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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Elwood, S. (2024). Thinking Geomedia Futures: Indigenous Futurisms, Afrofuturisms, and Counter-Mediations of Temporality, Spatiality, and Digitality. *Media and Communication*, *12*. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8935

Media and Communication
2024 • Volume 12 • Commentary 8935
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8935

COMMENTARY

Open Access Journal

Thinking Geomedia Futures: Indigenous Futurisms, Afrofuturisms, and Counter-Mediations of Temporality, Spatiality, and Digitality

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Submitted: 10 July 2024 **Accepted:** 22 July 2024 **Published:** 3 September 2024

Issue: This commentary is part of the issue "Geomedia Futures: Imagining Tomorrow's Mediatized Places and Place-Based Technologies" edited by Karin Fast (Karlstad University), Cornelia Brantner (Karlstad University), and Pablo Abend (Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i448

Abstract

For critical scholars, abiding concerns about geomedia futures have included utopian–dystopian formulations of geomedia in popular culture and governance, the deep harms and inequalities that inevitably flow from technocapitalist geomedia regimes, and the urgent need for a plurality of counter-normative ways of theorizing and engaging geomedia. Toward these concerns, I argue here that Indigenous futurism and Afrofuturism hold vital conceptual and analytic insights for thinking and realizing geomedia futures that assemble time, space, and digitality in just and life-sustaining ways. Here, I briefly explore work by geographers, historians, and digital studies scholars that has engaged Indigenous and Black feminist speculative traditions to critique the structural, embodied, and emplaced violence of racial capitalist and settler colonial histories, chronopolitics, and futures. The minoritarian futures expressed and circulated through speculative fiction, visual arts, everyday digital practices, and technocultures by structurally-oppressed groups for whom the future has never been taken for granted hold vital conceptual and analytical insights for thinking geomedia futures beyond the limits of its technocapitalist roots and present structures.

Keywords

Afrofuturism; digital geographies; geomedia; Indigenous futurism; speculative imagination

For critical future studies, Indigenous studies and Black geographies scholarship offer vital inroads, in particular through their insistence that time and place are political claims: To imagine or work toward a future is to make claims about the lives, lands, and relations that comprise that future. Lou Cornum (Diné/Bilagáana) writes, "Alongside the question of what the future holds is the question of who holds the

future. Black futures, Indigenous futures, Latinx futures, Dalit futurism, disabled futures, queer futures" (Cornum, 2023, p. 166). Closely related, Danielle Purifoy argues:

> The long Black practice of recognising what makes life possible is perhaps part of what makes life precious enough to sustain….The enduring parable of Black places is the urgent evidence of another future where life is no longer made impossible. (Purifoy, 2021, p. 832)

In the writings from which these passages are drawn, Cornum and Purifoy use Black feminist and Indigenous speculative fiction as theoretical-analytic lenses for apprehending abundant possible futures beyond the violent relations of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and associated ideologies of modernity, progress, and technology. They argue that Black and Indigenous traditions of theory and life crafted at the intersections of speculative fiction, activism, vernacular cultures, and more offer vital reservoirs of wisdom and praxis for "making a way out of no way": Crafting thriving, repair, and right relations to lands, waters, human, and non-human lives in spite of enduring structures that seem to preordain dispossession and death.

These articulations of Black and Indigenous futurities, in a wide range of spaces and media, enact conceptual-epistemological innovations and grounded practices of thriving by oppressed groups for whom the future has never been taken for granted. Also relevant, but beyond the scope of my commentary, are theorizations of queer futurity (first articulated by Jose Estaban Muñoz to challenge normatively white theorizations of queer negativity and anti-relationality). For critical geomedia studies, these diverse traditions of futuring chart profoundly important ways of rethinking and remaking relations between peoples, technologies, space, and place.

This edited collection of articles on geomedia futures (Fast et al., 2024) coalesces around deep concerns with the celebratory and singular futuring that is often woven into mainstream representations of geomedia, and the socio-technological arrangements that ever-deeper geomediatization of everyday life is purported to advance. The academic editors traced how these hegemonic visions of the futures that geomediatization enables are entangled with technocapitalist structures and logics (Fast & Abend, 2022; see also Hartmann & Jansson, 2024). They identified critical futures studies as an arena of thought that refuses such singularity, opening up multiple possible geomediatization futures and the socio-technological relations that they might support. Building from these propositions, I argue that scholarly and creative work on Black and Indigenous futurities has a vital role to play in knowing and supporting critical geomedia futures that reassemble time, space, and digitality in just and life-sustaining ways that exceed the structural, embodied, and emplaced violence around which technocapitalist histories, presents, and futures are too often structured.

Scholars in geography are already charting epistemological-political openings from Black and Indigenous futuring expressed in fiction, artworks, and other creative forms, and exploring how these works represent pasts and presents, to open onto multiple otherwise futures. Summers (2022) engages Black feminist speculative fiction as an analytic frame for contemporary urbanism, tracing how the dystopian futures of social and environmental catastrophe envisioned by Octavia Butler, China Mièville, N. K. Jemison, and Nnedi Okarafor are the wholly unsurprising continuation of the catastrophic urban landscapes that technocapitalism racialized removal and extraction create. Importantly, Summers simultaneously uses utopian visions from these Afrofuturist authors to read the urban present, arguing for attention to already-existing socio-technological practices of "intrepid urbanism" that are already doing reclamation,

repair, and repurposing from within urban ruination, demonstrating otherwise futures to technocapitalist urban hellscapes. Purifoy (2021) also turns to Black feminist speculative fiction, reading Octavia Butler's *Parables* series as a theorization of the United States as dystopia assembled through labor exploitation, mass incarceration, and environmental harm, and as a framing of futures in which the survivors of these devastations craft restorative land-life interdependencies. These moves reject normatively white social science theory that apprehends Black places through a dystopian conceptual repertoire, Purifoy (2021) argues, instead theorizing Black places as, "parables of the threats of industrialisation, technology, and white ideals of progress, and [as] parables of adaptation, interdependence, and supportability" (p. 830). Curley and Smith (2024) point to the ways in which Black and Indigenous futurities have theorized how time, temporalities, and history are weaponized in support of settler colonial extraction, via ideologies of modernity, progress, and technological advancement. They call attention to futuring expressed through visual art that advances Indigenous temporalities and future relations of abundance and thriving. Analyzing a Phoenix, Arizona, mural depicting Diné and Tohono O'odham stories, they trace how the visual narratives in the mural situate the past and future in close proximity to one another, and draw throughlines from longstanding Indigenous natural law and technologies to contemporary renewable energy technologies.

These examples demonstrate some of the theoretical and analytic insights that geographers and other critical social and spatial thinkers might catalyze through deepened forging engagements with Black and Indigenous futurities. These arenas of critical futuring have an especially vital role to play in re-casting theorizations of the past and present to, among other things, more clearly apprehend already-present seeds of alternative futures beyond racial, technological, and environmental harms. These perspectives matter for critical geomedia studies because they unpack how linear and singular notions of time enable socio-temporal frames such as "modernity" and "progress," how these temporalities are bound up to technology, and how they are used to justify the structural arrangements and material practices of racial capitalism and settler colonialism (Cornum, 2023; Curley & Smith, 2024; Whyte, 2018). Some readers may ask how fiction, art, and other creative works are materially consequential in the face of these deep structural harms, or precisely how these creative expressions shape lived worlds. Toward this question, I would echo a foundational claim from many analyses of Afrofuturisms and Indigenous futurisms: Creative works are at once fully steeped in the sociocultural and political economic hegemonies within which they are created, and also engaged in expressing *speculative imaginations* that need not conform to the limits of these existing orders, and thus can demonstrate alternative futures (Muñoz, 2009; Yaszek, 2006). This externalization of speculative imaginations bridges literary-artistic worlds and lived worlds through representations that re-think past and present, in order to build propositions about alternative futures. As art and literature are created, circulated, and engaged, their speculative futurings condition societal imaginations of the kinds of land–life relations that are possible and desirable, with concrete implications for the worlds that communities and collectivities demand and strive to create (Cornum, 2023).

Of particular importance for thinking geomedia futures, some scholarship on Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism explicitly centers the role of digital practices in critical futuring, paying particular attention to digital mediations of socialities, spatialities, and temporalities. For instance, Cornum (2023) notes the crucial role that listservs, forums, blogs, and other networked media in the co-creation of early collections of Indigenous and Afrofuturist speculative fiction, tracing the generative cross-circulation of "minoritarian" futurities from these creative writings with those being framed in Black and Indigenous feminist theory and activisms. Through these examples, he illuminates digital mediations of *collective* imaginations across spacetimes,

"in the modality of prophetic possibility, suffused with connection to a prior…living memory among oppressed people" (Cornum, 2023, p. 170). Here, Cornum's emphasis on collective creation, imagination, and living memory charts ways of being and doing with digital media that are decidedly otherwise to the individualistic socialities and linear-singular histories and temporalities that anchor technocapitalist futures. Relatedly, Brock (2020) calls attention to the presence and significance of Afrofuturisms created and circulated through everyday "Black enactments" (p. 14) in online and social media. He argues that everyday practices of Black sociality enacted in digital media (call-out, showing the receipts, active/communal witnessing, critical-political re-framings) create a "post-present" that wrestles with enduring histories of racial harms while also collectively imagining and demonstrating other futures. Brock's analysis of these quotidian digital practices demonstrates modes of futuring that refuse the ideologies of efficiency, utility, and individualization that infuse hegemonic technofutures, and refuse the deficit, respectability/uplift, and resistance frames through which social science and popular culture too often read Black technology use.

For critical geomedia studies, scholarship on Indigenous and Afrofuturisms opens up countless vital conceptual and analytic directions. It charts how everyday digital life can function as site and mode of futuring. It illuminates how past, present, and future are, in these traditions of theory and life, coalesced and imagined around plural non-linear temporalities and life-affirming justice-seeking sociospatial relations. It draws our analytic attention to already-existing digitally-mediated futuring that exceeds the terms of hegemonic technocultures. All these conceptual and analytic moves offer ways of apprehending geomedia futures as already being crafted beyond the confines of technocapitalist structures and imaginations, through affective-political orientations that are more than only acceptance/resignation or resistance. For critical geomedia scholars, this means continuing to look for and learn from solidarity—and justice-oriented initiatives that deploy geomedia in ways that rewrite geohistories, insist on life-affirming sociospatial relations, and demonstrate otherwise futures to technocapitalist visions of a geomediatized future.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the academic editors for inviting me to this thematic issue.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Sarah Elwood is professor of Geography at the University of Washington. Her research focuses on digital technologies, urban geographies, and creative politics forged by structurally disadvantaged peoples fighting for equity, self-determination, and thriving. She is past editor of *Progress in Human Geography*, co-author of *Abolishing Poverty: Toward Pluriverse Politics and Futures* (University of Georgia, 2023), and co-editor of *Relational Poverty Politics* (University of Georgia, 2018) and *Qualitative GIS* (Sage, 2009).