

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction

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Custer on the Slipstream

GERALD VIZENOR

(1978)

Slipstream raises fundamental epistemological and ontological questions about reality that most other forms of fiction are ill prepared to address.

—*John Clute*

I don't understand how time works anymore.

—*Sherman Alexie*, *Flight*

IN THEIR 2006 ANTHOLOGY celebrating slipstream sf, James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel recall Bruce Sterling's coinage of the term *slipstream* in his 1989 fanzine column *sf Eye*. Sterling is credited for an attempt "to understand a kind of fiction . . . that was not true science fiction, and yet bore some relation to science fiction."¹ Noticeably absent from Sterling's original list of 135 so-called slipstream writers is Native author, scholar, and activist Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), whose 1978 story "Custer in the Slipstream" unmistakably invokes the genre. Nor is Vizenor included in Sterling and Person's updated master list of 204 slipstreamers.² In fact, the updated list includes only one Native author, Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe), despite the abundance of slipstream elements in the works of Sherman Alexie (Coeur d'Alene), Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), Stephen Graham Jones (Piegan Blackfeet), Thomas King (Cherokee), N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), Eden Robinson (Haida/Haisla), Leslie Marmon

Silko (Laguna Pueblo), and Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibwe), as well as Vizenor.

It's worth noting Vizenor as antecedent for the use of the term (which in fact was "coined" in the early 1900s as part of the jargon of the foundling aeronautics industry and received literary application at least as early as 1983 with the creation of Slipstream Press) not so much to correct the critical history of the idea as to draw attention to the inherent similarity between a now-familiar sf trope and a way of describing Native intellectual thinking, a subject of relevance to a broader interest in Native and Indigenous sf. Sterling and Vizenor make parallel efforts to articulate theories of a literary imagination. Sterling describes slipstream literature as "fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so."³ Vizenor illustrates the imaginative and creative nature of Native stories in typical trickster fashion by employing all of these slipstream elements, showing us a world where time and space are distorted, where shamanistic possession leads to surreal vision in which a reincarnated George Armstrong Custer comes "back to his time in consciousness . . . uncertain . . . if he could travel forever from the place he had been." Vizenor's slipstream narrative constitutes a survivance story that tribal people tell of a time when "the loathsome voice and evil manner of this devious loser [Custer] [that] prevails on hundreds of reservations" magically disappears into thin air, "slipping from grace in a slipstream."

If one can characterize Sterling's effort to coin a term that intended to describe something *other than* the prevailing genres of sf, fantasy, speculative fiction, magical realism, cyberpunk, et al. — in short, to put a label on writers whose craft defied neat categorization — readers must find intriguing the exclusion of Native authors, whose work remains even *more other than other* despite features that imply its status as an original slipstream literature.

Vizenor's "Custer on the Slipstream" provides two elements essential to an understanding of Native slipstream writing. First, Native slipstream provides a nonlinear way of thinking through complex cultural tensions like "Custerology," a term popularized in 1998 by Michael A. Elliott to capture America's ironic fascination with this historical figure who can be simultaneously viewed as a military hero by western standards and as a genocidal madman by Native Americans. Second, it conveys the very real psychological experience of slipping

into various levels of awareness and consciousness, here conveyed as a state of falling down into deep dark pools of shamanic trances and possession.

So here, we kick off our slip down the rabbit hole of overlooked Indigenous sf with a seminal work that brings together two well-known yet never-before-aligned staples of Native American resistance and science fiction legerdemain: Custer as the poster child of the limitations of white oppression, and time travel through alternative realities.



General George Armstrong Custer, retouching the message that old generals never die, must hold the national record for resurrections. White people are stuck with his name, and his specter, in Custer, South Dakota and other places, but since the battle of the Little Bighorn the loathsome voice and evil manner of this devious loser prevail on hundreds of reservations. He is resurrected in humor and on white faces in the darkness.

The Chippewa, known as the Anishinabe in the language of the people, described the first white men as *kitchi mokaman*, which in translation means, the men with swords or "great knives." Since then the word has been shortened to *chamokaman* or *chamok* and the description has become depreciative and sardonic.

Farlie Border was a chamokaman and the resurrection of General George Custer. He lived for personal aggrandizement and worked for the United States Department of Labor. He was a proud and evil white man who exploited minorities and the poor for personal power and income. His manner, behind his needs for power, was devious. He laughed with unctuous humor. Federal agencies often found the most corrupt and incompetent administrators and paid them the highest salaries to work with the poor and disadvantaged. Custer and Border sought power and wealth in small places, and worked better under attack.

Farlie Border was resurrected as George Custer under the sign of Taurus, the second sign of the zodiac, but he was too stubborn to admit his celestial bearing. His personal gain games required the best tribal minds, sober and articulate, to survive and share the federal spoils. More ominous than the racial contests he staged in finding

and placing tribal people in new paraprofessional careers was his appearance in the modern world. His white hair and brackish blue eyes, his gait and manner, the placement of his blunt white fingers when he spoke, the smile and the evil curl on his thick lips, were all from the tribal memories of General George Custer. The evil loser had been resurrected in a federal program to serve tribal people and the poor.

Tribal people who visited his office for the first time said later that they could smell leather and blood and horses on the prairie. Someone in his department called him general, mister general, at a public meeting for the poor. Border smiled and stacked his fingers one over the others on the table like bodies.

"Crazy Horse is here," his tall blonde secretary told him one morning. "He said he has an appointment with you from the past, but there is nothing on the calendar about him. . . . He looks too mean to think about before lunch."

"What ever turns him on. . . . First place a call to Clement Beaulieu and then send in the mean one when I am through talking to Beaulieu," said Border.

General Border passed most of his federal administrative time in a padded high-back office chair. He pitched backward in his chair and bounced the tips of his fingers together when he listened. The drapes were drawn closed. The floor was covered with an expensive thick bone-white carpet. A picture of a black panther, the animal, was mounted on one wall. Two posters were taped on the other wall opposite the window. One encouraged tribal people, through ecclesiastical shame, not to drop out of high school. The second poster pictured one sad tribal child, suffering from hunger and various diseases, walking without shoes on the hard earth. The printed message, "walk a mile in his moccasins," had been crossed out and changed to read, "don't walk in my moccasins now, I think I stepped in something." His sinister smile seemed to spread over the entire room.

"Beaulieu. . . . You mixedblood bastard."

"Nothing is certain," responded Beaulieu.

"Lunch?" asked Border.

"No."

"Selfish bastard. . . . Then at least tell me what Alinsky said last night. What are the new rules for radicals?" asked Border, pitching

back in his high-back chair and closing his eyes to listen. He preferred telephone conversations with people because visual contacts made him nervous.

It was spring and the winter dreams of radicals and racial ideologies were budding into abstract forms. Saul Minsky, the radical organizer and street-tough theoretician, was on his "zookeeper mentality" tour and had spoken at the Lutheran Redeemer Church in Minneapolis to a collection of fair-minded liberals. He said it was the issue and the action, not the skin color that made the difference in organizing for social changes.

"Alinsky blessed himself with cigarette smoke," said Beaulieu. "He smokes too much. He toured through the usual zookeeper shit . . . his social worker shockers . . . and then defined power as amoral, power as having the ability to act. The liberals loved him. You should have been there. . . . Why do you fight being the great white liberal you are?"

"Be serious, Beaulieu," said Border.

"Yes, this is a revolution, right?" said the mixedblood tribal organizer. "I remember two great lines from his speech: the tongue has a way of trapping the mind, and we are tranquilized by our own vocabulary. . . . He *is* one of the word warriors."

"More?"

"Never expect people to move without self-interest. . . . The white liberals there had no trouble knowing what that meant. Neither do you there, Farlie Custer."

Silence.

"He also said color made the difference . . ."

"The difference in what?"

"The difference in issues and actions."

"Bullshit! No white man said that," said Border.

"Listen to this," explained Beaulieu. "I was putting you on, color makes no difference for the moment, but the best part of the evening was a spontaneous speech made by an old bow and arrow, as George Mitchell says, one of the arrowstocracy. He called himself Sitting Bull one time and Crazy Horse the second time, one of the prairie arrowstocracy, and he moved forward through the old church with a loud voice, interrupting Alinsky. Saul took another cigarette and listened. No one had the courage to tell him to stop. He spoke your name."

Beaulieu remembered how silent the church was when the old arrowstocrat spoke:

"My people call me Sitting Bull. Listen here, who told you white skins to sit there feeling smug and stingy as ticks on a mongrel when you should be out there, in the streets with the rats and cockroaches, all over this land, burning down the Bureau of Indian Affairs?"

"The Bureau is yours, your government made it up, and it is killing us while you sit in here talking and talking like ducks on a crowded pond. The white man has been killing us since he first drifted off course and got lost on the shores of our great mother earth. . . .

"Now our pockets are empty and mother earth is polluted and stripped for coal and iron. Why are you all sitting here listening to talking about talking from a white man? My name is Crazy Horse, remember that, you'll hear it again. My people are the proud Sioux. Listen, there are things to tell now. The white man puts himself in our way everywhere. Look at that Border and the Bureau, Custer is sitting everywhere holding up the Indians. Now all the original people on our mother earth go through white men and stand in lines for everything. The white man tries to make us like you to sit and listen to white people talking about talking about money and things and good places to live away from the poor.

"What would the white man do if he didn't have our problems to talk about? Think about all the people who are paid to talk about us and our so-called problems. Who would social workers be without us? Tell me this. Who would they be? They'd be out of work, that's where they'd be now. . . .

"But they are wrong, all wrong. The land will be ours again. Watch and see the land come back to us again. The earth will revolt and everything will be covered over with new earth and all the whites will disappear, but we will be with the animals again, we will be waiting in the trees and up on the sacred mountains. We will never assimilate in places like this. This church . . .

"There just ain't enough jobs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs to keep us all quiet. Everywhere else the government restores the nations they defeat in wars. Do you know why the Indian nations, the proudest people in the whole world, were never restored? Do you know why? You, all you white faces, do you know? The answer is simple,

see how dumb white people are. This is the answer, listen now, because we were never defeated, never defeated, that is the answer. . . .

"Everywhere else in the world the white government sends food and medicine to people who are hungry and sick but not to the Indians. We get nothing, nothing, because the white man never defeated us, but he makes his living on us being poor. The white man needs us to be poor for his sick soul. We got nothing because we have never been defeated, remember that. . . .

"The white government puts people everywhere in our way, trying to defeat us with words now and meetings so we can be helped. But we still dance, see. The road to evil and hell will never be laid with feathers from our sacred eagles. We are the people of the wind and water and mountains and we will not be talked into defeat, because we know the secrets of mother earth, we talk in the tongues of the sacred earth and animals. We are still dancing. When we stop dancing then you can restore us. . . .

"Remember me. Remember me talking here. My face is here before you. My name is Crazy Horse and when I talk the earth talks through me in a vision. I am Crazy Horse. . . ."

When he stopped talking he lowered his head, fitted his straw hat on his head over his braids, drew his scarred finger under his nose, and then walked in a slow shuffle down the center of the church and through the center doors to the outside.

Alinsky lighted another cigarette.

"Catch you later, Custer," said Beaulieu.

"Fuck you, Beaulieu," said Farlie Border, dropping the telephone and stroking his white beard. He sat back and remembered the first time he encountered a tribal person. The experience still haunts him at night. It was in northern Wisconsin where his parents had a summer cabin. Border had seen people with dark skin from a distance, his parents called them savages, but it was not until he was fifteen that he had his first real personal encounter.

He was watching the sun setting behind the red pines across the lake when he heard several dogs barking. Young Border opened the door of the cabin and no sooner had he focused on four reservation mongrels chasing a domestic black cat than the animals turned around twice and ran past him into the cabin. The four mongrels knocked

him down in the door. He stood up again, the cat reversed the course and he was knocked down a second time when the dogs came out of the cabin. Then, in a rage, he took his rifle, which was mounted near the back door, and shot at the cat and two mongrels before an old tribal man grabbed his arm and knocked him to the ground. Border rolled over and sprang back on his feet ready to fight, but reconsidered when he came face to face with four tribal people. The faces smiled at him and pointed at his white hair. At first the tribal people teased him, speaking part of the time in a tribal language. They called him an old woman with white hair, but then, recognizing a historical resurrection, he was named General George Custer.

"Custer, you killed our animals."

"Wild animals," said Border to the four faces.

"Everything is wild, little Custer."

"But the mongrels attacked me," pleaded Border.

"Now you must pay for our animals."

"You must pay us for the wild," said another face.

"How much?" asked Border.

"Ten thousand dollars," said a third dark face.

"How much?"

"Ten million dollars," said a fourth dark face.

"What did you say?" Border asked again.

"Then return the land to wild," said the old man.

"What wild?"

"Your cabin and the land is ours."

Border resisted their demanding voices and became arrogant and hostile. He demanded that his rifle be returned and made a detracting remark about tribal people. The tribal faces smiled and mocked his words and manners, and then touched him again and pulled at his white hair. Border was furious and lunged at the old man, but the old tribal shaman stepped aside like a trickster. Border tripped and fell to the ground.

"This is wild land," said the old man. "This has been tribal land since the beginning of the world. . . . What you know is nothing. Custer has taken your heart."

Border spit on the old man.

"Custer has returned," said the old man.

"Rotten savages," said Border.

The sun had set behind the red pines.

Silence.

The old man motioned with his hands and then hummed ho ho ha ha ha haaaa. . . . Border was weakened under the gaze of the old man. Then he was overcome with dizziness. Moments later, he has never been sure how much time passed, he regained consciousness. His rifle was gone. His eyes were crossed and his vision was weakened. He could not see straight for several hours. Border still dreams about falling with the setting sun into deep black pools, like the deep dark eyes of the old tribal man who possessed him with his shamanic powers.

Border bounced his fingers together.

The office was too warm.

"My name is Crazy Horse," he said, standing inside the office door on the bone-white carpet. "Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse and I have come down here to see you alone. . . . I came on the rails not on relocation. Need some cash now, not much, but enough to make it for a time. . . . And some work, hard to find work, like your work, whatever you can find me to do well."

Border turned in his high-back chair. Looking toward the floor, avoiding eye contact, he saw that Crazy Horse was wearing scuffed cowboy boots and tight blue jeans. His crotch was stained and his shirt was threadbare at the elbows. He rolled his own cigarettes and carried a leather pouch of loose tobacco lashed to his belt.

"Crazy Horse is the name. . . ."

Border said nothing. While he watched his hands he thought about the old tribal man at the cabin. Crazy Horse cracked his knuckles and then hooked his thumbs under his belt. Tattoos, wearing thin on his fingers, spelled "love" on the left and "hate" on the right hand.

Crazy Horse waited on the white carpet. The longer he waited for recognition the more he smiled. He bumped the brim of his western straw hat with his thumb, tipping it back from his forehead. His right ear moved with ease when he smiled. Animals knew more about smiling than people, animals knew that when he smiled and moved his ear in a certain way, it meant that he was in spiritual control of the situation. He survived much better when white people did not speak, because words, too many words, loosened his concentration and visual power.

Silence.

Border was breathing faster. The veins in his neck throbbed harder and his stomach rose in sudden shifts beneath his light-blue summer suit. Border turned and looked into the face of the stranger. His eyes were deep black pools. Border could not shift his focus from Crazy Horse. He was being drawn into the dark pools, the unknown, he was falling in his vision. His arms tingled and his head buzzed, but before he slipped from consciousness into the deep dark pools of tribal shamanism, he sprang from his chair with the last of his energy, like a cat, leaped across the white carpet and struck at the tribal face with his white fists again and again until he lost his vision and consciousness. He was peaceful then. Face down on the deep white carpet he could smell the prairie earth that dropped from the boots of the shaman.

"Border, wake up . . . wake up, wake up."

Silence.

Border came back to his time in consciousness, but he was uncertain, he wondered if he could travel forever from the place he had been on the floor. His vision was weak, colors were less distinct, sunlight was blurred as it fell through the windows in the outer offices, blurred as it was when the old tribal man hexed him at the cabin. He did recognize the shapes of familiar faces around him, his fellow federal employees. The women rubbed his arms and face, and then the men lifted him into his high-back chair.

Silence.

"Where is that man?" asked Border.

"What man?"

"That man called Crazy Horse."

"Crazy Horse?"

"Crazy Horse, peculiar name of course," his secretary explained. "Well, he waited for a few minutes, not too long, and then left while you were on the telephone . . . but he did say he would be back sometime."

Farlie Border shivered in his sleep for months. His dreams were about people falling into deep pools, dark pools, people he could not reach. In some dreams he saw his own face in the pools, slipping under before he could reach himself. To balance his fear and boredom with his work he turned to visual and mechanical thrills. He

ingested hallucinogenic drugs, subsidized bizarre sexual acts, bought a police radio so he could be at the scene of accidents, and drove a powerful motorcycle.

Border disappeared late in the summer. White people said he was teaching at a college for women, but tribal rumors held that his vision crossed coming around a curve at high speed on his motorcycle and he died in the wind space behind a grain truck . . . slipping from grace in a slipstream.