Forever Fresh Talanoa Series 2.3

New Kinds of Tomorrow

by Ioana Gordon-Smith, Michel Mulipola, Skawennati, Solomon Enos

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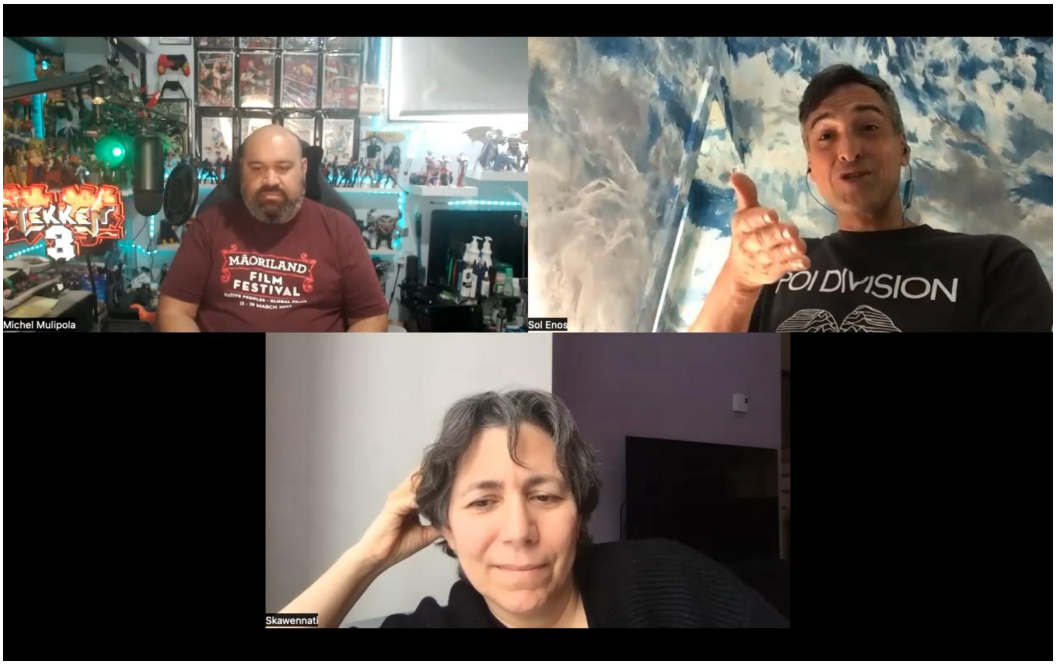


In Episode Three of our second Talanoa Series, visual artist, wrestler and gamer Michel Mulipola (Sāmoa/Aotearoa), Mohawk multimedia artist Skawennati (Turtle Island) and Sci-Fi/Fantasy artist and illustrator Solomon Enos (Hawai'i) discuss the importance of shapeshifting, imagination and innovation in Indigenous storytelling, as well as in their respective practices.

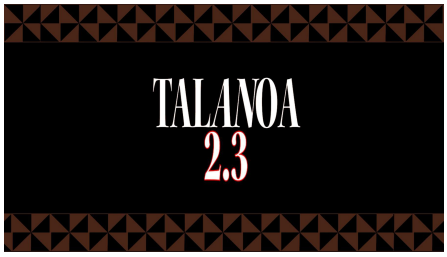
*Click here to watch the third episode of the Talanoa series on In*ter*is*land Collective's website, and continue reading below for Ioana Gordon-Smith's response to the video.*



Forever Fresh Talanoa Series 2.3 Shifting the Shape of Stories with Michel Mulipola (top left), Solomon Enos (top right) and Skawennati (bottom), 2023. Facilitated in collaboration with In*ter*is*land Collective.



Forever Fresh Talanoa Series 2.3 Shifting the Shape of Stories with Michel Mulipola (top left), Solomon Enos (top right) and Skawennati (bottom), 2023. Facilitated in collaboration with In*ter*is*land Collective.



Forever Fresh Talanoa Series 2.3 Shifting the Shape of Stories, 2023. Facilitated in collaboration with In*ter*is*land Collective.



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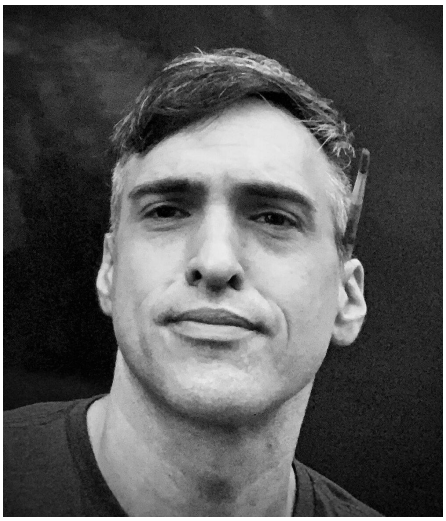
Skawennati. Photo: Rober Lemoyne.



Michel Mulipola. Courtesy of the artist.



Solomon Enos. Courtesy of the artist.

In their essay "'What's a Story Like You Doing in a Place Like This?': Cyberspace and Indigenous Futurism," the writers at Novel Alliances note that for "many uninformed readers Indigenous Science Fiction (sf) is an oxymoron."[01] They observe that popular culture, new technologies, fiction and speculation are often seen as

incompatible with preconceptions of Indigenous culture as fixed in a remote past.

Imagination and innovation, however, have always held a place in Indigenous cultures. In 2003, writer Grace Dillon coined the term Indigenous Futurism—itself a spin on an existing Afrofuturism—to describe an upwelling of creatives working across literature, science fiction, fantasy, video games, novels and comic books to (re)imagine Indigenous pasts, presents and futures. Skawennati, Solomon Enos and Michel Mulipola are among many Indigenous artists reimagining Indigenous worlds. Skawennati, based in Tiohtiáke/Montréal, is a Mohawk artist best known for her machinima: moving-image works that utilise video-game software such as Second Life, a platform where users can generate their own content within the 3D-rendered virtual world. Solomon is an Indigenous Hawaiian artist and illustrator whose paintings, illustrations, murals and game designs lean towards sci-fi and fantasy. Aotearoa-based Sāmoan illustrator (and wrestler!) Michel often draws on the comic-book genre to depict and illustrate Moana-centric stories.

Skawennati, Solomon and Michel gathered over Zoom and between their homes in Turtle Island, Hawai'i and Aotearoa to share and compare their approaches to visual storytelling. There is no shortage of ideas across the trio. As Solomon observes, "there's a wealth of stories and narratives and ideas that need to be translated."

What is meant by 'translated' is an underlying thread of the talanoa, although Skawennati, Michel and Solomon never really use that term specifically again. Instead, they spend time discussing, among other threads, shapeshifting. Shapeshifters, of course, are the trickster archetype par excellence found across Indigenous storytelling. Think of Māui turning into a bird, or Wesakechak, who can shapeshift into plants, water and wind.[02] Tricksters, as I have noted elsewhere, "are consummate boundary-crossers, slipping through loopholes and outwitting the confines of constructs."[03] Fundamental to the role of shapeshifters is the sense that the way things are now is not the way things must be, and that in fact numerous realities are possible.

Shape-shifting also appears in the popular genres of comic books, virtual reality and illustration that Skawennati, Michel and Solomon all draw upon. In their talanoa, they share their interest in superheroes—seemingly ordinary figures who can transform into the extraordinary. The superhero appears within the comic books that fill Michel's studio and fuelled his childhood aspirations, and is also seen in Skawennati's latest approach to depicting deities. In her recent work *On the Occasion of the Three Sisters Accompanying xox on Her Visit to The Queen: Osahè:ta', Onon'ónsera, O:nenhste* (2022), Skawennati depicts the three sisters—personifications of corn, beans and pumpkins—as Indigenous deity superheroes.

Reimagining stories is not without its risks. Skawennati shares the criticism she has received for depicting the three sisters. Solomon offers some insights into the difficulties of reimagining Indigenous figures and stories. He notes:

> the curiosity of going visual is that you're taking something that is in multiple forms and you're creating a singularity out of it. There's a challenge in that, because in a way we're creating canon. Before we didn't need to have that singularity, because we'd encourage everyone to have their own interpretations of what these deities look like.

Here, we can begin to glimpse what might be meant by 'translation': to take something that exists primarily in an imagined form in the interior mind, where it is free to take on many different shapes, and give it a concrete visual identity. The etymology of Indigenous words also comes through a parallel to stories, where words take on multiple, nuanced meanings and are not fixed to one definition. Though a multiplicity of Indigenous imaginings to one story (and a single word) was once sustained, the dominance of Western ways of seeing the world necessitate more-immediate visual representations. Solomon explains:

> How we visualise things that didn't need to be visualised in the past but now [have] to be in order for [them] to compete with all the other visual junk food that has

nothing to do with our culture. And in order to compete, we have to excel.

Across their practices, Skawennati, Michel and Solomon offer their own takes on how worlds can be reimagined, translated and shapeshifted. Solomon talks about the potential of augmented reality to layer onto the current landscape Indigenous agrarian systems and ways of sustainably using land. Nor are their imaginations necessarily divorced from real-world realities. Skawennati describes how her work, which has often utilised virtual reality, is slowly incorporating more and more physical forms, such as soft sculpture and costuming.

The importance of speculative imagination has been widely discussed through the emerging discourses of Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurism. Michel offers his own take on a Moana version of imagining new worlds: Fetu-rism. 'Fetu' in gagana Sāmoa, or 'whetu' in te reo Māori, translates as 'the stars'. The evocation of the skies describes how Skawennati, Michel and Solomon look beyond the here and now to imagine what was and what could be. Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous science-fiction and Indigenous whetu-isms "are central to the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures imagine new kinds of tomorrow."[04]

This is the third of three edited talanoa in our second series produced with In*ter*island Collective. Click here to view the first episode, click here to view second episode, and click here to view the first Forever Fresh Talanoa Series, released in 2021.

Footnotes

01. "'What's a Story Like You Doing in a Place Like This?': Cyberspace and Indigenous Futurism," Novel Alliances, Updated 23 March 2015, novelalliances.com/2015/03/23/whats-a-story-like-you-doing-in-a-place-like-this-cyberspace-and-indigenous-futurism-in-neal-stephensons-snow-crash/

02. Ionah M. Elaine Scully, "Shapeshifting Power: Indigenous Teachings of Trickster Consciousness and Relational Accountability for Building Communities of Care," *The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal* 4, no. 1 (2021): article 6.

03. Ioana Gordon-Smith, *Mischief Makers*, into panel, Pātaka Art + Museum, 27 November 2021-6 February 2022.

Biographies



Ioana Gordon-Smith is a Sāmoan/Pākehā arts writer and curator living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Across her work is a commitment to Moana arts practices and their histories. She has held roles at Artspace Aotearoa, Objectspace and Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, and currently works as the Curator Māori Pacific at Pātaka Art + Museum. Ioana is the Assistant Curator of *Yuki Kihara: Paradise Camp*, the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, and co-curator of the international Indigenous triennial, *Naadohbii: To Draw Water* in Winnipeg, Canada. She is also the co-founder and co-editor of *Marinade: Aotearoa Journal of Moana Art* and a trustee for Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. As well as writing for art journals, magazines and exhibition catalogues, Ioana has contributed to publications produced by Thames & Hudson, Routledge, ARP Books and Te Papa Press.



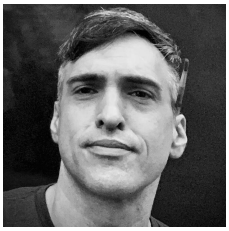
Michel Mulipola is a Sāmoan comic book artist, professional wrestler, Tekken personality and Story Artist & Cultural Consultant for Disney Animation Studios, based in Māngere, Tāmaki Makaurau in Aotearoa. He has illustrated works for the NZ School Journals, Marvel trading cards, WWE comic books and also co-created the first ever Sāmoan language comic - *O Le Aiga Samoa*. As a pro wrestler, he is a former NZ Heavyweight Champion and current NZ Tag Team Champion for Impact Pro Wrestling.

Comics, wrestling, video games and animation - all the things Michel loved as a kid, he gets to do as an adult and get paid for it. He's the personification of 'Living the Dream.'



Skawennati investigates history, the future, and change from her perspective as an urban Kanien’kehá:ka woman and as a cyberpunk avatar. Her machinimas, still images, textiles and sculpture have been presented internationally and collected by the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée d’art contemporain de Montreal and the Thoma Foundation, among others.

Recipient of a 2022 Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions Grant and an Honorary Doctorate from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, she is also a founding board member of *daphne*, Montreal’s first Indigenous artist-run centre. She co-directs *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace,* a research-creation network based at Concordia University, where she received her BFA. Originally from Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory, Skawennati resides in Montreal. She is represented by ELLEPHANT.



Solomon Robert Nui Enos is a Native Hawaiian artist, illustrator, and visionary. Born and raised in Makaha Valley (O‘ahu, Hawai‘i), Solomon hails from the well-known Enos ‘ohana. Solomon has been making art for more than 30 years and he is adept at artistic expression in a wide variety of media including oil paintings, book illustrations, murals, and game design. A self-described “Possibilist” Solomon’s art expresses an informed aspirational vision of the world at its best via contemporary and traditional art that leans towards Sci-Fi and Fantasy. His work touches on themes like collective-consciousness, ancestry and identity, our relationship with our planet, and all through the lens of his experience as a person indigenous to Hawai’i.

Solomon has exhibited in *Biennial X* (Honolulu Museum of Art), *6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Queensland Art Gallery), *CONTACT* art exhibitions, and others. His work is held in private collections and in the public collections of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and Hawai'i State Art Museum. He has led numerous community mural projects and has received art commissions for hotels, corporate offices, public buildings, and schools in Hawai'i. His latest works include murals and augmented-reality installations for Google and Disney.

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