’s be real...in the eyes, experiences, and realities of contemporary Indigenous communities and individuals, the dystopic future is not something set in the distant future but rather lived realities in the daily interactions with settler colonial spaces and regulations.

My goal through this spectacular example is to signal to the complexities of what it means for generations of Indigenous individuals who have been raised and continue to face on-going colonial violence...for them to enter every space...many of these daily movements shadowed by settler colonialism...there is no escape...BUT it also recruits settler colonists to be held accountable to the on-going practices that continue to covertly reproduce hierarchies of citizenry in which Canadian citizenship eclipses everything. In the minds of the everyday settler citizen, “out of sight, means out of mind” provides the perfect condition in which to encourage complacency and ignorance about the complex series of relationships between settler governance and Indigenous sovereignties.

While my colleagues alluded to spectacular design as being grounded in fantastical notions of future forecasting where technologies are set aside, I instead argue for an alternate reading of the concept of speculative design,
I would argue that technology is not left out of the equation...socio-technical elements are central in order to destabilize the colonial narrative of Indigeneity as being situated firmly in the distant past.

I use the term Indigenous futurism to facilitate a conversation and practice that shatters the colonial assumptions of Indigenous cultures and bodies as ‘on the brink of extinction’ – and by placing firmly Indigenous bodies in contemporary landscapes.

Through the lens of indigenous futurism, the use of stories and imagery creates an imagined space where the past, present, and future co-exist to facilitate on-going conversations about Indigeneity outside of the purview of the settler state. Indigenous futurisms does not pursue a purely utopic or dystopic conceptualization of time and space

**SLIDE** - but rather as Lempert (2015) posits that Indigenous futurism challenges the “[assumption that Native peoples are not just relics of the past, but have as many complex cultural and political futures as Western societies, [helping to] reimagine the assumptions that inform the social and policy treatment of contemporary Indigenous peoples” (p. 14).

**SLIDE** - Wikler (2016) points out that “the dynamism of Indigenous futurism [IF] highlight the role of IF not only in reimagining a future with Indigenous peoples, but also its ability to recreate lived, past events or reality. The understanding of the past being perceived as realistic by western definition just because it happened, is a constricting way of thought. IF allows for Indigenous peoples to reclaim these events through a technological space and offer a contrasting narrative to the colonial perspective of the past, present and future.”

**SLIDE** - A recent example would be Adrian Duke’s, Wikiupedia (play on the word “wickiup” a small round tent). Duke, a member of **Maskawapitank Nation**, has developed a crowdsourcing app that locates stories to tangible spaces in Vancouver, creating alternate realities that disrupt the colonial structure in real-time and fosters Indigenous youth to connect to Elders and other communities through shared storytelling practices. “The app allows users to find information, audio clips, videos and pictures about a certain location by selecting it from a map, similar to a Google map. [It’s] still in the testing or "beta" phase, during which Duke hopes to collect 600 stories” ([http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/adrian-duke-wikiupedia-phone-app-1.3988502](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/adrian-duke-wikiupedia-phone-app-1.3988502))

**SLIDE** - In the case of Ryan McMahon (an Anishinaabe/Metis comedian, writer & media maker’s) series ‘Stories from the Land’ – this becomes evident with the project’s central focus being “a podcast series broadcasting a collection of indigenous community sourced stories that connect Indigenous peoples to place with the aim of reinforcing worldview, philosophies, and teachings through digital [platforms]” (from website). It is about ASSERTING, REINFORCING & ARTICULATING INDIGENOUSPEOPLES' CONNECTION
TO LAND THROUGH STORY. Through the series, McMahon visits with communities and runs workshops, being an intermediary through his technological knowledge to create and nourish existing relationships between Elders and youth sharing in community-specific stories while also opening up the circle for others to learn. Through shared storytelling sessions, what emerges are a digital mapping of stories, grounding place, space, and memory, tying the intangible to tangible locations. This digital manifestation ties the ephemerality of stories to visual representations of specific geographical sites...establishing a continuous loop of connectivity of community and storytelling.

PAUSE

By engaging in re-imaginings of the past, present, and future using the overarching framework of speculative visualities facilitates the situating of Indigenous identities in the now, communities and individuals having the ability to negotiate their own identities autonomously in spaces that are not governed solely by settler logic, leading to blurring of the binary that forms the backbone of settler narratives, making time and space more malleable and fluid and irrefutably situating Indigenous bodies thriving in tandem with settler realities. It provides a more complex depiction of Indigenous realities that challenges the dominant categorization of Indigenous peoples as some homogenous glob of peoples within settler structures.

Thank you.

Panel Concluding Remarks
"As we wrap up our panel, we would like to leave you with a few last thoughts.

Grounded in the Canadian context, the conversations that have emerged out of this space through the window of speculative design has become a means by which to flesh out very real issues that infiltrate our everyday interactions with our own subjectivities and larger society.

In our panel, we have utilized this framework to re-cast the implications of our existing realities and the potential of continuing down pathways that ground in the real dangers of reproducing problemetic practices that shape our material conditions.

In fact, we have attempted to signal the very real outcomes in which the solutions that we think will solve our material and social conditions being centred around future-casting, ends up being sites of further division and hierarchy.

While some of us have grounded in the logic that we need to set aside the technological elements in order to imagine alternate realities, others have situated technology as being central and necessary to facilitate change.
Ultimately, our spectacular examples should act as a catalyst encouraging you to pause...to contemplate your individual biases and systemic short-sightedness in the ways that you discuss or understand or affect social issues.

By pushing the boundaries of imagination, we can speak to what’s broken, what’s not working, and maybe admit that something is impossibly difficult to address, and acknowledge that it is still dysfunctional...but in these conversational spaces, while it may feel like failure, it still produces something powerful and meaningful.

Thank you.