orbit.

Donahue, JJ 2025 'Time Travelling and Thought Experiments; or, an (insistently-too-quick) introduction to (some of the work of) Indigenous speculative fiction.' *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 12(1): pp. 1–18. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.23089

Open Library of Humanities

Time Travelling and Thought Experiments; or, an (insistently-too-quick) introduction to (some of the work of) Indigenous speculative fiction

James J. Donahue, The State University of New York, College at Potsdam, donahujj@potsdam.edu

This introduction conceives of a thought experiment with respect to the history of the study of Native North American literatures in order to comment on the comparatively smaller impact Indigenous speculative fiction has had on the study of Indigenous literatures. It broadly surveys lesser-known and out-of-print works alongside canonical works and popular bestsellers to demonstrate the breadth of works published by Indigenous writers in English. The introduction concludes by briefly summarizing the essays published in the special issue.

Introduction

In some ways, it's probably fair to say that Indigenous speculative fiction is – as the kids say – "having a moment."

Georgian Bay Métis author Cherie Dimaline's 2017 novel *The Marrow Thieves*—which follows a found family of Indigenous survivors as they are hunted for their bone marrow following an apocalyptic event—has been well-honored by such prestigious prizes as Canada's Governor General's Award and the US's Kirkus Prize (as well as the White Pine Award and its nomination as a finalist for the Canada Reads competition). Anishinaabe author Waubgeshig Rice's 2018 post-apocalyptic thriller *Moon of the Crusted Snow*—which centers on an Anishinaabe reserve community in northern Canada as they respond to an unknown societal collapse in the south—was nominated for the John Campbell Award and (particularly following the global COVID-19 pandemic) was placed on numerous "must read" lists throughout Canada and the US. And since 2020 alone, Blackfeet author Stephen Graham Jones's horror fiction—the novella *Night of the Mannequins* and the novels *The Only Good Indians*, *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, and *Don't Fear the Reaper*—has been nominated for 16 awards with 8 wins, 3 of which were for *My Heart is a Chainsaw*.

And while there are numerous authors I could have referenced in this introduction, one reason I chose to open with these three is that their novels were all followed by a sequel, suggesting their popularity in the literary marketplace as well as their enduring hold on their readers' imaginations. Dimaline's *Hunting by Stars* was published in 2021;[1] Rice's *Moon of the Turning Leaves* and Jones's *Don't Fear the Reaper* were both published in 2023. And Jones completed his Indian Lake Trilogy in 2024 with the publication of *The Angel of Indian Lake*. The late 2010s through the 2020s are certainly a landmark decade for Indigenous speculative fiction.

As part of this "moment," Indigenous writers of speculative fiction have also had their short works published in two recent anthologies (3 if one includes Nisi Shawl's wonderful collection *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color*[2]). Oji-Cree author Joshua Whitehead's *Love After the End* (2020) collects works of speculative fiction penned by LGBTQ, Two-Spirit, and Indigiqueer authors,[3] while writers Shane Hawk (Cheyanne-

[1] Cherie Dimaline has noted in interviews that she originally had no intention of writing a sequel. However, strong fan interest encouraged her to continue the story: "Petitions were started and sent to me. There were social media accounts opened in the characters' names and then they would send me a direct message. So 'French' was contacting me on Instagram, saying, 'Wow, what's next? Please don't leave me out here'.".

[2] Certainly emphasizing the popularity of speculative fiction is the collection's "Foreword," written by *Star Trek* actor and longtime *Reading Rainbow* host LeVar Burton, who opens his remarks by proudly announcing that he is "a huge fan of science fiction!" (9) This should come as no surprise given his 15-year run as Lt. Commander Geordi LaForge in the popular TV show *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the subsequent movies.

[3] Although not the focus of this introduction or the special issue, it's worth remembering that authors included under the

Arapahoe, Hidatsa, and Potawatomi) and Theodore C. Van Alst's (Mackinac Bands, Chippewa and Ottawa) *Never Whistle at Night* (2023) brings together various authors across the "dark fiction" spectrum. Both anthologies pair popular, best-selling novelists such as Stephen Graham Jones (who wrote the "Introduction" to *Never Whistle at Night*), Mona Susan Power (Standing Rock Sioux), and David A. Robertson (Norway House Cree) with emerging authors like Andrea L. Rogers (Cherokee) and Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache), whose multiple-award-winning debut novel *Elatsoe* was also published in 2020 along with "Story for a Bottle," her contribution to Whitehead's collection.

However, if—like many science fiction time travelers—we go back in time just a few years, we will see that this "moment" builds upon another such moment. While it was certainly not incorrect for some reviewers to situate *The Marrow Thieves* in the larger context of YA fiction, such reviews quietly (albeit also unintentionally) ignore the novel's participation in a vibrant vein of Indigenous speculative fiction. Just one year earlier, in 2016, Dimaline's wonderful story "Legends are Made, Not Born," was included in Hope Nicholson's[4] *Love Beyond Body, Space & Time*, which collected work by queer Indigenous writers using science fiction and urban fantasy to explore various manifestations of love (including self-love) among queer and two-spirit Indigenous communities. Just as writers like Dimaline can and should be included in larger conversations regarding YA fiction, this collection situates Indigenous writers largely within the history of queer literatures. In her foreword, scholar and educator Grace L. Dillon connects this collection to a larger body of creative and critical work on two-spirit/queer Indigenous survivance. Dillon's inclusion in this collection also brings readers back to her own anthology published four years earlier in 2012, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, collecting work from both popular authors such as Stephen Graham Jones, Sherman Alexie (Spokane), and Simon Ortiz (Pueblo of Acoma) as well as selections from relatively unknown (and in some cases otherwise out-of-print) authors such as Misha (Métis), Gerry William (Spallumcheen), and Zainab Amadahy (Cherokee, Seminole, Pacific Islander).

Clearly, the "moment" noted above builds upon a strong foundation established by earlier writers and texts.

---

larger queer umbrella have long turned to speculative fiction for expression. Interested readers are directed to Alexis Lothian's wonderful study *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* as a starting point for unpacking this history.

[4] Nicholson also edited the first two *Moonshot* collections of short-form graphic narratives. Volume 3, published in 2020, was edited by Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe/Métis) and Michael Sheyashe (Caddo), following Nicholson's retirement from publishing and closure of her press following sexual assault allegations.

But our time traveling should not stop here. While Dillon's collection was published in 2012, what most sets her collection apart from the others mentioned above is that she does not limit herself to recent works by the authors represented. In fact, one of the many strengths of this anthology is her inclusion of excerpts from Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko's 1991 novel *Almanac of the Dead* and Anishinaabe author and scholar Gerald Vizenor's 1978 novel *Darkness in St. Louis: Bearheart*.[5] The inclusion of these works brings us back in time another 34 years, noting the writing of Indigenous science fiction back as far back as the 1970s, decades before anyone was using such terms as "Indigenous Futurism" and pulling us far closer to Robert Heinlein's coinage of the phrase "speculative fiction" in 1947.

So in some ways, it's entirely *unfair* to say that Indigenous speculative fiction is "having a moment." Unless, perhaps, we consider "moments" in terms of geologic time.

So…has it all been speculative fiction all along?

No, of course not. But also, yes, absolutely.

While there are many competing definitions of speculative fiction floating around, they all to some degree are rooted in one particular meaning of the word "speculative," which can be defined as "engaged in, expressing, or based in conjecture rather than knowledge." Speculative fiction, then, is any fiction rooted in the act of speculation about what *might* be (somewhere, someplace) rather than what *is* or can be demonstrated to *have been*. Authors of speculative fiction can create new worlds rooted in technologies that do not exist, magics that perform what would otherwise be seen as the miraculous, or posit pasts as well as futures rooted in different timelines and possibilities. Alternate histories, potential futures, new geographies, or even small but significant alterations to the world we live in, all fall under the larger umbrella of "speculative fiction."

However, there is another possible definition, one I always share with my students, that is of particular interest to this special issue as well as to our larger understanding of speculative fictions, Indigenous or otherwise. In the English language, "to speculate" also means to "make an investment in the future, often at high risk." Generally used in economic discourse to refer to high-risk investment strategies focusing on how investments will perform in the future, "speculation" here can be used to define those works of "speculative fiction" that make some sort of investment in our future, often at high risk. Works of science fiction or fantasy that present us with worlds where current prejudices—and perhaps the systems that enforce such prejudices—are largely absent, not only speculate about what might be but often do so at the risk of losing a reading

[5] Vizenor revised this novel and republished it in 1990 under the title *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*.

audience that may be invested in those prejudices and systems (or refuse to admit that they exist). Alternate histories can give us an understanding of how to correct current problems by highlighting poor decisions made in the past. Horror fiction can draw inspiration from cultural violence as well as threats to physical and/or psychological damage. Post-apocalyptic novels can warn us off the destructive paths we are currently treading.

I would be hard-pressed to find a work of Indigenous fiction from any genre, tribal tradition, or aesthetic expression that does not in some meaningful way engage in the second kind of "speculative fiction" defined above. Even if that is not the current working definition that most of us have in mind when we think of "speculative fiction."

Therefore, I'd like to propose a thought experiment. But before I do so, some necessary background.

For many years, scholars in Indigenous literatures (at least in the US) have been writing in the shadow of the so-called "Native American Renaissance," a construction—both as a phrase and as a "moment" in the history of Indigenous literatures—that dominated our understanding of Indigenous literary history for decades, at times even while many authors and scholars struggled against it.[6]

Brought into existence by the publication of Kenneth Lincoln's famously influential 1983 study *Native American Renaissance*, this renaissance is, at its core, a celebration of the growing recognition of the literary value of Indigenous writing. Lincoln notes, for instance, that "Native American writers have been honored by a Pulitzer Prize for Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* (1969), front page reviews in the New York literary magazines for Leslie Silko's novel of Laguna Pueblo, *Ceremony* (1977), and critical enthusiasm for the poetry and fiction of James Welch as a new Indian Steinbeck" (184). Ignoring for the moment the dated language (as well as the slight that Welch's work should be understood as an Indigenous version of a canonical white American author), Lincoln justly draws attention to the accolades earned by these writers, and further comments that "[o]ver one hundred more young Indian writers have gathered around these leaders to participate in a Native American renaissance" (184).

And, of course, he is not wrong. This is an accurate understanding of this moment in literary history.

---

[6] Craig Womack (Creek and Cherokee descent) succinctly noted that the phrase is "a source of controversy" (15). While there is much to be said on this topic, this Introduction is not the time and place to engage it in depth. Interested readers are directed to A. Robert Lee's insightful essay, discussed below, for a starting point on the long critical history of this controversy.

However, like all academic studies, his includes a set of parameters that, as I will show below, could have been set differently.

Early in his book, Lincoln notes that "[t]he Native American renaissance, here targeted, less than two decades of published literature, is a written renewal of oral traditions translated into Western literary forms" (8). On the following page, he notes that his work is a "hybrid" of "anthropology [and] literary criticism" (9). And he does so while also warning the reader of the "danger of misdirected romanticism, fueled by pastoral myths of the noble savage and nostalgic regression to the Garden of Eden" (22). Despite my implied criticism of this work—and considering the impact this work had on our understanding of the period—there is much to admire about Lincoln's study, and there are good reasons why it has come to define this "moment." The construct of the "Native American Renaissance" continues to have such a hold on the scholarly community that nearly 40 years later, *The Cambridge History of Native American Literature* includes a section titled "Native American Renaissance (Post-1960s)." The first essay in this section—A. Robert Lee's "Rethinking the Native American Renaissance: Texts and Contexts"—is a fair and balanced accounting of the problematic construct, avoiding taking a position on "[w]hether or not Native American Renaissance does good or less good service as a signifier" (265). However, his essay does serve as a reminder that "[p]rogress, of course, has been made" (266), and that however one feels about this construct as a means of classifying, understanding, and even defining "Native American Literature," it is but one part of an "always larger and wholly ongoing ambit" (266). And while I (and others) clearly take issue with how this work has come to define the discussion of late-20th century Indigenous literatures (at least in the US), one cannot find fault with the richness of his writing, the thoughtful research underpinning his analyses, or the passion he brings to the subject.

I'm just suggesting that there are other ways to define this period.

To borrow yet another trope from speculative fiction—this time, alternate history as well as science fiction—what if we could go back and do it all over again? What might the landscape of Indigenous literary studies in North America—not to mention Indigenous *literatures*—look like if the canon had been defined differently?

Now it's time for the thought experiment.

What if we constructed a different canon of Indigenous literatures from North America, one that still built upon the foundation of some of the canonical authors of the "Native American Renaissance" but emphasized different aesthetic and generic concerns, even while supporting some of the same political concerns? What if, instead of focusing on literary anthropology and the adaptation of oral traditions to print, we instead

emphasized creative worldbuilding, particularly examples featuring "supernatural and/or magical [as well as technological] phenomena" set in "fictional universes."[7] In some cases we could still work with some of the very same writers and some of the very same texts. But we could position them differently, read them for slightly different purposes, and perhaps come to understand the larger landscape of Indigenous fiction differently, as part of Lee's "always larger and wholly ongoing ambit."

What if we posited the following list as a skeletal "canon," dating back to the 1970s and building up through the work of contemporary authors:

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977)[8]
Gerald Vizenor, *Darkness in St. Louis: Bearheart* (1978)
Gerry Williams, *The Black Ship* (1984)
William Sanders, *Journey to Fusang* (1988)
Misha, *Red Spider, White Web* (1990)
Zainab Amadahy, *The Moons of Palmares* (1998)
Daniel Heath Justice, *Kynship* (2005)
Stephen Graham Jones, *It Came from Del Rio* (2010)
Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (2017)
Darcie Little Badger, *Elatsoe* (2020)
Cherie Dimaline, *VenCo* (2024)

As we can see, we begin with an author who was central to Lincoln's formulation of the "Native American Renaissance" and her 1980 American Book Award-winning novel *Ceremony*. Gerald Vizenor and Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Band Chippewa) also appear on this list, and while they were not central to Lincoln's study,[9] they have come to be widely acknowledged as central figures of that moment. And instead of including Erdrich's justly famous debut novel *Love Medicine* and the much-loved series following its publication—8 novels over a 21-year period—we would instead include her more recent work of dystopian science fiction. This "canon" also includes Stephen Graham Jones, a popular novelist whose work is as much respected by academic circles as it is by popular reading audiences. And as this special issue helps demonstrate, Darcie Little

[7] This language is borrowed from Patrick Moran's *The Canons of Fantasy: Lands of High Adventure*, and slightly amended to include works of science fiction.

[8] Interested readers are directed to Patrick B. Sharp's essay "Questing for an Indigenous Future: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* as Indigenous Science Fiction" for a reading highlighting "Silko's use of generic elements common to science fiction" (120).

[9] Lincoln did include a passing reference to an unattributed couplet from Vizenor's poetry (73).

Badger and Cherie Dimaline are fast approaching such recognition within the larger academic community.

However, some perhaps less well-known names appear on this list as well. Gerry Williams's *The Black Ship* (currently out of print) and Zainab Amadahy's *The Moons of Palmares* (which was reprinted in 2013) are works that would easily be recognized by readers as treading similar ground as those of such classic science fiction novelists Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, and Ursula K. Le Guin, employing fast-moving interstellar vessels chasing far-flung planets to comment on the history and legacy of settler colonization. Misha's wonderful steampunk novel would perhaps add yet another popular genre to our speculative canon of Indigenous fiction (more on her work below), perhaps even opening the door for more substantial critical attention on the work of novelists like *New York Times* best-selling author Daniel H. Wilson (Cherokee), whose academic background in Computer Science and Robotics informs his science fiction novel *Robopocalypse* (2011), its sequel *Robogenesis* (2014), and *The Andromeda Evolution*, his sequel to Michael Creighton's classic 1969 work of science fiction *The Andromeda Strain*.[10]

This canon also includes the work of Cherokee novelist William Sanders, author of numerous works of alternative history, science fiction, and fantasy, as well as mystery novels and works of non-fiction. Generally more celebrated in science fiction circles than in the academic community studying Indigenous literatures, Sanders was twice a finalist for the prestigious Nebula Award for his novelettes *The Undiscovered* (1997) and *Dry Bones* (2004), and twice won the Sidewise Award for Alternate History[11] (1997 for *The Undiscovered* and again in 2004 for *Empire*). In addition to his writing, Sanders was a well-regarded editor in his work with *Helix SF*, the online science fiction magazine he co-founded. Although the magazine only lasted two years,[12] it had received much well-deserved praise for its publication of women and non-white authors, helping to diversify what many see as a traditionally white, male community (more on this below).

In that vein, I also included on this list Cherokee scholar, educator, and novelist Daniel Heath Justice's 2005 work of epic high fantasy, *Kynship*, the first installment

[10] Wilson was approved by Creighton's widow, Sherri, to pen this novel, which also bears Creighton's name on the cover. Continuing the stories begun by beloved now-departed writers is not at all uncommon in popular genres. Brandon Sanderson completed Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series after Jordan passed away in 2007. Similarly, fans of Robert B. Parker's westerns can read Robert Knott's Virgil Cole and Everett Hitch novels.

[11] While this award does not have the same name recognition as the Nebula, this award has recognized the value of numerous writers currently enjoying both a popular readership and critical attention by academics, including such notables as Michael Chabon, Ted Chiang, Ken Liu, and Philip Roth.

[12] Sanders shut down the magazine and subsequently deleted the website after a racist rejection letter he wrote was made public. Unfortunately, most of the work published by *Helix SF* has not been reprinted elsewhere.

of his *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* trilogy (followed in 2006 by *Wyrwood* and in 2007 by *Dreyd*). Originally published by Kegedonce Press—founded in 1993 and explicitly involving Indigenous peoples at all stages of production—the press no longer reprints this trilogy. It was revised and expanded for a 2011 reprinted edition published by the University of New Mexico Press. Admittedly, one reason I chose this book is that it's a personal favorite.[13] I have read it numerous times. I have taught it several times. I have given it as a gift more than once. It's fair to say that I am a huge fan of this work.[14]

Which is why I am constantly surprised that I have never once seen it on the shelf in a brick-and-mortar bookstore. The book is certainly still in print, and it is a remarkable contribution to a genre that has never lost its appeal among a popular reading audience. In fact, as brick-and-mortar bookstores grow in size—the teenager I was more than 30 years ago would marvel at the size of many Barnes & Noble stores today—fantasy fiction takes up an increasingly large amount of shelf space, giving readers a multitude of options to complete current series or begin new ones. And I can promise you, I look for this book regularly. (Just ask my wife and kids. We cannot go into a bookstore unless they are willing to let me spend significant time browsing the fantasy shelves. Luckily, they are also off browsing the shelves and hunting down their own exciting finds.) And while it might be true that university press reprints of novels, particularly those written by academics, don't often find their way into the inventories of chain booksellers, those booksellers are also more than willing to put on their shelves anything that will sell. Given the popularity of fantasy series as well as the increasing recognition of the work of non-white authors (not to mention authors whose work challenges the genre's history of misogyny and toxic masculinity), I'm surprised that this work is not more readily available to the genre's reading audience.[15] I'm particularly surprised given that everyone I know who has read it—from students to colleagues to friends—has loved it.

Of course, we will never know what the results might have been from this thought experiment. Would works of speculative fiction occupy an even larger amount of shelf space in popular chain bookstores? And if so, would this have inspired more Indigenous authors to contribute to the various genres of speculative fiction? Would there be more

---

[13] If we're being honest, our personal preferences help dictate what we teach and what we produce scholarship on, which means that personal preference plays a not insignificant part of canon formation.

[14] As a scholar, I am also a fan of Justice's critical writings, in no small part because of his belief that "speculative fiction offers a complementary and distinctive range of reading and interpretive strategies that can undo the violence of the deficit models of 'the real' and offer transformative visions of other lives, experiences, and histories. Fantasy, science fiction, and horror merit consideration as serious literature with ethical import, deserving of critical and pedagogical regard" (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 142).

[15] Certainly, the book is readily available online, in a Kindle version through Amazon.com as well as in print from the University of New Mexico Press.

movie adaptations of the work of these authors?[16] Would Indigenous authors be more central to the larger field of speculative fiction? Would authors like Justice be negotiating with Peter Jackson to adapt his trilogy to film?[17]

Further, if works of speculative fiction are so popular, why are Indigenous-authored texts not more in demand? Certainly, online discussions of Sanders's ill-fated online journal suggest that science fiction is rife with latent (as well as overt) racism and sexism. Similarly, in their 1997 *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, John Clute and John Grant call out such "maggots" in fantasy literature as "overwhelming whiteness, the cult of warlike values and violence, the non-critical perpetuation of gendered structures, the distribution of characters and peoples into magical 'races,' the trope of history-as-decline and a European-centric model echoed in the geography of many fantasy worlds" (615–16). And multiple award-winning author NK Jemison has famously quipped that "Epic fantasy was certainly not black women doing...well, anything." (qtd. in Sangster, 201). I think it's safe to say that science fiction and fantasy—and speculative fiction more broadly—have a long history of problematic politics when it comes to diversity and inclusion, providing us with an answer as to why more Indigenous authors have not been canonized in those literary communities.

To return to Indigenous fiction, if the authors associated with the so-called Native American Renaissance are the ones who enjoyed early success—and enjoyed that success based on their audience's interest in works exploring tribal cultures and documenting tribal histories—then presses will be more likely to publish similar works. Certainly, this does not mean that works outside of such well-established molds won't be published. However, it does mean that such works might be more difficult to find. Misha's *Red Spider, White Web*, to take one of my favorite examples, was published not by any of the major publishing houses for literary fiction (such as Penguin, HarperCollins Harcourt, or Random House), nor was it published by one of the major publishers specializing in speculative fiction, such as Tor, Dalkey, or DAW. Rather, it was published by Wordcraft of Oregon, which stopped publishing new titles in 2016. Interested readers can still order copies directly from the press as they sell off their inventory.[18] Even with internet ordering, small press publications can be harder to find, especially given that small presses have smaller budgets for marketing, don't have the same distribution deals

[16] Directors Steven Spielberg and Michael Bay were associated with the proposed film adaptation of Wilson's *Robogenesis*. Chris Hemsworth was cast and Anne Hathaway was approached for a role. However, there appears to have been no progress made on this adaptation.

[17] The 6-part movie franchise based on Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit* and his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy collectively earned over $5.8 billion (US).

[18] I should note that Wordcraft of Oregon published their edition in 1999. The novel was originally published in England, by Morrigan Publications, in 1990. I cannot find an online presence for Morrigan Publications as of this writing.

with larger sellers (brick-and-mortar bookstores as well as online wholesalers), and as we see with Misha's work, these titles go out of print much more quickly.

Further, let's imagine that Misha's work is reprinted and chain bookstores begin to sell it. Where should it be shelved? This could be a crucially important decision. Should it be shelved with other steampunk novels in the larger speculative fiction section or with other Indigenous authors in the "Indigenous" or "Native American" sections? Regular readers of this journal will no doubt recall the recent issue on the works of Percival Everett, whose own award-winning novel *Erasure* addressed this very topic: Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a writer of philosophical literary novels that often reference classical mythology, finds it difficult to build a readership because of where his books are shelved in bookstores, and why. Being placed on the "wrong" shelf can have disastrous consequences for authors, as intended audiences may not be able to find their works.

The question of shelving leads to other, no less important questions when thinking about Indigenous speculative fiction. Is steampunk sufficiently Indigenous? Is science fiction? Is fantasy? I'm assuming that anyone reading this introduction would say "yes." But would general reading audiences? Would publishers? Would bookstores? What about the above-mentioned reviewers of Cherie Dimaline's novel that discussed it in terms of YA fiction but not in terms of Indigenous speculative fiction? Because how we market, sell, review, teach, and publish on these works helps determine who reads them, and how.

Moving back to academic circles, we can also ask if my thought experiment would lead to more works of speculative fiction being included on more university syllabi. Would courses on "The Native American Renaissance" have been replaced with courses on "Indigenous Speculative Fiction"? Would more graduate students find their way to such a focus in their dissertations? Would more scholarship presented at conferences or published by academic outlets have been produced than what we have today?

Permissible Narratives and the Scholarly Community

If these books discussed above are as worth reading as I claim they are, why are some of them out of print? Why is there not more scholarship on many of them? How did William Sanders manage to write more than 20 novels—ranging from alternate histories to thrillers to science fiction to mystery to fantasy...in addition to his early works of non-fiction—without becoming more central to the (ever-expanding) Indigenous literary canon (at least, before his controversial comments) given his recognition by awards committees? If Indigenous authors are more increasingly incorporated into the various canons of literary fiction, why do we not see more works of speculative fiction included?

As I have already suggested one very important reason has to do with canon formation, an act we academics are all responsible for. We often learn the canon in our programs of study, and often recreate that canon—or at least a significant portion of it—in our own teaching.[19] And the choices we make are often defined as much by the available materials as our own interests. Those teaching from the Norton Anthologies, for instance, are limited to what they can teach, unless they choose to supplement the text in meaningful ways.[20] Sometimes, our choices are limited by our institutions and the courses as they are designed. And in our own scholarship, we often make choices based as much on our assumptions about readership and what we can successfully pitch to journal editors and press acquisition editors. [21] All of which is to say, once canonized, it is likely that academics will continue to produce scholarship on an author's work. However, it can also be difficult to reach that status within academic circles.[22]

---

[19] I was hired in 2006 by my current university for a job in "20th Century American and Non-Canonical Literatures." One reason I was hired was my work in Native American literature. That is to say, when I was hired in 2006, "Native American literature" was sufficiently "non-canonical."

[20] One of my professors in graduate school—the late Prof. Ann Charters, formerly of the University of Connecticut, herself a prolific editor of academic volumes as well as volumes for classroom instruction—once told me that, as a rule of thumb, most presses won't publish an edited collection of any kind unless roughly 70% of the material is either otherwise available (such as already available in a competing edited volume) or addresses thoroughly familiar authors. Presses, she told me, dislike taking risks with new material, as there is no existing market from which they can estimate potential sales. In my own work as an editor, when once speaking to an acquisitions editor at a major university press which eventually published one of my co-edited collections, one of the first questions I was asked was: "which major scholars will be included in this collection?" Name recognition is always a factor when it comes to potential sales, regardless of the type of publication or its intended audience. As such, treading (reasonably) familiar ground is always a safe bet for scholars working in a publish-or-perish job market.

[21] And here I point the finger at myself as well. My 2019 book *Contemporary Native Fiction: Toward a Narrative Poetics of Survivance* examines the means by which the formal structure of the narratives supports the political aims of the novels. I selected one paradigmatic author for each chapter, pairing the author with a narratological approach. In selecting my paradigmatic authors, I considered those authors' position in the canon as well as how well their work fit the parameters of the study. The four authors and novels I chose were James Welch's *Fools Crow*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*, Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda*, and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*. For those so interested, I address Boyden's identity controversy in the introduction. Interested readers can begin their own investigations here. My point in sharing this is to note that, in my own research, I explicitly considered canonicity and popularity, in part to help pitch this idea to the press. Additionally, the portion of the title before the colon was selected by the press, in part because of the popularity of the search terms in online databases used by academics. At all points, one of our chief goals was to produce a book that had a fair chance of being read (not to mention purchased) by the target audience.

[22] Although it doesn't happen often, writers and their works can also quickly fall out of favor in academic circles. In addition to the Boyden identity controversy noted above, Sherman Alexie—once a mainstay of Native American Literature syllabi and the subject of many academic studies—has had far less scholarship produced about his work following the allegations of sexual misconduct made against him. It's still too soon to tell what the long-term effects will be, but early signs suggest that both Alexie and Boyden are falling out of favor and could someday lose their "canonical" status if they continue to be avoided in academic studies and left off college syllabi. In a personal conversation I had in 2023 with an Indigenous novelist who wishes to remain unidentified, he noted that he would be surprised if either author ever published another novel.

In addition to the work of canon formation we perform with our scholarship and teaching, we should also remember that what we teach is almost entirely determined by what gets published and what stays in print. We can only purchase from bookstores (online as well as brick-and-mortar) and university suppliers what publishers produce and keep in print.[23] In his remarkable study *Permissible Narratives: The Promise of Latino/a Literature*, Christopher González argues that "[c]ertain historically marginalized groups in the United States resist this metaphor of the melting pot because they feel they have not had an opportunity for the same level of self-expression as the dominant group" (1). He furthers this by claiming that "early successes of Latino/a authors have made it difficult for successive generations of Latino/a writers to write in a manner that differed from the well-established literary tropes" (10). What comes before, in other words, will most certainly help determine what will follow. Early successes will create an audience for similar works, which publishers will make every attempt to satisfy. Works that differ from those for which a market already exists will be harder to find, as publishers are less likely to take a risk by investing the resources needed to publish them.

And it's not hard to see how academic scholarship and professional publication feed each other. Novels that are regularly featured on college syllabi—such as Silko's *Ceremony*—have a better chance of staying in print much longer than those works that are not regularly taught, such as Jones's *It Came from Del Rio* (and this despite the continued success and popularity of his other books). The availability of texts and their inclusion in works of academic publishing will then no doubt influence the direction taken by other scholars who are themselves navigating the field, particularly graduate students and emerging scholars.[24]

All that said, I am certainly not arguing that there is no scholarly discussion of these authors, or of Indigenous speculative fiction more generally. But I will say that, compared to the amount of ink that has been spilled over the "canon" that scholars like Kenneth Lincoln and those in his wake have established, the critical commentary is woefully under-developed.

The Cambridge History of Native American Literature, discussed above, does a wonderful job of including works of speculative fiction into the larger academic discussion. In his

---

[23] Self-publishing and internet publishing are helping to change this, but those two publishing avenues still don't receive the same degree of formal recognition that traditional publishing does. Nor do they enjoy the same amount of popular sales.

[24] I recall a conversation with one of my professors in graduate school, who would regularly direct students on what to write for their seminar papers. These papers, he would tell us, will become your first published articles, and thus help shape the direction of your careers. And while he no doubt meant well—he wished that all of his students would find success on the job market—he also certainly helped steer some graduate students away from taking risks that might not pay off on the market.

contribution to the collection, Eric Gary Anderson thoughtfully writes about horror and fantasy, discussing such authors as Jones and Justice, as well as the work of Cherokee novelist Blake Hausman and his 2011 novel *Riding the Trail of Tears*, a work of science fiction that explores a variety of questions related to the fictional creation of a virtual-reality Trail of Tears experience. The *Cambridge History* also includes a short essay by Stephen Graham Jones, a thoughtful accounting of Jones's experience growing up in a media landscape where influential Indigenous characters were not portrayed by Indigenous actors.[25]

More significantly, however, is the work of Miriam C. Brown Spiers, whose 2021 study *Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction*, situates itself in the overlapping—and as yet still emerging—areas of science fiction studies and Indigenous studies. With chapters exploring the fiction of William Sanders, Stephen Graham Jones, Blake Hausman, and Choctaw novelist D.L. Birchfield's 2004 alternate reality novel *Field of Honor*, Spiers provides thoughtful readings of works of contemporary Indigenous science fiction while also highlighting some of the problems with that designation. Given that "science fiction" "emphasized Euro-American rather than Native literary traditions" (xi), some scholars have found alternative means of categorizing the work of these Indigenous authors.[26] Despite these potential complications, Spiers notes that "Indigenous science fiction"—and here I would like to expand her thinking to Indigenous speculative fiction more generally—"has the ability to expand and complicate the boundaries of the historically Euro-American genre in ways that are beneficial to both Native and non-Native audiences" (xl).

++++++++++

If the above introduction makes anything clear, it should be these two related points: first, that there is a great deal of Indigenous speculative fiction worth reading, teaching, and producing scholarship on; and second, no one academic venue can possibly cover with any degree of comprehensiveness the scope of this work. With a great many wonderful works in a variety of genres—and with more being published, written, and conceived as I write this introduction—any attempt at being exhaustive will only leave readers exhausted. So instead, what this special issue offers is a glimpse, a brief look at some of the most intriguing, some of the most rewarding, and some of the most popular

[25] It's also a thoughtful reminder that, for all the good work done by non-Indigenous scholars, we must also always find space for Indigenous voices to lead and steer these conversations.

[26] Although I wish to avoid an overly long discussion on this issue as it would require a similar approach to horror, fantasy, and most certainly post-apocalyptic fiction, I strongly encourage readers to follow up on Spiers's work, paying particular attention to her discussion of such formulations as Dillon's "Indigenous futurism" and Dean Rader's "the Indian invention novel" (xii).

works of speculative fiction currently available. For the reader already immersed in this field of study, these articles advance a conversation you may be familiar with. For those who are new to these works, these articles invite you into that conversation. In either case, this special issue is offered to the reader as part of a rich and developing line of inquiry, engaged with an even more rich and developing field of literary production. As we have seen above, this is not the first word. And as the submissions themselves indicate, this will certainly not be the last word, either.

We open this special issue with Cyanne Topaum's "Terminal Futurity and Native Ressentiment in the Indigenous Post-Apocalypse," which draws a clear line of influence from Vizenor's work of speculative fiction to Rice and Dimaline's recent fiction, highlighting the juxtaposition of Indigenous survivance with Indigenous death in novels outlining a post-apocalyptic future resulting from the machinations of settler colonialism. Evripidis Karavasilis follows this "Biocolonialism, Indigenous Identity and Belonging in a Dystopian World: Reading Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*," a reading of Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and its exploration of the biopolitical effects on Indigenous bodies in a similarly dystopian post-apocalyptic world. This essay is followed by Carlos Tkacz's "Slipping Futures: Native Slipstream, Stephen Graham Jones's *The Only Good Indians*, and Disrupted Models," which focuses on the horror novel's complex representation of time to comment on the possibility of cultural survival in such a post-apocalyptic settler-colonial world. Leaning toward a trope often employed by horror novels, Valentina DeRiso then offers a reading of Eden Robinson's (Haisla and Heiltsuk First Nations) award-winning novel *Monkey Beach* highlighting issues of Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous/settler-colonial relationships by means of the spectralization of Indigenous presence in "Wondrous Hauntings in Eden Robinson's Monkey Beach." Moving out further in both time and space, Tom Ferlic's "'I'm Writing This All Down So I Don't Forget': The Indigenous Futurist Short Story and Kinship as Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Resistance" explores the means by which Indigenous futurism has been engaged to craft safe spaces for trans identities by offering alternatives to heteropatriarchal notions of kinship. Markus Schwarz continues this exploration into science fiction in "From Colonial Terraforming towards a Planet-Based Solidarity: Indigenous Speculations between Planet Earth and Outer Space," which reads a group of Indigenous Futurist short stories for the means by which they provide decolonized versions of space exploration and the terraforming of new worlds. Finally, moving away from physical spaces and into dream states, Ruth Gehrmann's "Dreamscapes as Sites of Resistance: The Unconscious State, Decision-Making, and Community Formation in Indigenous Speculative Fiction for Young

Adults" explores the means by which Indigenous Young Adult authors employ dream spaces in the efforts of community formation and development.

As one can see, there is much in this issue worth diving into.

Indeed, Indigenous speculative fiction in most certainly having a moment. As it always has.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Amadahy, Zainab. *The Moons of Palmares*. Future History Press, 2013. [reprint]

Anderson, Eric Gary. "Native American Horror, Fantasy, and Speculative Fiction." Taylor, Melanie

Benson, ed. *The Cambridge History of Native American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020. 431–446.

Birchfield, D.L. *Field of Honor*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2004.

Burton, Levar. "Foreword." Shawl, Nisi, ed. *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color*. Oxford: Solaris, 2019. 9–10.

Clute, John and John Grant. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. New York: Orbit Books, 1997.

Dillon, Grace. "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms." Dillon, Grace, ed. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Tuscon: U of Arizona P, 2012. 1–12.

Dillon, Grace, ed. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Tuscon: U of Arizona P, 2012.

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. Toronto: Dancing Cat Books, 2017.

---. *VenCo*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2023.

Erdrich, Louise. *Future Home of the Living God*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

González, Christopher. *Permissible Narratives: The Promise of Latino/a Literature*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2017.

Hausmann, Blake. *Riding the Trail of Tears*. Lincoln: Bison Books, 2011.

Hawk, Shane and Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr., eds. *Never Whistle at Night: An Indigenous Dark Fiction Anthology*. New York: Vintage Books, 2023.

Jones, Stephen Graham. "Can You See the Indian?" Taylor, Melanie Benson, ed. *The Cambridge History of Native American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020. 526–530.

---. "Foreword." Hawk, Shane and Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr., eds. *Never Whistle at Night: An Indigenous Dark Fiction Anthology*. New York: Vintage Books, 2023. xi–xvi.

---. *It Came from Del Rio*. Lyons, CO: Trapdoor Books, 2010.

---. *My Heart is a Chainsaw*. New York: Saga Press, 2021.

---. *The Only Good Indians*. New York: Saga Press, 2020.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2011. [reprint]

---. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier UP, 2018.

Lee, A. Robert. “Rethinking the Native American Renaissance: Texts and Contexts.” Taylor, Melanie Benson, ed. *The Cambridge History of Native American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020. 255–270.

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Native American Renaissance*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.

Little Badger, Darcie. *Elatsoe*. NY: Levine Querido, 2020.

Lothian, Alexis. *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. NY: NYU Press, 2018.

Misha, *Red Spider, White Web*. Le Grande, OR: Wordcraft of Oregon, 1999.

Moran, Patrick. *The Canons of Fantasy: Lands of High Adventure*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019.

Nicholson, Hope. “Letter from the Editor.” Nicholson, Hope, ed. *Love Beyond Body, Space & Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*. Winnipeg: Bedside Press, 2016. 7–8

Nicholson, Hope, ed. *Love Beyond Body, Space & Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*. Winnipeg: Bedside Press, 2016.

Sanders, William. *Journey to Fusang*. New York: Popular Library, 1988.

Sangster, Matthew. *An Introduction to Fantasy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023.

Sharp, Patrick B. “Questing for an Indigenous Future: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* as Indigenous Science Fiction.” Isiah Lavender III, ed. *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014. 117–30.

Shawl, Nisi, ed. *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color*. Oxford: Solaris, 2019.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking Press, 1977.

Spiers, Miriam C. Brown. *Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2021.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Darkness in St. Louis: Bearheart*. Truck Press, 1978.

Whitehead, Joshua. “Introduction.” Whitehead, Joshua, ed. *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2020. 9–15.

Whitehead, Joshua, ed. *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2020.

William, Gerry. *The Black Ship*. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 2015. [reprint]

Wilson, Daniel H. *The Andromeda Revolution*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.

---. *Robogenesis*. New York: Vintage, 2014.

---. *Robopocalypse*. New York: Vintage, 2011.

Womack, Craig. “Book-Length Native Literary Criticism.” *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*. Womack, et. al., eds. Norman: The U of Oklahoma P, 2008.