



Sovereign Futures in Neshnabé Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

Film has been the primary way dominant society has consumed inaccurate and problematic symbols, images, and stereotypes of Native peoples for over one hundred years. Indigenous-made films, on the other hand, reclaim Indigenous representational space or 'visual sovereignty' through narratives of Indigenous experience that highlight culturally relevant stories and contemporary issues they face. In particular, Indigenous-made speculative fiction inspires contemplations of Indigenous agency in alternative realities. Indigenous futurisms expressed in works of speculative fiction is a rejection of theoretical, institutional, and political projects that imagined Indigenous peoples in the past and excluded them from the future. Through a survey of Neshnabé speculative fiction and other art, this article argues that Indigenous futurisms constitute creative approaches to sovereignty in a multiplicity of potential futures and is an analytical framework that illuminates the ever-expanding contours of Indigenous sovereignty in order to imagine an otherwise present and past circumstances of Indigenous existence.

Keywords: Indigenous Futurisms, Science Fiction, Sovereignty, Traditional Knowledge, Speculative Fiction

On a rainy Thursday evening in the spring of 2019, several dozen Pokagon Potawatomi tribal citizens gather at the tribal community center in Dowagiac, Michigan. They are shuffling chairs around as they find places to plop their belongings and greet each other with excited smiles and warm hugs. Evenings like this are normally reserved for sipping cedar tea at home and repairing regalia, sewing, or doing beadwork. Wintertime and early spring are for stories and creative undertakings, after all. However, the community has ventured out on this particular night so that they can enjoy a meal and watch a film together. A guest is also in town, Shane McSauby (Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians), a Neshnabé¹ filmmaker from Michigan. He is sharing two of his short films, *Mino Bimaadiziwin: A Decolonial Love Story* (2017) and *Nimkii* (2019). The Pokagon community is excited, because film screenings like these sponsored by the tribal government are the only ways in which citizens can view independent Indigenous-made films. This screening is significantly better attended than past ones. Attendees explained to me that this is because they had been anxiously awaiting the opportunity to watch 'Native sci-fi'.



Figure 1

Still from *Nimkii* (2019). A young Native girl living in New York City raises her fist to the sky acknowledging her new-found power to control lightning.

Nimkii is a silent film featuring a young Native girl in New York City. After making herself a medallion with the 'Water is Life' image she finds out that she has the power to control lightning. Saving a woman from being mugged, the girl becomes a vigilante using precise strikes of electricity to fight crime committed against her community. Both films inspire discussions between the Pokagon community and McSauby about the importance of Neshnabé traditional ways and their application in the future.

After the films conclude, the audience asks questions and shares their thoughts with Shane. One Pokagon elder, Majel DeMarsh, expresses glowing gestures of affection and excitement, clapping her hands together gently and drawing them closely to her heart. '*Kthë migwëthh!*' (Thank you so much!) 'for such an amazing experience, Shane'. She explains how much she enjoyed the films, and how she's glad that a young Neshnabé filmmaker is curating the positive aspects of Native experiences 'for a change'. Her remark implies that representation of Indigenous peoples in film—even those made by Indigenous filmmakers—are overrepresented by negativity. Indeed, DeMarsh is correct that

while there is value in articulating uncomfortable and sometimes negative truths of Indigenous life in film, these representations are often at the expense of Indigenous humor, love, and resiliency. In fact, the Aila Test, developed by Ali Nahdee (Anishinaabé/Ojibwa) and modeled from the famous Bechdel-Wallace test, is a critical approach to creating and consuming film. It suggests that Indigenous representations are overly victimized and gendered. The test poses three criteria to 'pass': (1) An Indigenous woman must be a main character; (2) she must not fall in love with a White man; (3) and she must not be raped or murdered at any point in film (Vassar, 2020). The simplicity of the three requirements gestures to the horrifying fact that Indigenous women are stock figures whose sole purpose is to be victims of White male aggression and sexual desires in cinematic stories. Unsurprisingly, both McSauby films pass the Aila Test.

In addition to positivity and alternative representations of Indigenous women and girls in his films, the Pokagon community remarked on the magic and science fiction aspects of Shane's work. 'The Future is Indigenous!' someone casually yelled in excitement during a lull in the audience question-and-answer session. The group chuckled and agreed. Within a system of settler colonization, to insert oneself as Indigenous not just in the present, but in the future is a political statement. Claiming that Indigenous peoples are not just relics of the past, but have viable futures is a powerful assertion of Indigenous agency and it has material effects on the possibilities that Indigenous communities envision for themselves.

This article is the result of ethnographic research conducted with Neshnabé communities in the Great Lakes region of the United States between the years 2015-2019. *Neshnabék* (plural) are Indigenous peoples whose traditional languages are grouped into the Algonquian language family and whose diaspora includes Canada, the U.S., and even Mexico, though Neshnabé traditional homelands are in the eastern coast and Great Lakes regions. While it was necessary to travel to other Neshnabé communities in order to fully investigate the issues in my research questions, most of the ethnographic research was conducted with the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, the tribe in which I am an enrolled citizen.

While it was not an original topic of inquiry during my early fieldwork, science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction was a topic that repeatedly came up in conversations with Neshnabé partners in my research about space and place, climate change, and Indigenous agency. Despite decades of controversial resource extraction projects that have dispossessed tribes of their lands, Indigenous communities in the Great Lakes region of the U.S. are making space for themselves in the future through political action and creative projects. McSauby's films, *Nimkii* in particular, are examples of Indigenous speculative fiction, blending the everyday lived realities of Neshnabé people with elements of fantasy and magic. With these themes in mind, I use the term, 'Indigenous science fiction' to refer to: '*Indigenous-made* speculative film, art, video games, literature, and oral storytelling that draws from autochthonous knowledge systems to envision and convey alternative futurisms and pasts to mainstream ones with Indigenous communities at the forefront of this imaginary landscape' (Topash-Caldwell, 2020, p. 84). The films screened at the Pokagon community center in the late spring of 2019 are part of a larger trend in Indigenous-made media in recent years. These films inspire contemplations of how traditional knowledge and community-specific values inform Indigenous agency in alternative realities.

Indigenous futurisms as expressed in works of speculative or science fiction² is a conceptual rejection of theoretical, institutional, and political projects—both in the academy by anthropologists and in popular contexts such as film. These projects placed Indigenous peoples in the past or framed Indigenous peoples as trying to rectify their place in the modern present. As visual anthropologist, William Lempert explains, 'Native science fiction film provides a creative subversive mode of representation' (Lempert, 2014, p. 164). Because all science fiction already imagines potential futures or alternative existences most commonly through literary and visual works, Indigenous futurisms describes the multiple lenses of Indigenous art, filmmaking, storytelling, and activism that deploy autochthonous imaginary landscapes of possibility centered on Indigenous traditional knowledge, values systems, and most of all, active presence. Indigenous futurisms comprise creative works and intellectual theorizations produced by Native peoples which imagine a multiplicity of potential futures through wedding the latest scientific understandings with

Indigenous traditional knowledge (Dillon, 2012). This definition is not meant to reinforce the dubious binary between western science or empirical inquiry and those of traditional knowledge. Rather, because these two knowledge systems—science and traditional cultural knowledge—are differentially deployed along lines of unequal relationships of power and representation, Indigenous futurisms tends to explicitly address these politicized differences in their respective intellectual traditions. Finally, Indigenous futurisms foregrounds Native presence in a genre that has virtually never included them. As will be further explained in this article, Indigenous presence in speculative fiction is a politically potent mechanism of making Indigenous space in the future as well as asserting a creative form of sovereignty.

Creative sovereignty

In 2019 Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip tribes) and Dr. Adrienne Keene (Cherokee Nation) launched a podcast series called 'All My Relations', where they and esteemed guests discuss topics from language revitalization, politics, and issues of Indigenous representational authority. In terms of the latter, Matika Wilbur shared her story about why she began Project 562, a photography project for which she is well known. The project aims to counter negative and stereotypical images of Native peoples in the U.S. by capturing and deploying visual proof of their diversity, beauty, and resiliency of Native America through portrait photography. Wilbur notes the connection between negative and stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples created and maintained by non-Natives and the adverse, sometimes deadly effects these images have for Native youth. Alternatively, Indigenous representational authority, or the right to create, manage, and deploy representations of one's own community, is integral to sovereignty (Biolsi, 2005; Raheja, 2010), the rights of Indigenous communities to represent their own images (Dowell, 2013; Singer, 2001), histories (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), lived experiences (Menchú, 2010), and traditional knowledge systems (Cajete, 2000). Representational authority is an articulation of sovereignty that is directly related to Indigenous peoples' abilities to make important decisions about their communities' futures (Ascher, Steelman and Healy, 2010; Posey and Duffield, 1996; Rifkin, 2017) and the well-being of the environment as tribal nations. These forms of 'visual

sovereignty' (Raheja, 2010), 'knowledge sovereignty' (Whyte, In Press), and 'temporal sovereignty' (Rifkin, 2017) illustrate the specific violences experienced by Indigenous peoples through structures of settler colonialism (Povinelli, 2002; Wolfe, 2006), but in doing so illuminate new spaces of resistance, reimagining and reclaiming space.

Traditional stories and prophecies together with ecological revitalization and political demonstrations are what I argue in my previous work forms of 'Neshnabé futurisms' and are unsurprisingly common themes in Indigenous Speculative fiction. These politically multi-focal projects guide Native American ecologists, theorists, and political activists in the Great Lakes region in mitigating and surviving ecological destruction of their homelands—destruction caused by climate change and controversial developmental undertakings such as oil pipelines and hydraulic fracturing ('hydro-fracking').

Indigenous futurisms are developed in concert with Indigenous histories in particular places and politics of 'refusal' (Simpson, 2014) to harmful natural resource extraction projects such as pipelines and hydrofracking (Estes, 2019). In her analysis of the resistance movements by tribes and allies to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) at Standing Rock and beyond, Streeby (2018, p. 41) describes the water protectors' various projects as 'efforts [to] collectively imagine a different future'. In other words, Indigenous futurisms imagine and mobilize projects to actualize alternative futures from those of the Anthropocene: global warming, rising sea levels, polluted water in the lakes, rivers, and aqueducts from oil pipelines and hydrofracking. Put differently, 'Communities are empowered and constrained by the constellation of their members' expectations, fears, and hopes for the future' (Lempert, 2014, p. 173). Therefore, Indigenous futurisms is an analytical framework that illuminates the ever-expanding contours of Indigenous sovereignty.

Additionally, the emerging use of the term, 'Indigenous futurisms' as opposed to futurism or *the* singular future, leaves space for Indigenous agency to actualize a multiplicity of potential futures and timelines; each community can simultaneously envision different futures (LaPensée, 2019), which is why Indigenous futurisms is always used in the plural form in scholarly literature. As

a result, this article uses the term Indigenous science fiction for consistency and clarity, but takes Indigenous science fiction, speculative fiction, and futurisms as interchangeable constructs. Put simply, Baudemann (2016, p. 117) defines Indigenous futurisms as 'Indigenous storytelling about the future'. So, what stories are Indigenous peoples telling and why?

Science Fiction and Colonial Encounters

Goldberg: 'Not until Lieutenant Uhura do we even *appear* in the future... As a kid who loved science fiction it wasn't until Lieutenant Uhura that I realized that I was in the future'.

deGrasse Tyson: 'That you were *allowed* in the future'.

In this 2016 interview on the TV series, *Star Talk*, hosted by astrophysicist, author, and science communicator, Neil deGrasse Tyson, his interviewee, actress Whoopi Goldberg proclaims that as a young Black girl never seeing people who looked like her represented in science fiction media taught her that she did not actually exist in the future. But witnessing the Black female character, Lieutenant Uhura played by Nichelle Nichols, led her to believe that maybe she could. The above exchange between two African American celebrities—Dr. Neil DeGrasse Tyson and Whoopi Goldberg—indexes the pervasive idea that futures as depicted in science fiction belong exclusively to White, Anglophone Americans. Without conflating the experiences of Indigenous and Black subjectivities³, this dialogue shows how science fiction and its institutionalized racism is similarly experienced between Black and Indigenous audiences. Futuristic technocratic societies represented in science fiction as the inevitable result of White accomplishment may have been an unexamined assumption on the part of most audiences. But the impression that African American actress, Nichelle Nichols, made in the hearts of young Black viewers when she boarded the USS Enterprise was a powerful one.

Representation and agency of even fictional characters have material effects on disenfranchised groups. Seeing African American actress, Nichelle Nichols, play Lieutenant Uhura on *Star Trek* would later inspire Whoopi Goldberg to play in the series herself as character, Guinan, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Alternatively, as Fryberg et al.'s (2008) research demonstrates,

negative or stereotypical images of Native Americans have detrimental psychological effects for Native youth. This is particularly salient in light of mainstream science fiction works that either leave Indigenous presence out of the future entirely or problematically co-opt Indigenous images. Similarly, Cruikshank (1998, p. 164) reveals that material disparities are 'maintained and reproduced through manipulation of symbols and by the power to control representation'. From Spivak's foundational text, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Social Theorists understand that voice and representational authority are antithetical to the subaltern. Because once the subaltern have a voice, they are no longer subaltern; rather, they are *Other*. While some theorists have rejected using postcolonial theory to understand Indigeneity (because in the latter, the colonizers never left), when Indigenous interlocutors represent themselves in ways that make sense or are palatable to settler colonialism, Spivak's arguments become appropriate (Povinelli, 2002). Indigenous science fiction invokes a host of theoretical questions around not just representational authority, but whether or not it translates an image of Indigeneity that settler colonialism can make sense of. In the world of mainstream science fiction Indigenous peoples are subaltern; they cannot speak, because they don't exist.

Media depiction is a particularly salient issue in relation to Native Americans, because film has been the primary way dominant American culture has seen symbols, images, and stereotypes of Native America for over one hundred years (Raheja, 2010). Science fiction, in particular, reproduces the 'colonial gaze' (Fanon, 1968) whereby knowledge and power is distributed about the objects of film 'while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at' (Reider, 2008, p. 7). Others have argued (Attebery, 2005; Byrd, 2011; Medak-Saltzman, 2017) that the representation of people of color as meaningfully existing in technocratic futuristic imaginaries is unusual. And even when Indigenous peoples are included, such as in cameos like in the first episode of the (2002) series *Firefly* (see Medak-Saltzman, 2017) or as long disappeared ghosts spoken about only as regretful victims of colonial progress, it is rarely on their terms or told from their perspectives. This is due to a long tradition riddled by power imbalances and informed by Indigenous peoples' positions in the colonized mental dynamic. Indigenous peoples and 'traditional' or 'tribal societies' are opposite social imaginaries of mainstream science fiction

consumers; Indigenous science fiction is 'practically an oxymoron' as Drew Hayden Taylor (2016) puts it. Unlike the future of technocratic empiricist societies (understood as the future of White nation states), Indigenous communities are 'closer to nature' and 'have culture' (usually in need of protection by patriarchal academic and museum institutions). In accordance with this mental binary, the meaningful use of advanced technology would alienate Indigenous peoples from who they truly are (Veracini, 2011).

Mainstream science fiction participates in the erasure of Native peoples. Futures represented in mainstream science fiction have advanced beyond the need for identities tied to the land in the ways Indigenous communities stubbornly do, as future humans depart Earth in search for other homes. These departures, aided by advanced technology and sometimes even extraterrestrial societies, are often the result of ecological and social pressures.⁴ Another cause is the desire for discovery.⁵ Together these representations are cosmopolitan, multi-world ecologies of social possibility as well as destruction (often at the same time).⁶ In other words, they are 'the procolonial, prosupremacy of (certain) humans, proextractive, procapitalist, and promasculinist elements of these narratives that present the natural world and (certain) peoples as needing to be tamed, exploited, civilized, removed, or vanquished' (Medak-Saltzman, 2017).

This coloniality includes the ways in which Indigenous peoples are talked about in science fiction. For example, in season three of the futuristic dystopian science fiction series, *The Expanse* (2018), character Jim Holden explains to his comrade that 'When the European tall-ships first arrived on the American continent, the natives couldn't see them'. He goes on to explain that, because the sight was so shocking, and the cultures so different, Native Americans were facing an assured destruction. He concludes that they were all wiped out in the end. We know, of course, that while settler-colonialism was and continues to be violent and destructive of Native lifeways, we did not perish. Interestingly, *The Expanse* (2018) takes place in a space-age and (western) technologically advanced context. The series overall foregrounds class struggle between the elite Earthlings, the militarized Martians, and the subaltern Belters. In doing so, the show leaves much room for discussions of social justice. Yet, despite the considerably large amount of plot points for narratives of social justice

combined with incredible technological advancements that allow space travel (sometimes inter-galactic), colonization of planets, moons, and asteroids, and the construction of hundreds of space stations, the existence of Indigenous peoples is somehow completely absent and rendered impossible in this fantastic imagined future.

This impossibility is due in large part to the way settler colonialism erases Native peoples. Indigenous presence is a threat to settler colonial sovereignty. Indigenous peoples index settler dispossession of land and resources. When Indigenous re-presencing in alternative or future existences occurs in science fiction media, Indigenous sovereignty as it exists *outside* of imperialism, rather than being subsumed by it through ideologies of liberal multiculturalism (see Povinelli, 2012) it creates a form of cognitive dissonance for the audience. Mainstream science fiction creates space for many possibilities of social change, technological innovations, and societal arrangements except those that challenge the legitimacy of settler colonialism and empire the way that Indigenous sovereignty does.

With this tradition of colonialist tropes woven into the fabric of mainstream science fiction, enter speculative storytelling. When mainstream science fiction inaccurately co-opts Indigenous images or leaves us out of the future all together (which is most of the time), there is more pressure to resist the narrative that Indians are not capable of existing in the future while also creating and deploying new narratives—ones more compatible with Indigenous perspectives and value systems.

Indigenous Science Fiction

Indigenous science fiction responds to centuries of modernist and colonial thought embedded within the tropes of mainstream science fiction. As Rieder (2008) explains, 'the period of the most fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century is also the crucial period for the emergence of the genre ... Science fiction comes into visibility first in those countries most heavily involved in imperialist projects' (Reider, 2008, pp. 2-3). The social and political consequences of ethnocentrism within the ever-expanding amount of 'cultures' being mapped on the Earth as a result of exploration and discovery, and later

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by domination and oppression, became just as important a mode of experience for the invention of science fiction as technological and scientific advancements were (Reider, 2008, p. 2). The glorification of 'colonization', 'discovery', and 'pioneering', cloaking the very real history of genocide that resulted from those same projects of empire building (Byrd, 2011; Kerslake, 2007; Rieder, 2008) is an irony of science fiction that is not lost on Indigenous peoples.

Many of the problematic ways Indigenous people are present (Kincaid, 2014) or, more often, absent in mainstream science fiction works is addressed in the creative clap-backs by Native peoples. One example is the comedic podcast, *Métis in Space*. In this podcast, the Indigenous hosts review science fiction shows and movies over a bottle of wine while critiquing and making jokes about the media's content, sometimes with invited guests. Specifically, the hosts focus on films and shows that include problematic representations of Native peoples. In crafting such comedic responses, they create auditory space for authentic Indigenous voice where there traditionally has not been one.

Another example of an Indigenous creative clap-back is in the work of Jemez Pueblo artist, Debra Yepa-Pappan with her 'I is for Indians' series 'Live Long and Prosper (Spock Was a Half Breed)'.



Figure 2

Debra Yepa-Pappan, 'Live Long and Prosper (Spock Was a Half-Breed)', 2008 with permission from artist.

When I spoke with Yepa-Pappan, she told me that this piece of art has a life of its own (Personal Communication March 22, 2019). It has been shared, exhibited in shows, and talked about in academic spheres over the past ten years. The popularity of this piece and the other three related works she collectively refers to as ‘the Saga’ surprised her. In a recent installation of her work from this collection, she jokingly remarked ‘Yes, I know, this one *again?*’ With sarcasm aside, the work of art is both beautiful and intellectually interesting. In the piece, a self-portrait of Yepa-Pappan is superimposed over an Edward Sheriff Curtis-style photograph of a Plains Native American woman while she salutes the viewer with a Vulcan hand gesture from the *Star Trek* series. The background tipis have Starfleet Insignia while the Enterprise ship floats in the sky above. The work is so popular, because it challenges viewers’ stereotypes of Native Americans, as well as comments on mixed identities of many Native peoples. It is also popular, because it is seen as ridiculous and therefore funny. For all the reasons explained above regarding science fiction being steeped in colonialism Yepa-Pappan’s *Live Long and Prosper* forces the viewer to imagine Indians in the future—a time and space typically devoid of Indigeneity. These creative clap-backs of racist mainstream science fiction by Indigenous intellectuals flex Native agency.

Indigenous science fiction does more than clap back at mainstream science fiction. Indigenous science fiction creators interviewed and referenced in my research enact what Lempert (2018) calls ‘generative hope’ for better futures. Generative hope avoids the previous trends in anthropology to pathologize ‘vulnerable’ communities that focus on crisis research. Crisis research explained by Tuhiwai-Smith’s (1999) influential work in *Decolonizing Methodologies*—is a brand of scholarly research that patronizes Indigenous communities and seeks to explain Indigenous failures and pathetic conditions within a framework of White settler guilt. In crisis research, non-Native investigators, project managers, and others insert themselves in communities to professedly solve problems not identified by the community they propret to help. And these forms of ‘help’ are usually intrusive and ineffective—sometimes even harmful. Generative hope, on the other hand, steers away from victimry and foregrounds Indigenous agency, building from a similar framework of Indigenous agency that Tuck (2009) calls for—community identified, driven, and

deployed. But this framework does not leave dystopian narratives or actual crises out of theorization altogether. As Lempert (2018) explains, generative hope 'reaffirms the need for vigilance against seductive desires for resolution and the undoing of damage that cannot be undone; it encourages both cautious optimism and the amplification of local visions for the future that seek to expand Indigenous possibility' (Lempert, 2018, p. 204).

Indigenous works of science fiction depart from a similar understanding of generative hope as they draw from traditional knowledge systems to comment on contemporary issues as well as imagine alternative conceptions of the future. In *Wakening* (2014), directed by Danis Goulet (Cree) and written by Tony Elliott, the viewer hears distant gun shots, footsteps, and a female protagonist running down an urban alley way in the first few seconds of the opening scenes. 'This is Indian land' is spray painted in red on a brick wall. Just barely avoiding militant guards, the protagonist who is wearing a metal bow, peers out over a post-apocalyptic urban landscape. She is not just hiding though; she's looking for something. At the same time, a robotic loudspeaker announcement by a male voice recites a series of rules and regulations about land ownership—likely from the 1876 Canadian Indian Act that severely disenfranchised Indigenous Canadians—especially women—from their land, communities, resources, and Indian Status. But where 'Indian' would be used in the Indian Act, the narrator uses the term, 'citizen'. Ultimately, the protagonist, Weesakechak, finds what she is looking for in a destitute theatre. She finds Weetigo—a terrifying and violent creature that seems to have the strength to rip her to pieces. It is found in a theatre room where it appears to be snowing and there are a few individuals tied to chairs with bear traps painfully clamped on their bodies. One of the prisoners tells Weesakechak, 'The seats were full. We're the only ones left'.



Figure 3

Still from *Wakening* (2014). Weesakechak prepares to face Weetigo and ‘the Occupiers’.

Weetigo⁷ is a cannibal creature in Neshnabé oral tradition and has been used as a metaphor to describe the settler colonial and capitalist nation state (whether that is Canada or the U.S.), because it consumes Indigenous bodies, knowledges, resources, and spirits. *Wakening* (2014), however, turns that metaphor on its head, because Weesakechak ends up liberating Weetigo instead of its prisoners in the theatre. Weetigo speaks to Weesakechak in Cree (similar to Neshnabémowin), but she responds in English. Weesakechak explains to Weetigo that ‘the Occupiers’ are more feared than Weetigo is. At the end of the film, Weetigo consumes the militant ‘Occupiers’ with violent blood-curdling noises of insatiable hunger and stares down Weesakechak

before fleeing the theatre. *Wakening* (2014) is an Indigenous-made science fiction story about prophecy and resistance. It uses oral tradition to image a future where even the most feared and abhorred beings in Neshnabé cosmology are better than settler-colonialism.

Despite science fiction with all its racism and empire-building, Indigenous science fiction fosters spaces for Native peoples to breathe, experiment, create, and hope in the context of present-day dystopias. In my research I found that despite explicit criticisms relating to coloniality, science fiction is an enthusiastically consumed and talked about topic on the Pokagon reservation and by Neshnabék more generally. What is more, as mainstream science fiction films more commonly put women's roles at the forefront as capable protagonists like in *Mortal Engines* (2018) instead of perfunctory supports to White male leads, thematic overlaps between mainstream and Indigenous science fiction grow; as one female activist in my research would say, 'We've been fighting empire for over 500 years'. To these ends, Cree Filmmaker Danis Goulet explains:

I think a lot of the tropes in sci-fi lend themselves to marginalized people identifying with it. So, if you even think of something like *Star Wars* where it's the rebels against this intergalactic empire. That's just like Indigenous people are the rebels, the empire is colonization and we see ourselves in it. Or alien stories where people get snatched away. That's residential schools.⁸ There are many examples of sci-fi tropes that are perfect metaphors for colonization or things that we experience. I think that's part of the draw. But I personally find it really exciting. (This is World Town, 2017)

While it is useful and appropriate to analyze Indigenous science fiction within the wave of recent media being produced, some have argued the genre is really not all that new. Chippewa scholar, Medak-Saltzman, explains that Indigenous 'traditions have always incorporated elements of futurity, prophecy, and responsibility-rooted strategies for bringing forth better futures' (2017, p. 139). So, it is not unusual that young Indigenous media consumers are attracted to science fiction. *Walking the Clouds*—the influential anthology highlighting science fiction works by Native writers—includes both newer science fiction stories as well as those typically categorized as 'traditional'. Dillon (2012) defines a tradition of Indigenous science fiction called

'reservation realism' as 'a fiction that sometimes fuses Indigenous sciences with the latest scientific theories available in public discourse, and sometimes undercuts the western limitations of science altogether' (Dillon, 2012, p. 2).⁹

In addition to bringing the viewer into the everyday lived realities of reservation life, Indigenous science fiction privileges autochthonous, localized, and historically situated knowledge systems instead of Western science with its ties to the Enlightenment in Europe. Indigenous science fiction draws from traditional knowledge systems to speculate on the technology of future societies with two important facets: (1) Indigenous people are present and (2) Indigenous agency is at the forefront of the story.

For example, the (2012) film, *The 6th World—An Origin Story*, written and directed by Nanobah Becker (Diné), tells a story about a near-future mission to establish human existence on planet Mars. However, the genetically modified corn that was supposed to sustain the cosmonauts on their journey becomes diseased and fails with devastating consequences. Fortuitously, Tazbah Redhouse (Jeneda Benally) discovers contraband Diné corn that was smuggled onto the ship without the crew's knowledge. This heritage corn is what ultimately saves the entire mission and all of humanity. *The 6th World* shows how Indigenous existence is deeply imbedded in, affected by, and conversely affects contemporary global politics. Indigenous 'culture' is not seen as antithetical to science fiction, rather it is because of heritage corn and traditional Diné values around food that makes the future possible. The film portrays what Dillon (2012) has referred to as *biskaabiiyang*—a form of Indigenous science fiction that is about 'returning to ourselves' and restoring balance in the world while healing our relationships with the land and with each other.

Indigenous science fiction similarly resists the common dismissal of past scientific achievements by Native peoples such as technological accomplishments and far-reaching ancient diplomatic ties of tribal nations before the arrival of Europeans. The popular television series *Ancient Aliens*' foundational premise regarding material produced by past societies—especially those of Africa and Indigenous America—is that they were visited, influenced, and even aided by extraterrestrials during the construction of such projects. This argument has been criticized for dismissing the accomplishments of people of color especially

since the technological achievements of European, and otherwise White societies, are not as often speculated as having been helped by extraterrestrials. In canning grand engineering projects requiring the organization of many people as categorically impossible for pre-contact Indigenous peoples to have achieved, the series *Ancient Aliens* is deploying a racist program rhetoric of Native peoples (Bond 2018).

Alternatively, Indigenous science fiction highlights and celebrates autochthonous scientific advancements. In an influential roundtable by Rebecca Roanhorse (Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo) called, 'Decolonizing science fiction and Imagining Futures: An Indigenous Futurisms', Johnnie Jae (Otoe-Missouria and Choctaw) explains:

We needed an outlet to celebrate our *indigenerdity* and change the narrative. Most folks are not familiar with indigenous people beyond the primitive 'Hollywood' Indian and whitewashed history that has people believing that we were just sitting around and doing nothing prior to colonization. So, it's hard for them to even acknowledge the indigenous roots and sciences behind many of these "modern discoveries". (Roanhorse, 2017)

Indigenous science fiction honors traditional knowledge systems and manners of storytelling in ways that have meaningful contributions to Indigenous identities and visions of the future.

Indigenous science fiction is not just about mainstream science fiction works being produced by Indigenous peoples. Therefore, using the term, 'Indigenous science fiction' without explicitly defining it runs the risk of deploying problematic ideas of the genre—parochial ones that are defined by outside, non-Indigenous influences. For example, it may become an iteration of juxtaposing savage bodies onto 'advanced' landscapes. The Potawatomi scholar, Kyle Whyte uses the term, 'Indigenous Science (Fiction)' with the use of parentheses, because—while related and overlapping—science and fiction have their own intellectual traditions in Indigenous worldviews. Indigeneity and science (plus or minus fiction) indicates that Indigenous science or traditional knowledge systems or 'Native science' (Cajete, 2000) on the one hand, and fiction on the other, can function relative to or independent from each other.

Both science and fiction have unique and complicated historical traditions and differentiated political deployments within privileged spaces independently of one another. For example, while much has been published demonstrating the equal validity of traditional knowledge to Western science (Kimmerer, 2013; Menzies, 2006; Pierotti, 2010; World Intellectual Property Organization, n.d.), Indigenous peoples are still trying to leverage their knowledge systems to protect their lands, cultures, and sovereignty (Corburn, 2002; MacGregor, 2018; Menzies, 2006; Robyn, 2002; Willow, 2012). With these issues in mind, Indigenous science fiction includes any story, visual or otherwise that draws from autochthonous knowledge systems and is produced by an Indigenous person; these stories are told to imagine and promote alternative futurisms and pasts to mainstream ones with Indigenous communities at the forefront of this imaginary landscape (Topash-Caldwell, 2020, p. 84). This definition includes traditional stories likely transcribed nearly a century ago in salvage ethnographic projects, oral traditions used for generations in Indigenous communities, as well as contemporary and experimental works expressed in film, comic books, video games, and even trading cards. So, Indigenous science fiction, as Grace Dillon succinctly puts it, 'is not new, just overlooked' (Dillon, 2012, p. 2).

Indigenous-made speculative fiction are creative experiments of possibility that make space for alternative conceptions of the future. Explorations of cyclical time, for example, revisit ideas about Indigenous traditional knowledge and social relationships to Indigenous lands. To these ends, Rifkin's (2017) *Beyond Settler Time* teases apart the ways in which Indigenous cosmological references such as stories, land, and prophecy resist oppressive settler colonial conceptions of the future. Indigenous creators and storytellers refuse restrictive and oppressive settler construct of family and lineal descent by describing and living in networks of kin relationships that extend beyond human biology. These emancipatory networked temporalities—relations tied to land and other-than-human beings—are developed and maintained with tools such as prophecy, place-making and storytelling. This process is what Rifkin (2017) refers to as 'temporal sovereignty'. Rifkin's text surveys the work of Indigenous writers that contribute to alternative futures but have not necessarily been categorized as Indigenous science fiction. In particular, his exploration of Indigenous socially

networked concepts of land is an insightful exploration of generation and time. In his discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko's use of prophecy in her (2000) novel, *Gardens in the Dunes*, her characters refuse to be defined by settler heteronormative lineal descendancy. Ultimately, 'their collective experiences of a shared homeland that animates social relations on their own terms' resist the limitations of settler-colonial space time and its policies which limit Indigenous relationships to land, practices of inheritance, and conceptions of ownership.

Family relationships play an important part in understanding Indigenous time. Whyte (2018) discusses the Neshnabémowin word, *aanikoobijigan*, or in Potawatomi, *ankobthëgen*, which refers to generational relationality. As fluent speaker, Kyle Malott (Pokagon Potawatomi) explained to me, it can be used to mean your great grandmother or your great grandchild. It is context-dependent. Similarly, Whyte (2017, p. 229) suggests that this linguistic and contextually based fluidity is:

an Anishinaabé perspective on intergenerational time—a perspective embedded in a spiraling temporality (sense of time) in which it makes sense to consider ourselves as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously as we walk through life ... Experiences of spiraling time, then, may be lived through narratives of cyclicity, reversal, dream-like scenarios, simultaneity, counter-factuality, irregular rhythms, ironic un-cyclicity, slipstream, parodies of linear pragmatism, eternity, among others.

For this reason, as argued above, Indigenous futurisms as a concept is plural. There is no Indigenous future in the singular sense; each community envisions different outcomes of the future based on their situated knowledges. In the next section I expand upon this idea of multiple, instead of linear temporality.

Indigenous Time in Speculative Fiction

In *ANX (The Cave)* (2009), a short film written and directed by Helen Haig-Brown (Tsilhqot'in), a man on horseback wanders into a cave during his hunt for a bear. The film begins as a narration as if orated by a storyteller, and the entire film is in Tsilhqot'in, an Athabaskan language from British Columbia. It is filmed in a remote-looking countryside of Canada on a sunny day. After tying

his horse to a tree, the man hunting the bear army-crawls through the tight rocky niche. He is startled to find a sudden bright light painfully piercing his senses causing him to be temporarily blinded and with a bloody nose. When the light subsides, he emerges from another entryway of the cramped cave system out into the countryside once again. The light seems different from when he first entered the cave. After rinsing his face in a spring, he notices a woman several meters from him. He calls out to her and is shocked to see her with no clothing. He quickly turns away, laughs, and mutters to himself in Tsilhqot'in, 'How embarrassing!' But then he notices other figures—about a dozen other people with tattoos and little to no clothing. They are working with wood, stirring for something in the stream, and otherwise keeping busy until they notice the man standing there watching them. They gather and approach him with mouths agape opening and closing in a strange unison. Telepathically they communicate with the man urging him to return from where he came; he is not ready for 'this place' yet. He is suddenly thrust backward by a wave of energy. He crawls back through the cave and returns to where he originally entered. Exasperated, he finds only bones where his horse once was. How long had he been gone and where exactly did he go? Were those individuals his ancestors, descendants of his community, or a parallel dimension of existence altogether?



Figure 4 Still from ?E?ANX (The Cave) (2009). An unnamed Tsilhqot'in woman telepathically tells the protagonist to go back to where he came from.

Indigenous science fiction film blends traditional knowledge with a variety of Indigenous story-telling traditions and speculations about humanity's roles in the universe. *Āwhiriāwhiri (The Cave)* was inspired by a story told by Haig-Brown's great-uncle and does not offer any concrete answers to the questions about where the protagonist went and who he met posed above. Instead it centers on the kind of interactions that are possible between Earth beings and the supernatural or extraterrestrials. 'Unlike Hollywood sci-fi films that project Western desires and anxieties regarding colonization, self-destruction, and Euro-typical utopia-dystopias, Native counterparts explore categorically different subjects, including noncolonial encounters of the third kind, utopian sovereignty, and dystopian assimilation' (Lempert, 2014, p. 165). Departing from mainstream science fiction media that overemphasizes the unlikely possibilities of alien invasion¹⁰, *Āwhiriāwhiri (The Cave)* is an example of Indigenous slip-stream storytelling (Lempert, 2014, p. 166) that Dillon (2012) defines as 'a species of speculative fiction within the sf realm [that] infuses stories with time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, and alternate histories ... it views time as past presents, and futures that flow together in a navigable stream. It thus replicates nonlinear thinking about space-time' (2012, p. 167). The protagonist in *Āwhiriāwhiri (The Cave)* enters an alternative dimension for a length of time not sensibly justified by his horse's death and decay. It therefore encourages the viewer to reconsider relationships between experience and non-linear conceptions of time.

Indigenous science fiction was not the first genre to introduce slip-stream or cyclical frameworks of time. Afro and feminist futuristic scholarship and media laid the groundwork for Indigenous science fiction (Barr, 2008). Even in mainstream science fiction, films like *Arrival* (2016) and *Interstellar* (2014) distort human conceptions of linear time. For the nonviolent aliens called 'heptapods' in *Arrival* (2016), time has 'no forward or backward direction ... Through this, *Arrival* (2016) can be seen to cunningly hide time signatures and time depths behind the veil of heptapod time travel' (Toby Neilson, 2018). Indeed, they arrive on Earth with a request for help from humans with the understanding that humans will one day need the help of the heptapods (or, perhaps, that has already occurred?). *Arrival* like *Āwhiriāwhiri (The Cave)* causes the viewers to question the relationships between human experience and the

possibilities the field of physics affords in relationship to linear versus cyclical models of time.

Similarly, artists in the Pokagon Potawatomi community have experimented with traditional artforms like beadwork and characters from speculative fiction and gaming culture. The beaded medallion of a character from the popular *Legend of Zelda* series, 'Skull Kid' wearing Majora's mask, is one example of the creative ways Neshnabé artists make space for themselves in subcultures, like gaming, that typically exclude them. The game itself, released in 2000, takes place in a realm called 'Termina', an alternate reality to the immensely popular, *Ocarina of Time's* fictional location of Hyrule.

The motifs, gameplay mechanics, and the overall storyline of *Majora's Mask* parallel traditional Neshnabé stories like the Nanabozho chronicles, a prominent trickster figure in Anishinaabé creation stories. The game, like many Indigenous stories across North America blend 'magic', alternative realities (instead of linear temporalities), trickster figures, and spirit beings in order to comment on anything from ethics, politics, and social dynamics in addition to delivering an entertaining narrative. The game mechanics of *Majora's Mask* manipulate linear time and create pockets of alternative realities, one of which includes the apocalypse when the moon crashes into the Earth. What sets *Majora's Mask* apart from other games in the *Legend of Zelda* series is its breaking off of the traditional *Zelda* timeline. Instead of the formulaic good-conquers-evil, the universe of *Majora's Mask* has been theorized by fans as taking place in a reality where the franchise's hero, Link, is unsuccessful in his quest to save Hyrule and must depart for Termina instead. Another unique aspect of the game is the use of a variety of magical masks that the player can obtain. These masks allow the player to transform into different beings as well as acquire special powers associated with such 'races'. Games like *Majora's Mask* parallel the linkages being made in Indigenous speculative fiction between traditional stories or Indigenous knowledge systems with futurity or alternative realities. These creative undertakings make compelling gestures toward ideas of futurity and constitutive creative approaches to representation and, by extension, sovereignty.



Figure 2

Beaded Medallion of 'Majora's Mask' from the Legend of Zelda Nintendo series by Christina Rapp (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi), 2019, with permission from artist.

Conclusion

Mainstream science fiction began as a modernist project projecting the hopes and dreams, as well as fears and anxieties, onto the screen and into the imagined (singular) future—one often not inclusive of people of color. The genre

is built from a foundation of colonial institutions and values solidified at the turn of the twentieth century, and continues to be immersed in colonial ideas of progress, discovery, and colonization. As a result, Indigenous science fiction is not just science fiction produced by Indigenous peoples. While representation of Native peoples in film is important, Indigenous science fiction is a creative mode of re-presenting of Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and goals; it is therefore, an articulation of sovereignty in temporal and spatial modalities that have never included us before. Because mainstream science fiction reifies settler dispossession and normalizes empire, Indigenous presence in the future is an ideological and literal threat to settler colonial sovereignty.

Indigenous-made speculative film, art, video games, literature, and oral storytelling draws from autochthonous knowledge systems to envision and convey alternative futurisms and pasts to mainstream ones with Indigenous communities at the forefront of this imaginary landscape. Departing from mainstream science fiction which assumes a linear progress of mankind that is based on Western values of environmental and social colonialism, as well as social and cultural evolution, Indigenous science fiction foregrounds the presence of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems that are situated in webs of ethical and respectful relations with human and other-than-human beings. Indigenous science fiction makes space for Indigenous values and allows for a multiplicity of futures (i.e. futurisms, plural), and in doing so, stakes temporal and spatial claims for Indigenous sovereignty.

More than just a definition or unique construct, futurisms refuse victimry and erasure. Refusal as Indigenous scholars like Tuck and Yang (2014) and Simpson (2014a) have articulated, does not just resist settler incursions or violations of Indigenous space, rather it is active in constructing alternative modalities of Indigenous existence and freedom. As such, Indigenous futurisms reclaim representational space and physical places, forging new, yet to be manifested, channels in the fabric of Indigenous space-time as creative modes of sovereignty.

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Ethics statement

Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians Tribal Council Memo of Agreement (February 2017), University of New Mexico Institutional Review Board (April 2017).

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Notes

¹ The general Algonquian word for Indigenous peoples to the Great Lakes region–Miami, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa, and many others. *Anishinaabé* is its more popular form and is the Ojibwe spelling while *Neshnabé* is the Potawatomi spelling. I will use the Potawatomi spelling in most cases. Both words are often translated as ‘the true humans’ or ‘original

people', but are more accurately translated as 'those who were lowered down' referring to the origin story of Great Lakes Native peoples being lowered down from the Sky World.

² This article uses the term Indigenous science fiction for consistency and clarity, but takes Indigenous science fiction, speculative fiction, and futurisms as interchangeable constructs.

³ Instead see Dery (1994) and Lavender III (2011).

⁴ As portrayed in the (1994) film and later TV series *Stargate* and the (2014) film, *Interstellar*.

⁵ As depicted in *Mission to Mars* (2000) with Jim McConnell's (Gary Alan Sinise) unanticipated decision to leave our solar system to join humanity's alien ancestors at the end of the film.

⁶ Especially as class struggle has become a foregrounded issue in recent years (Brownfield 2017; also see films, *Elysium* (2013), *District 9* (2014), and *Divergent* (2014)).

⁷ Also spelled *Wendigo* (Potawatomi) or *Wiindigoo* (Ojibwe) among dozens of other spellings and pronunciations.

⁸ Also known as Native American Boarding Schools in the U.S.

⁹ One example of this is Sydney Freeland's short film, *Hoverboard*, (2012) when a young Navajo girl is inspired to travel in time after watching *Back to The Future Part II*.

¹⁰ 'Unlikely', because as Dillon (2012) explains, extraterrestrials that have acquired the technological and sociological capacities to travel across or between galaxies would not be interested in the affairs of human beings or Earth's resources. Therefore, alien 'invasion' as a trope has more to do with contemporaneous social anxieties than with hypothetical reflections on life in the universe (Dillon 2012:5; Rieder 2008).