IIF Symposium Toronto - Jolene Rickard

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[pause]

00:18 Speaker 1: Okay, Nia:wen Jason and Skawennati for inviting me here, and I'd just like to say, "Hello," again, and give my thanks and recognition to the Mississauga, and the Whitehead, and the Mohawk, and Haudenosaunee. [laughter] I just want to note that Skawennati invited me to participate in CyberPowwow years ago. We were just talking about that first experience, and how, when it went live, I couldn't get on because, in my home territory, that we didn't have enough internet bandwidth to... Which I think happened to most of us at that first test. So, I don't really think, in our communities, we're that far from that point yet, unfortunately, so we all have limitations there.

01:06 S1: My talk this afternoon might be a little different than the track that most of you are on, and I hope that you'll bear with me. I'm interested in archetypal or intrinsic structures. And the moment that I think I intersect with this conversation is the way in which theory is expressed as a Western construct, and I wanna think through, as an indigenous person, the translation of indigenous visionary, indigenous culture as visionary, as theory.

01:38 S1: I think that we haven't really had that discussion in a way that we can push back at this notion that, the West is the... In the 20th century, is the only site in which this kind of abstract thought is part of the way in which creativity or change is noted. Because, within our cultures, there has always been this process of vision, and it's expressed in a number of different ways, and I use, for example, the specific cultural example of the Haudenosaunee, the painting by early 20th century Seneca painter, Ernest Smith. Just to draw your attention to the idea that, for the Haudenosaunee, the world began as a provocation in a dream, in the sky world. And so there's this really kind of interesting dissection of space that takes place, that's witnessed, in a very narrative form in this painting. And so, the kinds of things that I like to pay attention to is that archetypal structure, in that, in the oral tradition, the time of the dream is something that isn't constructed in the linear visual, and so, we have the upper world, the middle world, and then this world or turtle island.

03:08 S1: And so it's a narrative. We see a very similar sort of illustration of this concept in the work of Shelley Niro. At the same time, here are people whose entire philosophy is challenged and shifted with the coming of this idea of a peacemaker. And a peacemaker actually changed the mind, or the way of thinking about violence and destruction, and part of the message of the peacemaker was actually part of a vision. A vision took place. And so where do we put that discussion? Where do we put the messengers that have come to all of our people, and in some way shifted or changed the course of direction that we're on? And so the question I have for all of us is really, "Where are our cultures and our teachings located in this discussion?" And I'm gonna take you through a little... A little maybe exercise that you might add detail to, or that you may say has a slightly different trajectory. Some of us think of modernity, or at least in indigenous studies, I'm gonna argue that we think of modernity as that moment when geographically, the world understood itself as a complete space. Some people think of this as that moment when Columbus, so-called encountered, the Americas.

04:46 S1: Since that period of time, the discourse isn't just the singular, Western modernity, but it's a modernity that is a multiple modernity. So the question I have for you is, "Is this the moment of our multiple modernities as indigenous cultures?" And so, there are different sort of theoretical lines that we have to consider, when we're thinking about these two different systems, I think, I would argue of thought and knowledge. And so, if you'll allow me this sort of didactic or reductive language of the West... And it's interesting, because there certainly is a lot of push back right now to use that language of the West, as a sort of oppositional category to indigenous space. And I'm working on, actually, a push back answer to that right now, because I still think it's valid.

05:46 S1: One of the things that we look at in the structure of indigenous cultures, you think about language, is actually a way in which a number of scholars are analyzing the archetypal structure of our thought. And so, if we think about this in relationship to the West and it's notion of itself in theory and modernity... Set the language piece of it aside just for a moment but it needs to be in play.

06:20 S1: In the West a revolutionary change took place in the Renaissance with the... Is it a discovery? Or the implementation of the practice of marking space with perspective. And so, I am sure that you're familiar that marking space with perspective... That the motivation there of course was map making. And so, with the abstract, the ability to abstract land, or the interface with land, we can see easily at this moment in the Renaissance, 1400's, 1500's, where we see the impact of that both, philosophical, ideological and methodological change in mapping space. We can really recognize the impact it had in our communities.

07:15 S1: Then there's another critical point, that in the 1800s one of the things that we've been deeply impacted by, is the shift in the West to what I would argue, a lens-based society or ocular-centrism. And so we see the rise of the camera, 1830s from on forward and it requires... All of these points require a difference in the way our brain understands space. And so, the camera or lens-based practices then translates space again. And we don't have to rehearse the impact of the camera on our communities and what that meant. And so, these are all part of the tools of colonization that we're all working towards actually decolonizing at this particular moment in time. And so, I'm just showing you some of my interpretations of the creation story and these ideas. And so, the idea of the camera then... In the 20th century we see an interesting kind of movement because the camera in a sense, for people that had access to the camera, for people that are engaging with the camera, I think it caused another kind of reaction.

08:41 S1: And the other side of it from a painterly, material-based perspective, we see then this amazing development of abstract art. But of course we are very careful to note this is within a sort of Northern European, Western category. Because some of you, of course, are thinking right now, "But in my culture we've always made abstract art, our ideas have always been invested in abstraction." So there's a whole other thesis or PhD that needs to be written about indigenous abstraction and it needs to be set in place in dialogue with this notion that abstraction is only a Western expression.

09:20 S1: And so, if we look at the early 20th century, we can see that in the 20th century... If we look at perhaps the artwork of Mondriaan, and we think about where Mondriaan came from, he came from the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus, I think a number of people have argued, is the point zero for

this notion of the archetypal imaginary for the binary... The visualization of the binary code system or the sub-structure of the computer. So there's a direct relationship between the Bauhaus, it's understanding of the grid, and then we see then the development of the logic of this binary system or the infrastructure of the computer that then comes forward.

10:14 S1: Again, all of these structures are part of both a material, methodological, theoretical space that has been part of the colonizing trajectory that our peoples have been working very hard to both resist, survive and overcome. These tools are not simply tools, of course they have a great impact on the ways of... Many of you are expressing them the way that we understand how we experience the world. And so, if we think about this binary structure of the computer's early 20th century notion, we also have to think about this term, "imaginary" as an early 20th century idea. We use this term today, in a way that is perhaps imprecise, the way in which Benedict Anderson actually brought the term forward. He brings the term forward at a moment in time when it's really directed towards nation, and it's not simply just nation but it's very closely related to nation and nationalism. And so, there really isn't anything that I can recuperate about nationalism that today we could construct as useful. Because mostly nationalism is a tool of an oppressor.

11:52 S1: But what's important to recuperate, I think, from this term "Imaginary", is that in indigenous communities, I think we might mark the 20th century as this moment where we invest heavily in this notion of sovereignty, we invest heavily in this notion of nationhood. And right now, in the 21st century, we're thinking too, "Well, what does that mean? What does that overt structure mean? Is nationhood ultimately going to be useful for us in 50 years in the future?". This notion of nation, I think, is something that needs to be set in dialogue with all of the things you're talking about in terms of how it is we're re-imagining ourselves as, or continue to imagine ourselves, as indigenous peoples. If we're not familiar, and I'm not... I'm singing to the chorus here, I'm sure. But if we're not familiar with the structures, we just are complicit with that. I think that the arts are anticipatory, and so this, just like the way people in our communities... And you might have this ability that's very alive in yourself or this might be an ability that's alive in your family, or it might be something that is just an artifact of the history of your family.

13:26 S1: I think that we all have different experiences with this notion of people who have the ability to prophesize or people who in some way... In the language of the communities of the Six Nations, sometimes they're referred to as seers, not so often as fortunetellers, but they're people who have the ability and the will to suspend a fixity in time and to actually move in time, in what people who study languages have identified our languages as being poly-synthetic languages. I don't have to, of course, tell my colleague Ellen Gabriel about this, because she has often helped me to understand this even more deeply, that our languages are languages that are action-oriented, and they're action-oriented if we think about an English grammar in the sense of a verb, versus the sense of the English language noun-based languages. So the English language is a noun-based language. It's not as much a causative or action-based languages. So this consideration of time, and I'm sure that everybody here is familiar with Fabian and his critique on time, and I'm sure that you've already explored the notion of how his work coincides with this idea of time as being marked by an hourly wage through the Cartesian model.

15:03 S1: But what is our take on that? What is the way in which we wanna understand time yet we're all working in time-based media. And so where is that analysis? Where is our theoretical

platform, our platform of how we're negotiating that space? I think that's another dissertation, and I think some of the people in the room here are already working this through, are writing about it, but we're not naming it in this way, because we're really afraid of suggesting that perhaps our umbrella or worldview of culture is actually... It's not possible to be accommodated by the West. The West fits into a category of us. And when we more confidently state this, I think that we'll begin to really embrace the future. And so let me just take a little... You through this little exercise of a piece that I created in 1978. My own background is actually photography, and this period of time, for those... Maybe some of you don't even remember chemical photography, which is okay. [laughter] It's really a bad thing. And so, this piece is actually a four-mask layered negative photograph, where you have to actually create masks and then expose it and then create another mask and expose it.

16:34 S1: Of course, in Photoshop this takes two minutes. In the dark room, this takes an enormous amount of skill and registration and patience and maybe 30 sheets of paper to actually do it. But what this piece is about is my great-grandmother Flossy. And I wanted to create or change the static notion of the photograph in time in this piece. And it's interesting because in the 1970s, of course, straight photography was the standard and this idea of conceptual photography was just beginning to kind of come into the arts world. So this idea that photography is not a direct relationship of reality, but in fact is a conceptualization just like any other art form, was a kinda big shift in the way that we understand this space. So we're at this precipice again with VR. We're at this precipice again in which the way in which we are talking about gaming. All of these spaces bring us directly again to these points where the art, the structure of our minds, the way that we see, the way that we understand reality, all need to be reconfigured, re-calibrated, in order to practice this and then to locate it within an indigenous space.

18:09 S1: I think that we need to in some ways constantly be vigilant about how it is we understand the past and what we're bringing forward. Because if we resist the way in which the West structures the past, I think we'll find our future. So let me give you this one example, which has actually took place here at the AGO. I like the AGO, I don't have a problem with it, but they did a landscape show and only included one tiny little voice on indigenous landscape and the rest of the showed landscape in the Americas had nothing to do with us, even though it's all about our land. And so, I'm in a little tiny intervention and was only given the opportunity to write a caption, right? And so, what I decided to do with the caption, is I decided to use an iconic photograph of Haudenosaunee woman... I'm forgetting her name now. I'm sorry. But what I'm suggesting in this is that the... In this photograph, I'm suggesting that we can understand landscape and that we have marked the land in very different ways than the traditional conventions of landscape, which is primarily coming out of a European, specifically British canon, is what we inherit.

20:01 S1: And so, I focused on this. Here's a contemporary version of it, which is also a visualization of something... The Tree of Life that occurred in the sky world that was the transitional element from the upper world to this world. And so, within this image and then typically rimming the bottom of the skirts are elements water, wind, air... All of these elements typically rim the bottom of these skirts. This is the way in which people in the Haudenosaunee, in particular Caroline Parker who was a Seneca, late 1800s... The photograph is actually, 1870s, but it's one of the few photographs focused on a Haudenosaunee woman at that period of time. And so, it has become this kind of, I would say... This photograph that has facilitated the kind of re-traditional organization in our communities, because the way in which she was dressing at that

period of time, which is an aside, would not have been characteristic with the way that most people in that communities were dressing at that period of time, even as it relates to traditional clothing.

21:29 S1: And so, this idea that we mark our place in a very different way from the... Some of the colonial notion of land, was one modest little intervention in this much bigger show that has since moved to Arkansas. And when I communicated with the curator at Arkansas, there wasn't any native people being engaged to talk about this or talk about the land. And so this anxiety over the land is very present. It's what I would argue. I had the opportunity to co-curate an exhibit on the occasion of Oka's 25th year of post-res... From the Oka resistance 25 years ago. The Red Post, this is a piece that Ellen put on the show, which is the central figure in the show, and I just wanted to confirm in the sense, how prolific the ongoing representation of the symbol of the Celestial Tree or the symbol of this Orb of Life. It's a life-giving orb that redefines or creates our relationship to either the beginning of life for us, or an ongoing gift of this world.

22:55 S1: And you can speak without... About the more complex statement of The Red Post, but I'm mostly concerned with the circular orb design element, that she included this. And it's interesting, because we could talk about balance in this piece. We could talk about color, I mean there... We're all I think working towards developing a more familiar language of, "What are our aesthetics? What does it mean when we're using red? Is there a canonical way to understand color? Is there... " So in all of these things are something that we really need to... And I think everybody here is making great progress in making these movements.

23:39 S1: I want to just mark really another interesting kind of subtext of the way in which this notion of vision, or this idea of prophecy has impacted all of our lives and it goes right to the UN. The Hopi have a prophecy. They call the UN, of course, The House of Mica. And, they have this idea of their existence in the world. And they came east. They consulted with the Haudenosaunee. They consulted with other indigenous peoples. This idea of elders who have visions is a process that's still going on in the Circle of Elders in North America, and it translates, sometimes... In this case, we see it translating into the... Today, we're looking at the permanent forum. But underneath that, was this premonitory vision that we need to, in some way, create an international dialogue in order to continue to maintain the spaces, or to secure the spaces that we currently have. And I just point out, Leon Shenandoah, who was the former Tadodaho for the Haudenosaunee, and, it just makes you think about how the Onondaga, the other side of the river, had this very active process of prophecy in their community. And there's a whole cadre of young people amongst the Haudenosaunee who are having these visions, and there are various levels and degrees of the reception of this practice.

25:27 S1: So I have these debates with some scholars, of course, that you're very familiar with here. Sometimes, what we talk about are things like, in the West, the category of psychology, Freud's notion of the dream, the use of the term 'Zeitgeist', all ways in which the West is trying to understand this ephemeral space of the dream, or what we call prophecy. What is that now in relationship to the ephemeral space of the electric, right? Because all of the arts that we're talking about, in some way are engaging this kinetic energy of electricity. So we have that energy, and now we're negotiating our thoughts with a real and physical form of this energy, and we haven't really decided what really these relationships are. And so it comes up again for me, in my experience, in the early 1990s, when the wampum belts for the Haudenosaunee were being repatriated. This first

go around either from Albany or the Smithsonian, and they came back to Onondaga.

26:58 S1: This particular scene took place at Kahnawake this year. It took place at the occasion of the Recitation of the Great Law. And bringing forward the belts, of course, is an attempt to help our people to recognize a kind of conceptual order of what we think justice, peace, sometimes people use the term righteousness, sometimes people are using the term compassion or consciousness, what that is. And so, again, I present to you a didactic image to help us understand, 'cause sometimes we only understand the Western organizational space of this. And it helps us to back into a way of thinking that our ancestors had, that sometimes we struggle to own ourselves. And so, on the back of the red card, this is mine so it's kinda beaten up, have all the treaties. And we can have a discussion about what treaties are. That isn't my point 'cause treaties we, of course, all would agree, are really the colonizer's law, and our engagement through their law has been through these treaties.

28:35 S1: But the way in which the Haudenosaunee marked this space is through the wampum. And so, we have to recognize that the wampum is incredibly complex, abstract symbols, that require a multi-sensory embrace in order to activate them. And so, in the West, in the past 200 years, or maybe some would go right from the 1400s, it's been this narrowing down of the senses, so that the world is ocular-centric, the focus is ocular-centrism. I think that theorists would say the 20th century is the epitome of ocular-centrism. And now we see the deployment of, through some of the expansion of these technologies, we're beginning to see a demand for, again, a multi-sensory engagement. Hardwired into most of our cultures in our core philosophies, is the demand for this continuous, multi-sensory engagement. And that's, for me, what the wampum represents, but I am sure everybody in this room has an example that you can turn to. That affects how we think and order the world.

30:07 S1: So where does that multi-sensory engagement fit now in our engagement with this kinetic electronic space and the future? This is a question that I have for everyone, I haven't figured it out, I wanna figure it out, but I don't know if we could figure it out, I think I liked what somebody said earlier, they said we just keep creating. I think Elizabeth just said it, we just keep creating. So it brings me to this point of creating, in that one of my biggest beefs with indigenous studies, maybe beef... Beef is the right word 'cause beef is bad for... Like unless you're eating grass-fed beef, right? which you guys are way ahead of, right? And so one of my biggest issues with indigenous studies is the focus on legal and governance structures without really understanding the sort of critical side of creativity and the arts as essential to our future as indigenous people.

31:15 S1: So, there's a lot of attention paid to the authority of law, the authority of governance. And I'm gonna say creativity is an authority that we also have to really pay attention to. And that's what this... This is so exciting that this is happening here, because if we don't have this, all that other stuff is gonna calcify, and it's gonna get stuck in certain kinds of moments in time, because you're the ones that dislodge it from its complacency. It rests at these certain points. And so I was very excited when I saw Denise Deadman's image of the DNA Two Row. I was really excited at a recent kind of discovery I had when I was putting together this little conference at the school that I work at, and just as sort of an aside... That's a photograph of Tom Porter and I was just at his place the other weekend, at Kanatsiohareke, and Tom was sharing with us a vision, a dream he recently had and wanted to talk about it. And he's of a certain generation where "This is what you do, this is the condition that you live in, this is the state that you live in."

32:52 S1: This time, the way in which we communicate to each other now is sort of secondary, 'cause there's a whole bunch of people in our communities that still live in that time, and so... An experience from my own world, I get a phone call this morning while I'm trying to run out the door and it's my mother who said, "I just want to tell you Sister had a dream last night." [chuckle] And so, it's that she had to tell me the dream and, "Okay, thanks Mum," because between my mother and her sisters, of which there are seven of them, every day the phone rings back and forth between all of them and they have this very active discussion about the dreams and thoughts and experiences they've had. And that really kind of sets their day and it directs their day. Our lives are really complicated in really different ways, but I would argue that we need to pay attention to that as well.

33:52 S1: When I was looking and thinking about how to talk about peace because Cornell University is located in the homelands of the Cayuga people, and just last week, in a struggle over ownership of the emergence of their traditional government, a great deal of violence occurred. And so I've been thinking about how is it that we can support this emerging nation, stick to the principles of this idea of peace or consciousness, and sometimes putting together these little symposia and inviting people to talk about it helps. I looked to then, okay, what was the symbol that we might use to talk about this? And I wanted to use the symbol that embodied the Tree of Peace, and so I came to this wampum belt. And it's interesting because at Cornell, there's all kinds of experimentation going on in all different... All of the things you're talking about, wearable technologies, and looking at things, and nano technologies and so it's... But I'm concerned because what I'm seeing is the absence of a broader cultural critique in relationship to a kind of strident, embrasive technology without the sort of more complex view of how it's situated in a people's cultures. Peoples and cultures.

35:24 S1: But I have to tell you that I was seduced by this image that I came across in the lab of dendrochronology, which is a lab that looks at the wellness or life of trees. And so this is a slice of the white pie. This is what it looks like at the macro level in photography in an ocular-based sense in the lab. And I looked at this and immediately saw the structure. I saw this structure, and I began thinking about... I think our people in the past, and maybe today, and maybe they're not expressing it overtly today because maybe there aren't a lot of safe spaces to express these ideas without being looked at like, "Oh you're really old school, you're superstitious." These are all the terms that I think people in our communities use when they don't understand the complexity of this knowledge.

36:34 S1: And I began thinking about how the wampum is an early binary code. And I'm not the first person to come to this conclusion, lots of people who have talked about this. But at the cellular level we can see that the white pine, of which the wampum belt is a representation of, has this grid like structure, which I think is really interesting. Because the question that I have, and this is only a provocation.

37:14 S1: I worked with Dennis Tedlock, who is a Mayanist, an anthropologist and a Mayanist. And he opened his first lecture in class by saying that, when he first went to work with the Mayan people in Oaxaca, that they made him stay outside of the village. And this of course would have been in the 40s, excuse me in the 50s. They made him stay outside of the village because they didn't want his energy to contaminate theirs, is the way that he ultimately came to understand it. And that first night that he stayed with them, the elders from their community came to him and they said,

"Well... " They had a little conversation the next morning. And they wanted him to tell them what happened to him that night. And he told them what happened to him. He was visited by a certain kind of animal in a certain kind of dream, and it was only based on the fact that he expressed that idea to the elders that they said, "Okay. Well, we think we can work with you."

38:33 S1: And it's interesting cause both Dennis and his partner Barbara Tedlock, who does work in China, where of course it's illegal to construct yourself as an indigenous person. She does work with Shamans in China, which is a very open practice there. We know that here in North America this whole practice, of course, is very underground because of the kinds of colonial abuse that these ideas have suffered. But in other parts of the world these ideas are very present. So I wonder, if people in our communities had visions about bringing these kind of belts, these visions, these designs forward as a way of embodying this idea of peace, power, and righteousness, which is what this belt in part symbolizes.

39:38 S1: And so, the world around us, I think, is our test site, in a way. How we filter it, how we understand it, how we decolonize the confidence that we express in terms of our own ability to construct an indigenous imaginary S future. I think, it's dependent on all of these factors, and the only thing I can say is that, whatever the cultural modalities you're dealing with that have come forward within all of your own traditions, that they're profound. They're yet something to teach us as long as we continue to really push against decolonizing our minds and really trying to see. And maybe it's just not seeing, but maybe it's actually deploying all of our senses to engage why that thing survived. And so, for each of our communities we all have something that actually is so strong, so tight, that it came forward.

41:00 S1: And today people look this stuff. I think we're all respectful, but at the same time perhaps not as... I would say that our respect is sometimes rhetorical. And that we need to kind of rethink some of that. And when we hear the songs or the dances are happening or the ceremony, I think we need to just really just give ourselves permission to really think deeply about all of these things while at the same time, like you're doing, completely engaging in the world as we understand it today. Because there's nothing in our philosophies that says that we're not technologists, that says that we're not interested in future. In fact, I think most of our cultures are absolutely based on our embrace and consideration of the future. Thank you.

[applause]