

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction

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Imagining Indigenous Futurisms

\$AT THE EDGE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, one of Canada’s premier urban theater companies, Native Earth Performing Arts, staged *alterNatives*, a play about a liberal contemporary couple who throw a dinner party. Angel is a Native science fiction writer, and Colleen is a “non-practicing” Jewish intellectual who teaches Native literature. Their guests represent the apparent extremes of both societies—Angel’s formerly close friends are radical Native activists, and Colleen associates with environmentally concerned vegetarians/veganarians. Playwright Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway) satirizes many assumptions about contemporary Native experience, including a defense of science fiction (sf). Angel just wants to write sf because it’s fun. He resists being backed into producing “the great Canadian aboriginal novel” that would transform him into “a window through which the rest of Canada can see [his] community.” Angel views sf as a freeing arena and wonders why it should be reserved only for the likes of Arthur C. Clarke, William Gibson, and Ursula K. Le Guin, all of whom he greatly admires. “Unless there’s a race requirement,” he jests, “I like the concept of having no boundaries, of being able to create and develop any character, any environment or setting I want. . . . People want me to be ground-breaking, and I will be. But I’d rather do it my way, by becoming a financially comfortable writer of sci-fi who happens to be aboriginal.”¹

Angel’s privileging of sf over “the Great Aboriginal Novel” asserts that sf provides an equally valid way to renew, recover, and extend

First Nations peoples' voices and traditions. This reader brings together Indigenous authors who explore this choice.² Their stories enclose "reservation realisms" in a fiction that sometimes fuses Indigenous sciences with the latest scientific theories available in public discourse, and sometimes undercuts the western limitations of science altogether. In this process of estrangement they raise the question, what exactly *is* science fiction? Does sf have the capacity to envision Native futures, Indigenous hopes, and dreams recovered by rethinking the past in a new framework?

As *alterNative*'s Angel might answer, "Why not?"

As Basil Johnston (Anishinaabe) might remind us, *w'daeb-a-wae*, "a telling of the truth," casts our voices and words only as far as vocabulary and perception allow.

Walking the Clouds opens up sf to reveal Native presence. It suggests that Indigenous sf is not so new—just overlooked, although largely accompanied by an emerging movement—and advocates that Indigenous authors should write more of it. We should do this as a way of positioning ourselves in a genre associated almost exclusively with "the increasing significance of the future to Western technocultural consciousness," as the editors of the popular *Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction* (2010) view the field. *Walking the Clouds* weds sf theory and Native intellectualism, Indigenous scientific literacy, and western techno-cultural science, scientific possibilities enmeshed with Skin thinking.³ The stories offered here are thought experiments that confront issues of "Indianness" in a genre that emerged in the mid-nineteenth-century context of evolutionary theory and anthropology profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology, whose major interest was coming to grips with—or negating—the implications of these scientific mixes of "competition, adaptation, race, and destiny."⁴ Historically, sf has tended to disregard the varieties of space-time thinking of traditional societies,⁵ and it may still narrate the atrocities of colonialism as "adventure stories."⁶ Its title also pays homage to Afrofuturisms, an established topic of study for sf scholars. As Mark Bould's introduction to a recent special edition of *Science Fiction Studies* frames the matter, what's intended is not relegating Afrofuturisms to a purely sf field, but rather recognizing that sf theory and Afrofuturisms may have much to gain by the exchange. The same is true of the approach here.⁷

Writers of Indigenous futurisms sometimes intentionally experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but invariably *change* the perimeters of sf.⁸ Liberated from the constraints of genre expectations, or what "serious" Native authors are *supposed* to write, they have room to play with setting, character, and dialogue; to stretch boundaries; and, perhaps most significantly, to reenlist the science of indigeneity in a discourse that invites discerning readers to realize that Indigenous science is not just complementary to a perceived western enlightenment but is indeed integral to a refined twenty-first-century sensibility.

What better terrain than the field of sf to "engage colonial power in the spirit of a struggle for survival;" the warrior ethic that Taiaiake Alfred (Kanien'kehaka) urges Natives to embrace as "thinkers, teachers, writers, and artists"? What better mindscape from which to "look at traditions in a critical way, not trying to take them down, but to test them and to make sure they're still strong"?⁹

The book is divided into sections corresponding to the major sf elements that *Walking the Clouds* reimagines: Native Slipstream; Contact; Indigenous Scientific Literacies and Environmental Sustainability; Native Apocalypse, Revolutions, and Futuristic Reconstructions of Sovereignties; and Biskaabiiyang, "Returning to Ourselves": Beyond the Shadow-Worlds of Postmodernity and the (Post)Colonial.

Native Slipstream

Native slipstream, a species of speculative fiction within the sf realm, infuses stories with time travel, alternate realities and multiverses, and alternative histories. As its name implies, Native slipstream views time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream. It thus replicates nonlinear thinking about space-time.

In other contexts, the term *slipstream* often becomes a catchall for speculative writing that defies neat categorization. Victoria de Zwaan describes slipstream as "the overtly disruptive, experimental, and counter-realist surface of the text" and posits that slipstream is written by those who "play with and undermine the conventions of the [sf] genre" or by those who "could be discussed as sf because of their themes or techniques of estrangement."¹⁰ Damien Broderick suggests

that “slipstream slams comfortable expectations upside down and destabilize[s] our prejudices, and [does] so without preaching, for fun.”¹¹ Native slipstream shares these features but is noteworthy for its reflection of a worldview. In other words, it is intended to describe writing that does not simply seem avant-garde but models a cultural experience of reality.

Native slipstream thinking, which has been around for millennia, anticipated recent cutting-edge physics, ironically suggesting that Natives have had things right all along. The closest approximation in quantum mechanics is the concept of the “multiverse,” which posits that reality consists of a number of simultaneously existing alternate worlds and/or parallel worlds. Interested readers will enjoy John Gribbin’s *In Search of the Multiverse: Parallel Worlds, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Frontiers of Reality* (2010) and David Deutsch’s seminal *The Fabric of Reality: The Science of Parallel Universes and Its Implications* (1998). Deutsch’s approach describes reality as “an infinite library full of copies of books that all start out the same way on page one, but in which the story in each book deviates more and more from the versions in the other books the farther into the book you read.” The further twist of Deutsch’s theory is that it “allows universes to merge back together . . . as if two of the books in the library have the same happy ending arrived at by different routes.”¹²

Native slipstream exploits the possibilities of multiverses by reshaping time travel. Ultimately, the appeal may simply be “the fun” that Broderick lauds, but slipstream also appeals because it allows authors to recover the Native space of the past, to bring it to the attention of contemporary readers, and to build better futures. It captures moments of divergence and the consequences of that divergence. Vizenor’s “Custer on the Slipstream” offers an alternate reality where Native peoples no longer suffer “the loathsome voice and evil manner of this devious loser,” General George Armstrong Custer. Diane Glancy’s “Aunt Parnetta’s Electric Blisters” transforms spatial-temporal dislocations brought about by globalization, communications technologies, and electronic circuitry into a story of the heart’s restoration. Stephen Graham Jones’s *The Fast Red Road* navigates “Native time slots,” “glitches,” and “syndicated time loops” spanning from the thirteenth century to bioengineered Americas of tomorrow. Time slippages in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* teach that you can outrun

the monster of revenge, move beyond the anger that turns righteous justice into senseless violence, and forgive. Typical of Native survival stories, these slipstreams are tinged with sardonic humor and bittersweet hope.

The selections offered here only hint at the extent of Native slipstream. Recent Indigenous multimedia exemplify the trend: Archer Pechawis’s (Cree) *Horse* is an award-winning “Custer on the slipstream” experimental film, where horses at the Battle of Little Big Horn discuss the outcome while mourning humans’ loss of ability to “listen in”; Skawennati Fragnito’s (Mohawk) “TimeTraveller™” is a machinima about a Mohawk time traveler who uncovers the Indigenous perspectives that mainstream history books don’t care to recount; Cowboy Smithx’s (Blackfoot) film *Chance* combines quantum physics with Napi’s physics and science in time folds; Myron A. Lameman’s (Beaver Lake Cree) short film *Mibko* offers an apocalyptic vision of the near future in the aftermath of Indigenous resistance to exploitation of the Alberta tar sands; Beth Aileen Lameman’s (Irish, Anishinaabe, Métis) *The West Was Lost* offers an Aboriginal steampunk web comic that revisions the Windigo tradition in an alternative history; Jeff Barnaby’s (Mi’gMaq) *File under Miscellaneous* presents a Skin-rewired cyberpunk vision that explores the revitalization of Indigenous language while simultaneously restoring our knowledge that precontact written systems were consciously “erased” as part of the colonial agenda to eradicate Native self-sovereignty and identity; Helen Haig-Brown’s (Tsilhqot’in) *Cave* presents an alternate world drawn directly from Tsilhqot’in storytelling and has been called the first sf film to be shot entirely in an Indigenous language.

Contact

Among the more familiar sf templates, stories of contact typically cast the Native/Indigenous/Aboriginal as alien/other and exploit the theme of conquest, otherwise known as “discovery.” Either aliens invade humans or humans invade aliens, whether the terrain is geopolitical, psychological, sexual, or otherwise. Native writers who choose to experiment with sf thus confront the possibility of internal colonization, a semiotic of resistance and oppression that does little to

address larger historical realities that have inalterably changed Native existence. When viewed as tales of survivance, however, Native-authored sf extends the *miinidiwag* tradition of ironic Native giveaway, of storytelling that challenges readers to recognize their positions with regard to the diasporic condition of contemporary Native peoples. Here the concept of survivance follows Gerald Vizenor's seminal discussion in *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*. Native survivance is "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response . . . survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry."¹³ Miinidiwag, the Native "giveaway," are curative stories told in an ironic way, ones that taunt the audience by implicating their part in the lesson conveyed. The trick is to avoid becoming "a mere archive, covering the earth with empty traces of a lost plenitude," a public memory that exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs.¹⁴

Celu Amberstone's novella *Refugees* embraces the relevant contact themes almost in summary fashion. In this case, aliens have abducted earthlings and repopulated a new planet in an effort to sustain the human race. At face value, this would seem a beneficial act, and its effects embroil our narrator in the struggle to reconcile her biased trust of the colonizers with the skepticism of their latest crop of earth "seedlings." Gerry William's *The Black Ship* plays out hugely adventurous clashes between Home World Repletions and empire-seeking Anphorians typical of space opera. It thus follows a familiar contact template taken from trashy, pulp "sci-fi" origins "where larger-than-life protagonists encounter a variety of alien species, planetary cultures, futuristic technologies . . . and sublime physical phenomena" in a "plausible universe of plural, simultaneous, reversible spacetime continua."¹⁵ William's spin on the contact motif inverts the pulp formula to show the drama from an Indigenous perspective, including the perception of the Home Worlds as already full of life to respect and relate to. This is a literary technique that Lisa Brooks (Abenaki), a Yale historian, has recently explored in *The Common Pot*, one that she discovered many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Native writers were deploying to counteract the thinking of *terra nullius*, entering into an empty land. So, rather than a hollow earth (as even the subterranean adventures imitating the hollow earth theory might have it), the land itself is *wôlhanak* (in the Abenaki sense of "hollowed-out

places"), "not empty spaces to be filled but deeply situated social and ecological environments." Further, the land is *aki*, "a self-sustaining vessel" requiring "participation from all its interwoven inhabitants," the "common pot" to be shared, "not an altruistic ideal but a practice that was necessary to human survival."¹⁶ Simon Ortiz's experiment with contact narrative, "Men on the Moon," represents an important challenge to what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay characterizes as the American technological sublime, the awe-inducing expectation that humanity can create machines with the power to "annihilate time and space."¹⁷ Quietly resolved, this story realigns the practiced way of living and knowledge that sees far more acutely the oil-slick refuse left behind by advancing, trampling space age science.

Indigenous Science and Sustainability

One aim of this book is to distinguish science fiction from other speculative writing typically associated with Native thinking, such as the time-traveling alternative worlds in Native slipstream and contact narratives. Here it is useful to return the "science" to sf, which should be recognized as the signature feature of the genre. The question arises, then, whether Indigenous peoples can lay claim to the term *science* (and, indeed, whether they should want or need to).

The third selection of readings juxtaposes western science with what can be thought of as "Indigenous scientific literacies" (known elsewhere by terms such as Aboriginal resource management, Indigenous resource management, and the politically controversial "traditional ecological knowledge," or TEK) to argue that Native/Indigenous/Aboriginal sustainable practices constitute a science despite their lack of resemblance to taxonomic western systems of thought. In contrast to the accelerating effect of techno-driven western scientific method, Indigenous scientific literacies represent practices used by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years to reenergize the natural environment while improving the interconnected relationships among all persons (animal, human, spirit, and even machine). Some of its features include sustainable forms of medicine, agriculture, architecture, and art. Since Indigenous scientific literacies historically are shaped by the diverse natural environments of the groups that use them, no

single set of practices summarizes the possibilities. But many cultures shared the pattern of disseminating scientific knowledge in everyday teachings. In Anishinaabemowin, the word *gikendaasowin* begins to measure the prevalence and depth of scientific discourse. It is botanical knowledge, knowledge of the land, but it is also knowledge itself, teachings and ways of living. Storytelling was the medium of choice for transmitting and preserving traditional knowledge.

Interested readers will find ample discussion of the topic by researchers in multiple fields.¹⁸ The title of a work by Wendy Makoons Geniusz (Cree raised Anishinaabe) stands out, however, as a common refrain in emerging movements today: *Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive*. That is the point. Methods that do not resemble western science are not de facto “primitive.”¹⁹

Indigenous scientific literacies play key roles throughout Nalo Hopkinson’s works. The excerpt from *Midnight Robber* introduces the practice in its simplest guise: a child comes under the tutelage of an Indigenous mentor who begins teaching her the science of survival, emphasizing the practical, day-to-day transmission of generational knowledge. Gerald Vizenor’s *Darkness in St. Louis: Bearheart* implicitly criticizes the awe-struck neoshamanism that views Native people as impervious to the very real dangers of nature. The environment itself can be autonomous, resilient, and cruel; Native science employs practical everyday usage in mitigating its effects without resorting to romanticism (a claim often reserved for western science), which Vizenor views as a terminal creed. In Andrea Hairston’s *Mindscape*, Indigenous scientific literacies reflect the emerging study of organic electronics, organic physics, and ethnopharmacology. Finally, Archie Weller’s *Land of the Golden Clouds* extrapolates three thousand years into the future, where tribal song and storytelling persist as the way to teach and transmit Aboriginal science and medicine.

Native Apocalypse

It is almost commonplace to think that the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place. Many forms of Indigenous futurisms posit the possibility of an optimistic future by imagining a reversal of circumstances, where Natives win or at least are

centered in the narrative. Such alternate histories often have “well-known cataclysms” or “fairly resonant figures,” according to Andy Duncan, largely so the reader will be able to distinguish between the fictional timeline and the real one.²⁰ Recurring elements in alternative Native stories include the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, the Battle of Little Big Horn and Custer’s demise (1876), the Ghost Dances after the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890 (albeit many forms of Ghost Dances occurred historically prior to Wounded Knee), and the Oka uprisings of the 1990s at Kahnnesatake. The Ghost Dance may be the most widespread image connected to Native Apocalypse, and it appears to varying degrees in many of the pieces in this collection.

Let’s pause for a moment to clarify one possible Native conception of Apocalypse, in contrast to its association with the biblical canon. Lawrence Gross (Anishinaabe) contends that Anishinaabe culture is recovering from what he calls “post-apocalypse stress syndrome” and describes Apocalypse as the state of being *aakozi*, Anishinaabemowin for “he/she is sick” and, more to the point, “out of balance.”²¹ Native Apocalypse is really that state of imbalance, often perpetuated by “terminal creeds,” the ideologies that Gerald Vizenor warns against in advocating survivance in the face of invisibility. Imbalance further implies a state of extremes, but within those extremes lies a middle ground and the seeds of *bimaadiziwin*, the state of balance, one of difference and provisionality, a condition of resistance and survival. Native apocalyptic storytelling, then, shows the ruptures, the scars, and the trauma in its effort ultimately to provide healing and a return to bimaadiziwin. This is the path to a sovereignty embedded in self-determination.

Readers interested in an overview of the Apocalypse as a trope in sf might consider Patrick B. Sharp’s *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture*. His extensive genealogy of sf as nuclear frontier fiction provides a context for Indigenous futurisms, where contact and Apocalypse are reciprocal cause and effect. Here let a summary suffice to capture the dominant themes that mainstream sf has drawn from the real history of Eurowestern and Indigenous encounters:

Nuclear frontier fiction stories were defined by their landscape, which combined the wasteland imagery of literary Modernism

with the frontier imagery of the nineteenth century in various combinations. With cities reduced to rubble-strewn wilderness, the survivors had to battle with manifestations of savagery in order to establish a new America out of the wreckage of the old. Drawing on Darwinist formulations of progress and the frontier, most nuclear frontier stories repeated the racism of Darwin's arguments that depicted superior Europeans winning the struggle to establish a new and better civilization.²²

Sherman Alexie's "Distances" directly invokes the Ghost Dance and subsequently mixes a sense of nostalgia with Indian trapdoor humor, suggesting that a bitterly satiric approach is the valid response to the traumatic impact of apocalyptic eschatology on First Nations peoples. In the forlorn wasteland of William Sanders's "When This World Is All on Fire," Native bands diligently maintain their histories, dignities, and sovereignties while the invasive poor (often white) stream through their land; the story decenters the tendency in mainstream apocalyptic sf to pit a small and faithful band of the Eurowestern technologically elite against the descent into savagery that Sharp discusses. Zainab Amadahy's *The Moons of Palmares* encompasses a cycle from the onset of Apocalypse through revolution to a redesigned sovereignty. Misha's *Red Spider, White Web* closes the section by offering the traumatic experience of irrevocable losses suffered by both Native and Japanese as an *inversio* of nuclear frontier fiction.

Biskaabiiyang, "Returning to Ourselves"

It might go without saying that all forms of Indigenous futurisms are narratives of *biskaabiiyang*, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of "returning to ourselves," 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. This process is often called "decolonization," and as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori) explains, it requires *changing* rather than *imitating* Eurowestern concepts.²³ *Walking the Clouds* confronts the structures

of racism and colonialism *and* sf's own complicity in them. Authors who experiment with Indigenous futurisms can create "ethnoscapes" in the manner that Isiah Lavender has suggested: estranged worlds of the future in which the writer can "formulate an imaginary environment so as to foreground the intersection of race, technology and power,"²⁴ or sometimes, more to the point for the stories here, the intersection of Indigenous nations with other sovereignties, race, technology, and power.

Additionally, decolonization should be recognized as at least tangential to (post)colonial sf literature as a whole, and central to Indigenous futurisms as a path to *biskaabiiyang*. Amy Ransom provides a useful touchstone for discussions of oppositional postcolonial sf, foregrounding resistance to colonial authority.²⁵ Similarly, Michelle Reid's overview of postcolonialism asserts the view that sf writing is concerned with the "fantastic basis of colonial practice."²⁶ And John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* offers a groundbreaking study of colonialism and imperialism in sf, arguing that fantasies of appropriation, subjugation of "lost races," and plundering of "discovered wealth" are not just historical features of the genre but persist in contemporary sf works.²⁷

In the end, *Walking the Clouds* returns us to ourselves by encouraging Native writers to write about Native conditions in Native-centered worlds liberated by the imagination. These stories display features of self-reflexivity, defamiliarization, and the hyperreal present that Veronica Hollinger explains undergirds postmodern science fiction.²⁸ But those conditions are hardly new to Native experience. As Gerald Vizenor has stressed, postmodernism is already a condition for First Nations peoples, since they are seen as postindian if they do not resemble the iconic image of the late-nineteenth-century Plains Indian.²⁹

Eden Robinson's "Terminal Avenue" collapses the black hole and event horizon on the modern "Indian problem." Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* reestablishes the Indigenous Americas as the culmination of Wovoka's Ghost Dance prophecy. Stephen Graham Jones's *The Bird Is Gone* revisits the pop culture icons of Tonto and the Lone Ranger. Robert Sullivan's "Star Waka" contemplates Indigenous space travelers' arrival on new planets.

Ultimately, all of the stories in this reader vacillate between the extremes of (post)colonial, postmodern Indigenous being, seeking balance.

May you find balance too.
Mino bimaatsiwin!