

Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind: Alternative Futuring in Native Science Fiction Film

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In the last few years, Native filmmakers have begun drawing explicitly on the science fiction genre. Engaging recent short films depicting noncolonial encounters of the third kind and alternative utopian–dystopian futures, I argue that Native science fiction film provides a creative subversive mode of representation, uniquely positioning indigenous filmmakers to vividly reimagine a multiplicity of futures for their communities while critically addressing contemporary issues. Synthesizing scholarship in visual anthropology, afro and feminist futurism, and indigenous methodologies, I attempt to further develop an indigenous futurist analytical framework as part of a larger argument for increased anthropological engagement with Native futures. [indigenous futurism, indigenous media, Native America, science fiction]

Introduction

Science fiction is not escapism. You might say that science fiction is escape into reality. . . . In fact I can't think of any form which is more concerned with real issues. [Arthur C. Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*]

By stepping outside of present realities and into rich potential worlds, science fiction films suspend naturalized assumptions regarding Native futures, opening up a rare discursive space for alternative futuring. While afro and feminist futurisms have led to extensive science fiction film studies literatures since the 1990s, corresponding indigenous scholarship has only recently emerged through the groundbreaking work of Dillon (2012) and Medak-Saltzman (unpublished data) on Native sci-fi literature.¹ Here, I focus on recent Native-produced films that draw heavily on the sci-fi genre. I argue that these creative works are particularly relevant to anthropological concerns and require a serious engagement with indigenous futurist frameworks to understand them.

In her introduction to the first anthology of Native science fiction literature, Dillon contends that all forms of indigenous futurisms² entail a returning to the self,

which “involves discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native apocalypse world” (2012:10). Invoking the work of Smith (2005), she emphasizes the vast potential that the genre holds for decolonization processes. To operationalize an indigenous futurist framework in relation to Native science fiction films, I draw from scholarship in visual anthropology, critical indigenous methodologies, and film studies.

Within visual anthropology, scholars such as Ginsburg (2011), Turner (2006), and Prins (2002) have developed the study of indigenous media in anthropology, with an emphasis on how filmmakers actively reimagine cultural possibilities amidst a legacy of popular misrepresentation. Much of this work has explored the relationship between indigenous media and ethnographic film as well as the appropriate role of the anthropologist in visual representations of Native peoples. “Screen memories,” a recurrent thread in this literature, provides a complementary counterpoint to sci-fi, critically orienting the past to contemporary indigenous life (Ginsburg 2002; Peterson 2011).

Also vital for an indigenous futurist framework is the application of critical indigenous methodologies, as

demonstrated in the works of Smith (2005), Grande (2004), and Denzin et al. (2008). These scholars focus on projects that emphasize sovereignty and decolonization while grounding such research in relation to contemporary Native community issues. With a proclivity for critiquing the present state of affairs as well as reimagining futures, science fiction is uniquely positioned to seriously engage what Grande (2004:95) terms *red pedagogy*, an “emancipatory theory . . . that acts as a true counterdiscourse, counterpraxis, [and] counterensoulment of indigenous identity.”

Unlike Hollywood sci-fi films that project Western desires and anxieties regarding colonization, self-destruction, and Euro-typical utopia-dystopias,³ Native counterparts explore categorically different subjects, including noncolonial encounters of the third kind, utopian sovereignty, and dystopian assimilation. In order for anthropologists and other scholars to understand this nascent indigenous genre, I argue for the continued development of indigenous futurist frameworks accounting for the diversity of creative efforts, priorities, and histories between and among Native filmmakers and communities. Through the emerging indigenous futurist analytical lens, I discuss four recent short Native films that explicitly draw on the sci-fi genre before focusing in depth on Jeff Barnaby’s *File Under Miscellaneous* (2010) in order to show how one filmmaker uses the dystopic science fiction subgenre to critically comment on the specter of cultural assimilation.

Screening Indigenous Futurisms

Sobchack’s foundational science fiction film studies text, *Screening Space*, provides a detailed discussion of the variety of approaches that academics have used to define and analyze this genre. Her invocation of Hodgen’s definition of sci-fi as “fiction that takes place in the future or introduces some radical assumption about the present or the past” is particularly appropriate in this context (Sobchack 1997:19). This description does not demand the inclusion of science; rather, it focuses more broadly on either the *future* or the introduction of *radical assumptions*. Sobchack notes that

marginal sci-fi filmmakers are inventing “new forms capable of doing justice to the complexity of our historical moment . . . [that] neither long for the past nor merely re-present the present” (1997:304). She argues that their films are revolutionary, representing a fundamentally “new mode of representation for the science fiction film: one that does not regress to the past, does not nostalgize, and does not complacently accept the present as the only place to live. It does indeed imagine a future—but one contiguous with the present, and in temporal and spacial relation to it” (1997:305). Science fiction films hold the potential to not only play with mainstream conventions, but, more significantly, for creative and imaginative ideological subversion.

Afro and feminist futurist literatures, which emerged in the early 1980s (Barr 2008:246), provide more specific models for developing indigenous futurisms, emphasizing the representational potential of alternative science fiction voices. Nama uses the term “afrofuturism” to describe “the variegated expressions of a black futurist imagination in relation to . . . science fiction” (Nama 2008:160). She argues that “it is at the margins of American [sci-fi] cinema that some of the most radical expressions of the cultural politics of blackness have emerged” (150). I contend that Native sci-fi films also hold such radical potential. As Cruikshank articulates, material inequalities are largely “maintained and reproduced through manipulation of symbols and by the power to control representations” (1998:164). By imagining new worlds and societies where stereotypes may be remade and redefined, subaltern science fiction films possess unusual potential for social transformation (Cranny-Francis in Kuhn 1990:221). While sci-fi is clearly not a panacea for addressing contemporary challenges, “if we cannot look toward the future to imagine new possibilities and solutions for a history . . . marred with fear, violence, institutional discrimination, and deep-seated ambivalence, then where else?” (Nama 2008:172).

In *Afro-Future Females*, Barr (2008) notes the potential of applying afro and feminist futurist literatures to other subaltern subjects. However, such frameworks do not take into account the priority of many Native peoples for material and cultural sovereignty

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FIGURE 1. Still from *The Visit*. The policeman and Cree father discuss the flying saucer.

from, rather than equal and equitable inclusion *within*, dominant systems (Grande 2004:95). Therefore, it is vital that any attempts to develop indigenous futurisms acknowledge the need for a flexible framework that is amenable to the diversity of Native community priorities, histories, and concerns. Furthermore, it is imperative that such analytical projects are grounded in material, social, and psychological community realities.

To begin mapping the emerging Native science fiction film genre, I first introduce two short films that depict slipstream encounters of the third kind, followed by two others portraying alter(native) utopian-dystopian futures. Lastly, I focus in depth on Jeff Barnaby's dystopian short, *File Under Miscellaneous*.

Slipstream Encounters of the Third Kind

Wolmark underscores the ability of subaltern sci-fi films to subvert mainstream "alien" tropes that construct difference "in terms of binary oppositions, which reinforce relations of dominance and subordination" (Wolmark 1994:2). Unlike the preponderance of Hollywood extraterrestrial films characterized by colonial aggression, Lisa Jackson's (Ojibwa) *The Visit* (2009) and Helen Haig-Brown's (Tsilhqot'in) *?E?anx/The Cave* (2009) depict *nonviolent* encounters of the third kind, which are importantly differentiated from alien encounters in that they denote extraterrestrial *or* animate beings. As Wolmark argues in relation to feminist science fiction, these films succeed in occupying "a marginal position in relation to other forms of cultural productions ... [investing] metaphors with new and different meanings which undermine ostensi-

bly clear-cut distinctions between self and other, human and alien" (1994:2).

In Jackson's animated short, *The Visit*, a Cree family on the Ahtahkakoop reservation in Saskatchewan, Canada, is visited by a flying saucer. After waking up the family, the daughter asks the viewer, "What do you do when you see something like this?" The father's first response is to call the police, who then drive out and note that the saucer is only visible on the reservation. The policeman documents the incident and departs, leaving the father unsatisfied (Figure 1). He goes outside and begins beating his drum and singing, to which the spacecraft responds by pulsing in unison.

While *The Visit* has an animated children's book style, the narrative embeds multiple subversive elements in contrast to its Hollywood counterparts, in which "either aliens invade humans or humans invade aliens" (Dillon 2012:5). It presents extraterrestrials as being most interested in a First Nation's reserve as opposed to New York City, Paris, or some other iconic metropolis. The trope that aliens would obviously choose such a city is itself founded upon the assumption that a technologically advanced species would be most similar to, and therefore interested in, urban Westerners who represent the zenith of humanity. In addition, the father's success in communicating through Cree cultural modes—especially in light of the ineffectual response of the policeman—challenges naturalized Eurocentric ideas regarding which societies are best positioned to serve as interplanetary cultural ambassadors.

Dillon emphasizes the importance of Native slipstream as "a species of speculative fiction within the [sci-fi] realm, [which] infuses stories with time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, and alternative



FIGURE 2. Still from *The Cave*. The protagonist going bear hunting on the Tsilhqot'in reserve.

histories" (2012:3). Helen Haig-Brown's *The Cave* provides an excellent example of Native slipstream cinema. Constrained to include sci-fi and indigenous language as a participant in the Embargo Collective, Haig-Brown became quickly aware of the affordances of the genre and was proud to note that "*The Cave* is the first-ever indigenous science fiction film shot in Tsilhqot'in, my native language. This recognition means a lot to me and my community."⁴ Shot with a state-of-the-art RED camera the film, is narrated in Tsilhqot'in with English subtitles, amidst a stunning backdrop of Tsilhqot'in reserve landscapes in British Columbia (Figure 2).

While tracking a bear, a Tsilhqot'in hunter is shown crawling into a narrow cave, which leads him to an alternate realm. When he attempts to interact with the people there, they communicate telepathically that "this place is not for you . . . you are not ready," suggesting that it is a place for those who have passed on or achieved certain spiritual understandings. The hunter is compelled back through the cave by supernatural forces and returns to the human world only to find the skeletal remains of his tied-up horse, implying the time travel one would theoretically experience after transverseing a wormhole. However, Native slipstream filmmakers such as Haig-Brown are not simply appropriating established theoretical work on time travel and multiverses from contemporary physics (Carr 2007); rather, these phenomena have been embedded for millennia within indigenous temporal conceptions of the universe, which tend to view "time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream. It thus replicates nonlinear thinking about space-time" (Dillon 2012:3).

The Visit and *The Cave* present reimaginations of contact tropes while denaturalizing the projection of colonial violence. Neither of these films depicts encoun-

ters of the third kind as particularly "alien," but rather they are contextualized within indigenous cosmologies. Jackson's visual framing of the flying saucer among the stars next to Coyote and Haig-Brown's invocation of a spiritual ancestor realm both emphasize connection and relationship over aggression and alienation. However, the temptation to overgeneralize or idealize must be avoided, as violent contact encounters may well be produced, reflecting colonial as well as precolonial Native counter-histories of conflict.

Alter(native) Utopian–Dystopian Futures

Utopian and dystopian sci-fi films provide particularly creative spaces for engaging potential futures. Jameson (2005:233) notes that these visions are not oppositional; both concepts reflect a mix of hopes and fears regarding wildly uncertain futures. What the vast majority of Hollywood sci-fi utopic–dystopic films share is an underlying assumption that regardless of the specific future, it will be increasingly culturally and ethnically homogeneous, as virtually all complex characters in such films are visually, linguistically, and culturally Western and white.

Imagining both cultural and political futures, Nanobah Becker's (Diné) *The 6th World* (2012) could be categorized as utopian Native sci-fi. In need of the resources of the future Navajo Nation, a corporation and the U.S. government cosponsor the first trip to colonize Mars with the Diné. When the GMO corn crops on the spaceship fail, the crew, consisting of a Diné astronaut and her nonnative colleague, are narrowly saved by germinating the protagonist's smuggled corn pollen—used for healing and protection—connoting



FIGURE 3. Still from *The 6th World*. The Diné astronaut's prophetic dream about the new Navajo Nation on Mars.

bodily as well as spiritual sustenance (Figure 3). As in her prescient visions, the Diné astronaut uses Native corn to sustain the new Martian colony, artfully presented through red filtered shots of Monument Valley, the Diné landscape made famous by John Ford's westerns. This film may be viewed as representing a future beyond the colonial confines of nationhood and blood quantum,⁵ the "sixth" world, which Becker noted is loosely based on a Diné prophesy in relation to the current fifth world. As in Shelly Niro (Mohawk) and Anna Gronau's *It Starts with a Whisper* (1993), *The 6th World* inverts and indigenizes colonial prophesies of Europeans as "light-bearers to pagans living in the darkness of Christianity" (Raheja 2010:185).

Becker explained to me that she chose to produce a sci-fi film because "the genre lends itself particularly well to indigenous storytelling" in relation to origin stories, the supernatural, and its ubiquitous symbolism. As Basso argues regarding Apache relationships between place, narrative, and history, Becker's film serves to "fashion possible worlds, give them expressive shape, and present them for contemplation as images ... that can deepen and enlarge awareness of the present" (Basso 1996:32). However, while noting that her film aligns with utopic sci-fi in many ways, Becker cautioned against the direct application of "utopia" to any indigenous context, as it problematically implies a distinct sense of linear progression, rather than cyclical time and the maintaining of balance (personal interview, September 14, 2012).

Instead of reifying indigenous primitivism on-screen (Prins 2002), *The 6th World* presents a future in which the Navajo Nation has significantly increased its sovereignty, wealth, and influence in relation to its colonial aggressor. Such a historical role reversal is particularly powerful given the history of forced removal during the Long Walk, resource extraction, and uranium contamination as well as the appropriation

of Diné language for World War II military codes (Denetdale 2007). Furthermore, as the Navajo Nation harbors vast amounts of uranium, coal, and other valuable resources as well as governs the largest land base and on-reservation population in Native America, such a future is not wholly implausible. Most importantly, while mastering interstellar technologies, these future Diné continue to take cultural values and traditions seriously while adapting them to changing circumstances, ultimately saving the mission, making the sixth world possible, and radically enacting a cultural future, "some 'third path' along which possibilities can be imagined other than those offered by the non-choices of assimilation or traditionalism" (Ginsburg 1995:72).

Like Jeff Barnaby's (Mi'kmaq) *File Under Miscellaneous* (2010), Jeana Francis and Nigel R. Long Soldier's dystopian sci-fi film *Future Warrior* (2007) expresses indigenous anxieties regarding the loss of cultural knowledge and identity. These films demonstrate that "the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place" and share elements of slipstream through the mapping of past colonial violence onto technological futures (Dillon 2012:8). Two hundred years in the future, Francis and Long Soldier position their protagonists as rebelling against a tyrannical government that is enacting its final policies of ethnocide by holding the last medicine man hostage and forcing Native peoples to ingest memory-erasing drugs. Drawing heavily on the art of Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee/Yakama), this dystopic future is presented as profoundly toxic (Figures 4–6).

Sanders (2008) argues that the creation of such a tangible imagined future world is as significant as the narrative itself. This film in particular emphasizes *science fiction*, with mandated drugs administered by a "government-sanctioned chemical corporation" in pris-



FIGURE 4. Still from *Future Warrior*. Painting by Bunky Echo-Hawk.



FIGURE 5. Still from *Future Warrior*. Protagonist with a protective gas mask.

tine sterile facilities that starkly contrast with the *Mad Max*-esque external environment, so noxious that it requires gas masks (2008:172). The extreme color filtering, as well as the soundtrack of jarring electronic beats and discordant loops, helps to emphasize the harsh and technological gestalt of this world.

Future Warrior explicitly engages the *Star Wars* films, which have been uniquely resonant with Western as well as Native audiences.⁷ As in George Lucas's (1977) hero's journey, a masked man with belabored breathing and a deep electronic voice murders the protagonist's elders. A young male, representing the last hope for his people, inherits his father's spiritual abilities and is taught martial arts and cultural knowledge from the only remaining elder, who reveals that there is a woman his age of similar ability. Just as Kunuk's *Atanarjuat* (2001) references Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) by laughing "at the camera," a tactic for establishing visual sovereignty (Raheja 2010:193),⁸ Francis and Long Soldier both parallel and subvert the *Star Wars* narrative. Instead of the one-dimensional and disposable Native Ewoks—whose belief system was manipulated by the white protagonists to bamboozle them into fighting a proxy war against a heavily armed empire—the filmmakers depict complex indigenous heroes. With the moral high ground and formidable agency, it is implied that like the Jedi, they will be victorious against all odds. Following a long tradition of Native apocalyptic literature, the film reveals "the ruptures, the scars, and the trauma in its effort ultimately to provide healing" (Dillon 2012:9).

Near the end of *Future Warrior*, the "last hope" himself becomes a teacher to a new disciple. Interestingly, this new teacher argues for the importance of "the technobiological spirit" in gaining power and holding "the wisdom of many generations." Here, Francis and Long Soldier reimagine Ginsburg's (1991) question of the "Faustian contract"; while technology has been recur-

rently assumed to result in cultural deterioration, it has instead often presented great potential for cultural expression, communication, and education by indigenous peoples themselves. Ultimately, the film's title accurately conveys the double meaning of a warrior *in* the future as well as a warrior fighting *for* Native futures.

White Skin, Red Masks: Dystopian Assimilation in Jeff Barnaby's *File Under Miscellaneous*

*I always knew the Lone Ranger
Wore a mask because he didn't
Want anyone to know
That he was friends
With an Indian*

*That always made me
Wish I was white
Crystal blue eyed Aryan
With cold, carved, marble
Skin*

It would be beautiful.

*I would trade jokes with
The Ranger
While I sat on my horse
Himmler*

*"What does a squaw
Say after sex?"
I would ask.*

*The Ranger would shrug
In ignorance
And I would answer:*

*"Get off me Dad
You're crushing my cigarettes."
And we would laugh and laugh . . .*

*Laugh until silver bullets
Shot out of every orifice
And burned the land
With our
Whiteness.*

"File Under Miscellaneous"—Jeff Barnaby

Barnaby's dystopic short, *File Under Miscellaneous* (hereafter *File*), developed from this poem—written in a



FIGURE 6. *If Yoda was an Indian* by Bunky Echo-Hawk.⁶

frenzy “on a napkin in about 5 minutes”—one of many he wrote to come to terms with his painful experiences growing up on the Mi’kmaq reserve.⁹ A synthesis of science fiction and personal biography, *File* serves as an exemplary case study for engaging indigenous futurism. Set in a dystopian future in which Native people submit themselves to be gruesomely reskinned as white, *File* provides a cogent indigenous commentary on the precarity of indigenous futures.

Barnaby is no stranger to controversial filmmaking, having previously directed the award-winning avant-garde shorts *The Colony* (2007) and *From Cherry English* (2004), which allegorize not only colonization, but also self-inflicted cultural loss. *File*, the final piece of this conceptual trilogy, has also garnered a great deal of success, including multiple festival awards.¹⁰ Film critic Todd Brown has even declared that *File* “cements

Barnaby’s position as one of the most unique, compelling and important voices in Canadian cinema.”¹¹ Building on his growing reputation, he was able to collaborate in *File* with a variety of talented creative individuals, including the acclaimed sci-fi visual effects artist Shervin Shogian. Barnaby has since released his first feature, *Rhymes with Young Ghouls* (2013), a revenge fantasy horror that critiques the history of forced residential schooling.

In the opening sequence of *File*, we are presented with a dark and smoky technological metropolis that evokes Ridley Scott’s 1982 canonical *Blade Runner* (Figure 7). This is no coincidence, as Barnaby cites this film as his initial entree into the world of sci-fi when he was “suffering from brain cancer as a kid and prone to hallucinogenic fever dreams because of it. . . . I was mesmerized. Fixated on this world of fake body parts, smoke and neon. A post apocalyptic world mired in toxicity and feigned humanity.” It is the creation of this lucid and rich, though horrific, world that MacDougall (2006) posits allows the medium of film to transcend the limits of language and viscerally present deeply affective interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. His argument regarding film’s unique ability to communicate tangible corporeality is particularly suited to the sci-fi genre, with its propensity for imagining novel and uncanny worlds within which previously unimaginable possibilities may emerge (Moylan 2000:xxi).

Dystopic sci-fi resonated with Barnaby’s experiences growing up in the Mi’kmaq community of Listuguj, Quebec. He recalls lamenting with his friends about wanting to become white in order to escape intergenerational trauma, the decline of Mi’kmaq language, and what they felt was superficial cultural

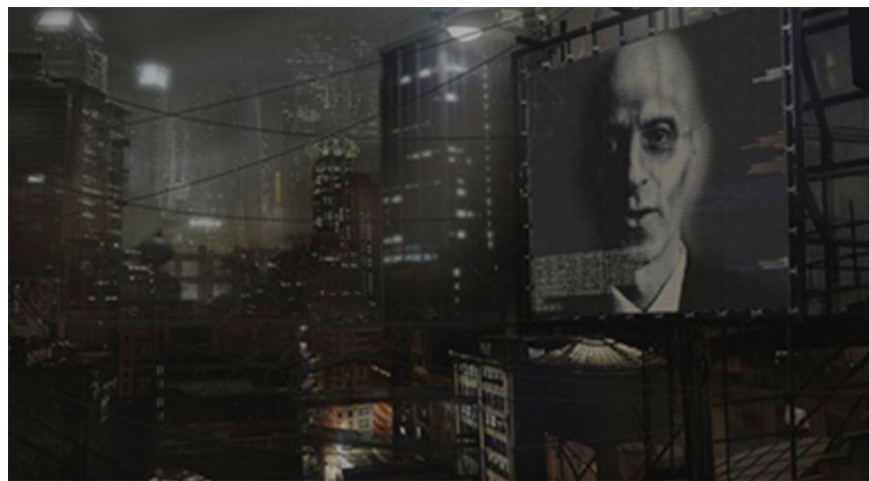


FIGURE 7. Still from *File Under Miscellaneous*. Dystopian cityscape.

engagement. As he recalled to me, “When we played cowboys and Indians, I always wanted to be John Wayne.” This turmoil motivated Barnaby to eventually leave his community for Montréal, where he “understood what it meant to be white or in the least not be Indian,” a description that parallels the narrative structure and thematic elements in his film. He reflects that his “world as an 8-year-old boy mirrored that of the smoke choked world of 2019 LA. Bizarre in its familiarity: I brain-screened bleak futurism as reserve life.” Barnaby noted that as he got older, he began relating this dystopic mode to his own culture and that at a certain age “it dawned on me: who would a ‘post-drum and feather’ Indian most relate to? The romanticized Tonto ideology or the alienated loner?”

File deals with such an isolated individual. We are first introduced to the protagonist (played by Mi'kmaq actor Glen Gould) as he is standing in a dark alley facing an ominous-looking medical center. As he approaches, body parts spill out of an opening in the building. While considering whether he should enter, we hear his internal monologue in Mi'kmaq, subtitled as the following:

It just so happens that I am tired of being a man. And it pushes me into certain corners, into some moist houses, into hospitals where the bones fly out the windows. There are sulphur-colored birds and hideous intestines hanging over the doors of houses that I hate.

Walking into a yellow-lit laboratory, he passes a pale and scarred doctor (Figure 8), and approaches several hanging flaps of white skin. We next see Gould strapped to an operating table. In Mi'kmaq, he thinks to himself, “There are mirrors that ought to have wept with shame and terror and venoms and umbilical cords.” Subsequently, in gruesome detail, his tongue is cut out

and his skin is cut away, replaced with the white scraps. He emerges in a business suit with the same pale Frankenstein's monster-like appearance as the doctor, whose own position as a postoperative Native suggests a commentary on self-assimilation. As Gould takes his place among dozens of indistinguishable similar individuals in front of a talking head on a large screen (*à la* 1984), he narrates in his mind the poem from the beginning of this section. While before the operation he spoke in English and thought in Mi'kmaq, with the loss of his tongue he can no longer speak at all and thinks only in English, with faint and fading whispers of Mi'kmaq in the background.

Barnaby is not worried about offending audiences with graphic content. As he articulated to me, his goal is “to present awful or beautiful things to people and have them deal with it,” the objective, he argues, of any good art. When people are bothered by *File*, “it isn't the violent imagery that offends, but the message, that your culture is destroying mine . . . [and] that white people come first and everyone else is commodified into an ethnicity. . . . This is something that most people won't acknowledge.”

The title of this section invokes Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008[1952]). His conception of psychological and linguistic colonization helps us to further understand this film. In what he terms the “epidermalization of inferiority,” Fanon describes the nature of suffering as a “Negro”: “I start suffering from not being a white man insofar as the white man discriminates against me; turns me into a colonized subject . . . tells me I am a parasite in the world . . . So I will try quite simply to make myself white; in other words, I will force the white man to acknowledge my humanity” (11). Revealing the ways in which blackness serves as a foil to whiteness, Fanon problematizes the psychological processes of becoming culturally European; *File* literalizes his metaphor. Barnaby reflects on the significance



FIGURE 8. Still from *File Under Miscellaneous*. The doctor performing skin transplant surgery.

of this symbolism and his own desire for white privilege as a teenager:

Letting go the responsibility of having to undo the horror of being Indian in the 20th century. To not have to carry that mantle of shame and humiliation. To be free. To not have to be native. To partake and laugh in the various things that have destroyed us without guilt or reprisal. But it was even more than that. It was the idea of having to do it wantonly and willingly. And to press the idea of subjugation on your friends and family. I wanted to be that voice, the voice that said burn it all and set me free.

Fanon argues that the language of colonial dominance embodies assumptions that “support the weight of a civilization” (2008[1952]:17–18), and further that the “Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is” ((2008[1952]:38). Barnaby depicts Gould’s tongue being cut out at the film’s climax because linguistic colonization is no abstract issue on the Mi’kmaq reserve, and represents one of the most serious threats to cultural sovereignty.

Barnaby presents us with a character who “struggles to survive amidst a hostile society which dominates the planet—as in *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison” (Malmgren 1991:7). Malmgren’s reference to Ellison (1952) is appropriate here, as it is the desire of the protagonist to become visible, replacing his dehumanized Native mask with white skin, depicting a future “that conforms to [the] deepest terrors and wishes” of conflicted Mi’kmaqs (Sanders 2008:172). *File* presents a dystopia so ominous and systemically poisonous to Native peoples that it becomes difficult to imagine the present adequacy of small incremental bureaucratic adjustments. Echoing Dillon (2012:8), he expressed to me that “Native America is, by any measure, a post apocalyptic culture.” This film embodies such a sentiment and depicts assimilation as systemic within dominant systems, requiring a sea change.

File is more than a science fiction projection of what *may* happen; it is also about daily realities of Mi’kmaq people and Barnaby’s own life history. Orwell’s (1949) dystopic *1984* (cited by Barnaby as an inspiration) was “not a futurist fantasy but rather a satire on his own world, an extreme vision of Britain in 1948 at the height of the Cold War” (Palmer in Sanders 2008:184). Similarly, *File* is largely about Barnaby’s own life and community. However, unlike Orwell’s liberal Western concerns about the loss of personal identity and freedom, Barnaby expresses common Native concerns regarding cultural identity and assimilation.

Such connections between science “fiction” and the lived experiences of Native peoples are integral for successfully engaging Grande’s red pedagogy and grounding such films in relation to community concerns (2004:95). Native sci-fi filmmakers’ ability to pose such provocative futured commentaries positions their films to critically reimagine the long-term impacts of contemporary policies, such as the devastating implications of blood quantum over centuries.

Considering Barnaby’s ability to deploy science fiction film while addressing autobiographical and community issues, what is the relationship between *File* and more “objective” documentary and ethnographic film traditions? Such questions have persisted throughout the history of film studies and visual anthropology, with Jean Rouch, a pioneer in *cinéma vérité* ethnographic filmmaking, proclaiming, “there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction” (Rouch and Feld 2003:20). Turner (1995) grounds such debates by arguing that issues of authenticity are less important than the potential impact that films may have on indigenous communities, and that the demand for “authentic” Natives is itself ideologically driven by persisting colonial fantasies of the other. These Native sci-fi films not only avoid such othered contact tropes, but also subvert this logic by indigenizing encounters of the third kind and utopian–dystopian futures. Like Rouch’s ethnofiction films in Niger, these shorts serve as vehicles for creating alternative filmic realities.

Barnaby and other Native sci-fi filmmakers transcend mere fiction by meaningfully communicating the lived hopes and fears of community members. It is difficult to conceive how ethnographic film, the documentary genre most devoted to such an interpretive project, could be as effective in conveying Native identity anxieties (Lempert 2012). The ability of filmmakers such as Barnaby to succeed where ethnographic filmmakers have not secures Native sci-fi’s role as a crucial component of the parallax effect (Ginsburg 1995) between indigenous and ethnographic film genres. Furthermore, Native sci-fi filmmakers such as Barnaby are better positioned to deeply explore topics that are taboo for anthropologists, such as the chilling confession that Mi’kmaq youth sometimes express desires to be “white.” It is paramount that such insights, as distressful as they are, are neither ignored nor superficially interpreted, but rather are critically and carefully engaged.

Future Directions

This article is an attempt to further the development of indigenous futurist analytical frameworks through

analyses of Native science fiction films, drawing on multidisciplinary scholarship. Although the current cost of sci-fi film production is prohibitively expensive—some of these shorts were funded at rates higher than many Native features—increasingly cheaper and sophisticated video and computer technologies will make this genre more accessible to even low-budget filmmakers in the near future. As more Native sci-fi films are produced, indigenous futurist frameworks will necessarily be expanded and revised to account for the increasing diversity among and between films. Indeed, while I focus on Native North American cinema, longer films from other continents have also been released, including the Colombian 2008-set Kogi slipstream, *Gonawindua* (Cavalli and Suárez 2011) and the Australian experimental Aboriginal feature, *Dreamland* (Sen 2009). There will also likely be increased support for such indigenous genres.¹²

As Native science fiction becomes an increasingly common form of expression for imagining indigenous futures on-screen, it is crucial that these films are contextualized in relation to relevant filmmaker biographies as well as community histories and concerns. There is also a need for continued theorizing on a variety of Native sci-fi mediums, each of which will undoubtedly demonstrate its own set of representational qualities. Furthermore, scholarship on Native science fiction will be able to draw from and creatively contribute not only to established anthropological scholarship on science fiction and the future (Collins 2003, 2008; Slusser and Rabkin 1987; Stover 1973), but also to recent anthropological engagements with virtual worlds and sociality (Boellstorff 2008), outer space and the extreme (Valentine et al. 2012), and inconceivably radical worlds (Povinelli 2001).

This article analyzes media that are essential for enacting Justice's (2008) "decolonization imperative," the simultaneous deconstruction of indigenous stereotypes, and construction of new representations, which are symbiotic strategies for expanding visual sovereignty. Although I have focused on the *creative* efforts of Native science fiction filmmakers, there is also an emerging literature on the critique of indigenous representations in popular sci-fi films.¹³ Both threads of scholarship will further more nuanced understandings.

While it is crucial that we acknowledge and engage the complex embedded commentaries on the present and past in Native science fiction, the act of futuring itself should not be dismissed by anthropologists as too nebulous for ethnographic study. As Derrida contends, we must challenge ourselves to remain "faithful and attentive to the ineluctable world of the future which

proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge . . . which breaks absolutely with constituted normality" (1976[1967]:4). Native sci-fi films should compel ethnographers to take seriously Valentine's (2012:1065) poignant question, "What kind of duty does the anthropologist have to engage [the] future as a social phenomenon of the present but also as a potential key for the future that opens up possibilities we may not yet have thought of?" It is not enough that anthropologists have shifted from viewing indigenous peoples as anachronistic relics to engaging the present concerns of contemporary communities. Indigenous futurism is about expanding ethnographic theories and methods to address futures as significant copresent realms of study, lest we risk "silencing Native futures," what I term as an inversion of Trouillot's (1995) *Silencing the Past*. Yet, indigenous futurism is about more than simply including these futures. By assuming that indigenous peoples have as much of a complex cultural and political future as any Western society, it has the potential to help reimagine the foundational assumptions of ethnographic projects, even for researchers documenting the language and knowledge of a community's "last elders." Anthropologists should engage such elders as much on deep cultural futures as on pasts, providing possible roadmaps for younger generations and complicating attitudes toward cultural orthodoxies, which have a tendency to be overemphasized by ethnographers. Echoing Future Warrior's invocation of the "technobiological spirit," indigenous futurism should also induce culturally appropriate academic dissemination through new media technologies that appeal to indigenous youth, including phone/tablet apps, social media, and popular indigenous video sharing websites such as Australia's IndigiTube. Communities are empowered and constrained by the constellation of their members' expectations, fears, and hopes for the future. Science fiction film holds particular promise as an indigenous medium because of its demonstrated potential for expressing and transforming such imaginative spaces. In the current context in which indigenous peoples face increasing social and material pressures, the development of critical literatures on such emerging media has never been more urgent.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank those who have helped me develop these ideas. I was introduced to the concept of "indigenous futurisms" through a conversation with Danika Medak-Saltzman in relation to her own research (personal communication, October 11, 2011). She helped me to frame this

article. My initial introduction to Native science fiction film was through Kristin Dowell's 2010 AAA paper, "*?E?anr: The Cave: The Making of a Tsilhqot'in Sci-Fi*." I also wish to thank Jennifer Shannon, Matt Sponheimer, Leighton Peterson, Teresa Montoya, Barry Lempert, and the VAR editors, Brent Luvaas and Mark Westmoreland, as well as my two anonymous peer reviewers.

- ² While "futurism" originated as an early 20th-century Italian artistic and social movement glorifying the progressive project of modern warfare as creative destruction, this term, as well as "futuring," has been operationalized in contemporary scholarship to connote a creative reimagining of the future in relation to marginalization, social critique, and the subversion of dominant ideologies.
- ³ See Rieder for an analysis of colonial discourse and the emergence and development of sci-fi as a genre deeply influenced by 19th-century anthropology and theories of evolution, which continue to foster its particular relationship with origins, discovery, progress, disaster, and exotic "others" (2008:2).
- ⁴ This news release may be found at <http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/newsrelease/2235>.
- ⁵ To receive federal recognition, Native Americans generally must have at least one-quarter of their heritage (or "blood") traced through one tribe based on the unreliable records from the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887. Because of intermarriage outside of and between Native American nations, if left unchanged, this system threatens to dispossess the legal recognition of virtually all Native Americans over the coming centuries.
- ⁶ While this painting was not featured in *Future Warrior*, it shows Echo-Hawk's engagement with *Star Wars* imagery, which helped inspire this film.
- ⁷ Despite its various issues of cultural appropriation, *Star Wars* has found resonance in Native America. In addition to Echo-Hawk's art and *Future Warrior*, the original 1977 film *A New Hope* recently became the first Hollywood sci-fi film to be translated into a Native American language (Diné). Framed as a language revitalization project, voice actors were recruited from the Navajo Nation, and it premiered on July 3, 2013, at the fairgrounds in the capital of Window Rock and continues to attract large Native audiences.
- ⁸ Raheja (2010) explores the concept of visual sovereignty as indigenous media representations that dialogue between Native and colonial histories, facilitating tribal agency and healing. For interesting current examples, see Peterson (2013) and Montoya (2013) regarding the ongoing process of repatriating the *Navajos Film Themselves* (Worth and Adair 1966) films to the Navajo Nation.
- ⁹ All quotes by Barnaby are from either his director's statement or personal interview (Barnaby 2012).
- ¹⁰ Screening at over 30 festivals, *File* has won awards at ImagiNATIVE, the Tulsa International Film Festival, and Terre en Vue as well as winning the 2011 Genie Award for Best Short Film.
- ¹¹ This review may be found at <http://twitchfilm.com/2010/09/short-film-short-review-file-under-miscellaneous.html>.

¹² The Sundance Film Festival is one example, whose 2011 Native Lab Fellowship encouraged applications from indigenous filmmakers working on "COMEDY! HORROR! SCIENCE FICTION! and DOCUMENTARY" scripts. Native westerns hold particular potential for speaking back to and beyond the genre most implicated in legacies of Native American stereotyping.

¹³ Adare (2005) engages indigenous perspectives on *Star Trek* and other popular sci-fi television shows that restrict Native people to stereotyped and one-dimensional roles. There has also been recent anthropological engagement with Cameron's *Avatar* (e.g., Starn 2011).

Filmography

Barnaby, Jeff, dir.

2004 *From Cherry English*. 10 min. Nutaaq Media Inc.

2007 *The Colony*. 24 min. Eye Steel Film.

2010 *File Under Miscellaneous*. 7 min. Prospector Films.

2013 *Rhymes with Young Ghouls*. 90 min. Prospector Films.

Becker, Nanobah, dir.

2012 *The 6th World*. 15 min. Futurestates.

Cavalli, Giuliano, and Jorge Mario Suárez, dirs.

2011 *Gonawindua*. 13 min. Murillo Films.

Flaherty, Jeff, dir.

1922 *Nanook of the North*. 79 min. The Criterion Collection.

Francis, Jeana, and Nigel Long Soldier, dirs.

2007 *Future Warrior*. 29 min.

Gronau, Anna, and Shelley Niro, dirs.

1993 *It Starts with a Whisper*. 24 min. Baye of Quinte Productions.

Haig-Brown, Helen, dir.

2009 *The Cave*. 11 min. imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival.

Jackson, Lisa, dir.

2009 *The Visit*. 4 min. National Film Board.

Kunuk, Zacharias, dir.

2001 *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. 172 min. Igloolik Isuma Productions.

Lucas, George, dir.

1977 *Star Wars: A New Hope*. 121 min. Lucasfilm.

Scott, Ridley, dir.

1982 *Blade Runner*. 117 min. Warner Bros.

Sen, Ivan, dir.

2009 *Dreamland*. 94 min. Bunya Productions.

Worth, Sol, and John Adair, dirs.

1966 *Navajos Film Themselves*. New York University.

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