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Building Indigenous Futures for Indigenous Children: Indigenous Futurisms and Dismantling the Myth of the Vanishing Indian

Abstract

The myth of the so-called vanishing Indian, which relegates Indigenous peoples to museums and views them as peoples of the past, is one of the most persistent and problematic contemporary narratives. It is, however, being actively dismantled through writing that posits Indigenous futurism, the inclusion and emphasis of Indigenous peoples and traditions in science fiction and speculative fiction, as demonstrated in Cherie Dimaline's 2018 novel *The Marrow Thieves* and other works of contemporary Indigenous futurism. This novel dismantles the narrative of the vanishing Indian using Indigenous futurism and by emphasizing Indigenous family and tradition. This article intends to provide a brief investigation of the storytelling and narrative elements that Dimaline uses to posit Indigenous futurisms for Indigenous children and deconstruct the myth of the vanishing Indian. The deconstruction of this myth through literature allows defiance of the myth into popular culture; the inclusion of the book in classrooms across Canada also allows children—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—to become aware of the harmful nature of the myth of the vanishing Indian.

Keywords: Indigenous Futurism, Indigenous Literature, Young Adult Fiction

Résumé

Le mythe du soi-disant « vanishing Indian », qui relègue les peuples autochtones aux musées et les perçoit comme faisant partie de peuples du passé est l'une des notions préconçues contemporaines les plus persistantes et problématiques d'aujourd'hui. Cela dit, cette notion se fait activement démanteler par des écrits explorant le futurisme autochtone, l'inclusion et l'emphase des peuples et traditions autochtones, en science fiction comme en fiction spéculative. Cette notion est en effet démantelée au travers du récit de 2018 de Cherie Dimaline *The Marrow Thieves* et à travers d'autres textes autochtones contemporains futuristes. Ce texte démonte le stéréotype du « vanishing Indian » en se servant du

futurisme autochtone et en plaçant de l'emphase sur la famille et les traditions autochtones. Ce texte a pour but d'analyser brièvement les éléments narratifs dont Dimaline se sert pour positionner le futurisme autochtone pour les enfants autochtones et pour déconstruire le mythe du « vanishing Indian ». Cette déconstruction du mythe en littérature permet de défier le mythe au niveau de la culture populaire. L'inclusion de ces livres dans les écoles canadiennes permet aussi aux enfants—autochtones comme non-autochtones—de prendre conscience de la nature nocive du mythe du « vanishing Indian ».

Mots clés : futurisme autochtone, littérature autochtone, littérature jeunesse

One of the most prominent and persistent myths surrounding Indigenous peoples is the myth of the so-called "vanishing Indian", which relegates Indigenous peoples to museums and views them as peoples of the past, despite their rich contemporary lives[1]. However, this myth is being actively dismantled through writing that posits Indigenous futurism, an inclusion and emphasis of Indigenous peoples and traditions in science fiction and speculative fiction, as demonstrated in Cherie Dimaline's 2018 novel *The Marrow Thieves* and other works of contemporary Indigenous futurism. This novel dismantles the narrative of the vanishing Indian using Indigenous futurism and by emphasizing Indigenous family and tradition. Deconstructing this myth through literature folds defiance of the myth into popular culture; the inclusion of the book in classrooms across Canada also allows children—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—to become aware of the harmful nature of the myth of the vanishing Indian.

The narrative of the "vanishing Indian" is the settler belief that Indigenous peoples are peoples of the past who will ultimately—inevitably—be forgotten. The myth perpetuates the false belief that Indigenous oral traditions and culture have been lost to centuries of disconnection and the 'purity' of their communities undermined by intermarrying with settlers. The mythology of the vanishing Indian is useful to settlers for a variety of reasons, as explored by scholars Kishan Lara-Cooper and Sammy Cooper. "The concept of a vanishing people," they explain, "relieves contemporary mainstream society of any accountability and/or reverence for the 'vanished' group," thus serving to ultimately dehumanize Indigenous people (2016, p. 60). This cultural dismissal defines Indigenous peoples as an extinct population, a group whose only significance is scientific or historical, as opposed to contemporary, political, or cultural. This scientific interest has led to the excavation of skeletal remains of Indigenous peoples around the world. These remains are often in museums without consent and without care for cultural practices, or familial or individual wishes, and have, in many cases, not been returned. This mistreatment of remains is evidence of the lack of accountability of mainstream society[2]. The feeling that Indigenous people are going extinct is not met with a desire to empathize with communities or resist the colonial barriers and system still in place today, but with "further cultural exploitation" as settlers attempt to "'experience' what is left […] of Indigenous ways of knowing" (Lara-Cooper and Cooper, 2016, p. 60). Even as they are being destroyed by historical and ongoing colonial structures still in place today, Indigenous cultures are commodified and exploited while Indigenous individuals are dehumanized. The belief in the so-called vanishing Indian persists in mainstream narratives, which Medak-Saltzman says have a "pervasive and profound inability to portray Natives peoples and our continued existence in the present, let alone project us forward into any potential futures" (2017, p. 140).

Indigenous writers carve their own space into these "potential futures" through Indigenous futurisms and science fiction; they are very aware of the fictional narrative of the vanishing Indian. The Anishinaabe word *biskaabiiyang* is often applied to the writing of Indigenous futurisms (Simpson qtd. in Leggatt, 2019, p.

[1] As discussed by Cherie Dimaline in "Reclaiming Lost Dreams."

[2] Accountability has—slowly—been growing over the past ten years. See "To return or not: Who should own Indigenous art?" (Farago); 'We were horrified:' fights to repatriate Indigenous ancestral remains continue worldwide" (Hamilton); "Indigenous Remains Do Not Belong to Science"; and "'They're not property:' the people who want their ancestors back from British museums." (Shariatmadari) for information on the fight for repatriation of ancestral remains to Indigenous peoples around the world.

143). Coined by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, the word indicates a "returning to ourselves" which allows storytellers to "pick up the things we were forced to leave behind […] and bring them into existence in the future" (Simpson qtd. in Leggatt, 2019, p. 143). Grace Dillon, editor of *The Walking Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, states that "all forms of Indigenous futurism are narratives of *biskaabiiyang*," and that Indigenous peoples are "recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (Leggatt, 2019, p. 143). Indigenous futurisms thus allow Indigenous people to deconstruct the false mythology of the vanishing Indian by placing themselves firmly in the future.

Indigenous futurist literature allows Indigenous children in particular the opportunity to see the potential of their own futures, as Cherie Dimaline discusses in a 2018 interview. When the interviewer stated that Dimaline wanted Indigenous children to feel "seen," Dimaline replied:

> Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I spent a lot of years working in […] First Nations communities, mostly in Ontario, and I was working with youth who didn't even have the language of seeing themselves in the future. And I thought, 'well, you know, if you don't see a world where you exist, then I'm going to build one, and I'm going to put you there.' (2019)

By placing children into a future that is not only full of Indigenous characters, but also full of Indigenous story, Dimaline offers a collection of stories within her novel. *The Marrow Thieves* is a work of knowledge-sharing and a work of young adult science fiction simultaneously. Novels like *The Marrow Thieves* "can aid us in our efforts to imagine our way out of our present dystopian moment to call forth better futures" (Leggatt, 2019, p. 143).

In the novel, Dimaline dismantles the myth of the vanishing Indian in three distinct ways. The first of these is through knowledge-sharing, which invites both the sharing of story and the sharing of cultural intimacy. *The Marrow Thieves* includes several interjections by characters other than Frenchie, the primary narrator. These interjections are 'coming-to' stories from Wab, Miigwans, and Rose, and even though the reader is removed from the central storyline, the anecdotes from their characters are designed to read like an oral history, says Dimaline. As she explains in "Reclaiming Lost Dreams," the rhythm of the narrative—the movement between characters, as though this were a group of people sitting and sharing a story together—was intentional. For Dimaline, it is reminiscent of the way her grandmothers and aunts told her stories as a child (Dimaline qtd. in Iyer, 2019, p. 29). In folding this Indigenous method of storytelling into the novel, Dimaline creates a sense of familiarity for Indigenous children who know this way of sharing and offers it to those whose stories have not been told in the same manner. Stories therefore become a way of forming connection, both within and without the novel.

There are also Indigenous stories included within the framework of the novel itself, including stories of the Wendigo, the Rougarou, and the residential school system. Storytelling is a form of cultural intimacy that impacts all people, but children especially. Consider RiRi's enthusiasm for story time, and the way that Frenchie constantly references the stories he's been told within his internal monologue (including Wab's coming-to story, and the stories Miigwans tells about Indigenous history). Their thinking and their ways of viewing the world are impacted by the stories shared. There are other forms of cultural intimacy in the book as well, particularly with the Indigenous camp they find in "Found" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 161), including the value of sweetgrass, tobacco, drumming, dancing, braids, and sweat lodges. Dimaline's casual inclusion of these culturally-significant objects is yet another act of sharing—a sharing between older and younger generations, as *The Marrow Thieves* is a young adult novel. By sharing stories and including Indigenous forms of storytelling in the novel, Dimaline is reminding children and youth of their indigeneity, and their futures that they have the opportunity to shape and build. In doing so, she simultaneously begins to deconstruct the myth of the vanishing Indian, which is founded on the belief that Indigenous peoples have no future.

Dimaline continues to deconstruct this myth through the text's emphasis on family. The novel begins with Mitch, Frenchie's older brother, sacrificing himself, and ends with both Miigwans reuniting with his half-Cree husband, Isaac, and Frenchie reuniting with his father, Jean. By framing the narrative with the reunification of

families—particularly families who have resisted violence and can now move forward in their lives—Dimaline connects community, family, and the future:

> And I understood that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream. And I understood just what we would do for each other, just what we would do for ebb and pull of the dream, the bigger the dream that held us all.
>
> Anything.
>
> Everything. (Dimaline, 2017, p. 231)

Throughout *The Marrow Thieves*, family is a touchstone. Each coming-to story includes discussions of the character's family, and families reunite twice in the second half of the book: first Frenchie and his father (Dimaline, 2017, p. 169) and later Isaac and Miigwans (Dimaline, 2017, p. 231). Dimaline's emphasis on families reuniting and returning to one another, or families being created through and despite hardship undermines the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples, caused, in part, by the cultural impact of the myth of the vanishing Indian and its effect on a family's ability to envision a future. In *The Marrow Thieves*, it is impossible to ignore that all the characters of the novel are individuals who need, care for, and fight for their families. Dimaline constantly reinforces the current and future existence of Indigenous *families*. This reminds readers—Indigenous and settler alike—that in all these very real futures explored in works of Indigenous futurisms, there is always potential for the development and maintenance of family and community, specifically family and community bound by tradition.

The mythology of the vanishing Indian is steeped in colonialism. It exists to undermine Indigenous ways of knowing, de-value Indigenous life, and dehumanize Indigenous individuals. When Dimaline offers to build futures for Indigenous children, she reminds all her readers that Indigenous people are more than the artifacts of a distant, unfamiliar history. *The Marrow Thieves*, like all works of Indigenous futurisms, is a work of *biskaabiiyang*. They allow children and families to return to their own histories and envision those futures simultaneously, defying harmful colonial mythologies in favour of hope for Indigenous communities and real, pervasive change in a world that continues to govern the lives of Indigenous peoples.

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