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***MIRRORING POSSIBLE FUTURES: READING INDIGENOUS FUTURISM IN
POPULAR CULTURE***

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Abstract:

This paper is concerned with a study of the employment of Indigenous Futurisms in popular culture, namely, literature, movies, comics, art and music as a critique of the exclusion and Oriental, unauthentic representation of the indigenous communities by the white man. The paper seeks to examine Indigenous Futurism as a reaction to colonialism and as an attempt at decolonising the Eurocentric, mainstream science fiction. The paper examines how Indigenous Futurism brings forth the diversity and culture of the indigenous communities all the while celebrating them by citing examples from literature and art. The paper is concerned with explicating how the soldiers of colour, pushed to the peripheries from centuries, reclaim their space and write back to the centre.

Keywords: *Indigenous Futurism, Decolonising, Popular Culture, Indigenous Communities, etc.*

Indigenous Futurism as a term was initially coined by the writer and critic Grace Dillon in her book, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Science Fiction*, to paint the picture of possible futures and reimagined pasts through the lens of indigenous cultures in the context of science fiction. The term was inspired and derived from Afrofuturism as a means of paying homage to Afrofuturism. Indigenous Futurism is an artistic movement encompassing art, literature, games, comics and other forms of media reflecting the cultural realities of the indigenous communities and their way of knowing and storytelling. It is a recreation of what could be and what could have been for the indigenous communities if not for their invasion through colonisation. Contrary to the mainstream view of Science Fiction, Indigenous Futurism not only looks at the future but forges a plethora of scenarios that reframe and surpass the notions of space and time, where indigeneity is celebrated. As opposed to the linearity in time and space practiced in the traditional Scientific Fiction, there is a coexistence of timelines that are no more linear. The idea of time in the indigenous sense, hence, is not experienced or expressed the same way as in the colonial narratives of linear timelines that tend to look only at the future. Indigenous Futurism strings together the past, the present and the future. Science Fiction has always been Eurocentric and Androcentric, a legacy that goes beyond and above Science Fiction. In the mainstream Science Fiction, Western Europe is positioned at the centre of not the world alone but of the entire galaxy that we inhabit. This Eurocentric fantasy systematically excludes native people and their perspectives. The indigenous communities, in these Eurocentric narratives, are denied voice and agency. Even the little representation of the 'uncivilised other' is Orientalist. The native communities are often employed as background props, plot devices or comic reliefs. They are deemed as museum relics, tropes of the past, thereby rendering their depictions unauthentic, culturally inappropriate and racist. The mainstream Science Fiction is seeping with narratives of conquests by the white male encountering the savage alien who is a metaphoric representation of the indigenous race, as in the movie *Avatar*, where the human race plunders a



habitable moon of another star system to seize its cherished mineral, unobtainium from the original inhabitants of the land, Na'vi, the uncivilised aliens of colour who are denied human qualities and are dehumanised in space as they are on Earth. For the indigenous community, being the coloured aliens who are subjugated and made to watch silently as their ancestral lands are being plundered has been a part of their lives. "Science Fiction imagines the encounter with the Other (the alien, the strange newness brought by chance), typically from the perspective of the prominent Self" (Reid, 257).

Indigenous Futurism is a revolution. It is a reaction to the stereotyping of the indigenous people by employing the very tool of Science Fiction, most of which was used as a mode of othering them. Indigenous Futurism enables the indigenous communities to define themselves and functions as an act of speaking back to the colonial tropes of Science Fiction by problematizing them. While defying specific categorisation, it also becomes an act of reclaiming the narratives that constantly alienated the indigenous population and depicted them as dwellers of the past, the last of the race or lost race. It is an attempt at reshaping the realities of the indigenous communities, a refusal to be annihilated by the coloniser who preferred to contain indigeneity to the long-forgotten ancient past so that it does not make demands in the future. "All forms of indigenous futurisms are narrative s of biskaabiyang, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of 'returning to ourselves', which involves discovering how personally one is affected by colonisation, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (Dillon, 10). As opposed to the Eurocentric Science Fiction depictions are the reimagining of the indigenous people in a technologically advanced spatial setup where the centre stage is occupied by the indigenous being as in the mainstream movie, sStar Trek: Voyager, with its authentic hero of colour, Commander Chakotay. Another instance of Indigenous Futurism can be seen in the short film, The 6 th World, where a Navajo astronaut carries genetically modified corn crops from Earth to Mars but resorts to the traditional Navajo corn crops to save humanity. Mi'gMaw filmmaker Jeff Barnaby, through his work Rhymes for Young Ghouls explicates how the legacy of the First Nations individuals goes beyond the territorial boundaries set by the colonisers.

Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo writer Rebecca Roanhorse's Trail of Lightning showcases the Navajo protagonist Maggie Hoskie's journey to save the sixth- world in a post-apocalyptic environment by using her heroic qualities that are typically looked down on by the West. Cherokee writer Daniel H Wilson's book, Robocalypse, challenges the Eurocentric view that looks down on the traditional way of life of the indigenous community, tagging it barbaric. It is the very technology-driven life of the coloniser that paves the way for his imminent doom. Palyku novelist Ambelin Kwaymullina through the Interrogation of Ashala Wolf: The Tribe, Book One, brings forth the story of Ashala, one among the "illegal" children or the children with supernatural abilities. For a child whose sanctuary is her tribe, she puts her powers to good use in saving her people. A Canadian Metis writer, Cherie Dimaline, through her work Empire of Wild, tells the story of a married couple Joan and Victor, through the legend of the Metis, including the tales of the terrifying monster Rogaru. She also portrays the exploitation of the land and the culture of the indigenous people by the coloniser through her book, The Marrow Thieves, which is set in a dystopian future where indigenous people have an advantage over their non-indigenous counterparts, the ability to dream. Oji-Cree writer Joshua Whitehead's work Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction is a work reflecting its title that centres on dystopias and the humans abandoning the dying Earth. It skews away from the colonial stories of space travel. Terra Nullis, Claire G Coleman work, paints the future colonisation of Australia by the humanoid aliens named greyfells. Indigenous Futurism is also employed through comic books. Sloane Leong's Prism Stalker, Voll is a psychedelic examination of colonialism in space. Vep, a refugee who is in the process of working for a private military, is seen



losing her selfhood. Moonshot-The Indigenous Comic Collection, edited by Hope Nicholson, brings together the comic book stories of several contributors from North America, thereby showcasing the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the indigenous community. Deer Woman: An Anthology, Co-edited by Elizabeth Lapensee and Weshoyot Alvitre, is concerned with unfolding the stories of violence that native women across North America are subjected to. Through the illustrated stories, the anthology pays homage to the strength and resilience of the native woman. Jay Odjick's Kagagi: The Raven centres around a teenager who figures out that he has imbibed an ancient power and that he is the Kagagi, tasked with the responsibility of destroying the age-old evil that has returned, the evil of Windigo. Warriors of colour are also depicted in mainstream comics, like Maya Lopez of Cheyenne and Hispanic descent appearing in Daredevil by Marvel Comics and Black Panther of the very technologically advanced African nation of Wakanda who made his first appearance in Fantastic Four also by Marvel Comics. Poems also do not shy away from the employment of Indigenous Futurism. Full-Metal Indigiqueer: Poems by Joshua Whitehead is a poetry collection that revolves around Zoe, a hybridised Indigiqueer trickster character. She amalgamates the protozoan or the organic and the technologic or the binaric to re-member and re-beautify queer indigeneity. Indigenous Futurism is also mirrored in art, music and video games. Indigenous Futurism in art seeks to confront the plastic perception of indigenous cultures formulated and perpetuated by the colonial regime. The paintings of Lawrence Paul Yuxwelptun, a Canadian First Nation artist, challenge the colonial ideals by refusing to paint indigeneity in red, black and white. His works are infused with the elements of the First Nation's imagery and Surrealism to highlight Canada's treatment of First Nation's people. A music band named A Tribe Called Red, based in Canada, blends hip hop, reggae, moombahton and dubstep with the elements of First Nation music. Thunderbird Strike is a video game by Elizabeth LaPensee in which a mythological creature of the North American indigenous people tries to revive the dead wildlife as a result of the plundering of the indigenous land and culture. Games like this can be seen as reactions to games like the Warcraft, where the animal-based characters are loosely based on Native American culture. There are also clothing lines that mirror Indigenous Futurism, like ACONAV, a fashion brand based in Phoenix, Arizona, owned by Loren and Valentina Aragon. It is a representation of the tradition of Acoma Pueblo. The brand evokes the idea that the future is very much rooted in the past and that envisioning a future is impossible without looking back at the past. The brand celebrates women, thereby honouring the matrilineal culture of the indigenous communities. Indigenous Futurism also permeates the architectural realm. Multidisciplinary architect Tiffany ShawCollinge has woven her family pattern in the Kinstinaw Park in Alberta she has designed. Kevin O' Brien's temporary structure named the Blak Box resists categorisation and moves beyond totemism and towards contemporary indigenous architecture.

To conclude, through the engagement of Indigenous Futurisms in popular culture, the indigenous communities ensure their inclusion and representation. Indigenous Futurism, therefore, functions as a reaction to colonialism, a tool of resistance and an effort at decolonising mainstream Science Fiction. Indigenous communities aim to explore and celebrate the folklores, mythologies, religions, cultures and traditions of the native communities while reclaiming their space and voice. Indigenous Futurism intends to question the misrepresentation of the indigenous people and challenges the many stereotypes attributed to them. It is a proclamation that the indigenous people are very much here and will be here forever.

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