

The Creation Story is a Spaceship

Indigenous Futurism and Decolonial Deep Space

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Thinking about outer space is how I came to be an Indigenous Futurist. A simultaneous experience of wonder and fear, there is an ambiguous pleasure in extending one's imagination to outer space. It is a beautiful and ghastly void, and one which is already being colonized by corporate and military interests. There is also an occasional hopelessness in trying to capture the scale and startling novelty of worlds so voluminous that they could contain 1,000 or more of our own small Earth. Imagining at these scales helps us untangle our position in the complexity of our own world while extending that understanding to a future space-time. Questions about Indigenous people in space are not simply hypothetical musings in order to prepare for an eventual space NDN pilot program (though they are also that); they are questions to help guide us on what is left of our Earth.

I keep asking, who is the NDN in space? What motivates the NDN to go forward, through the void? How do we maintain who we are when flung into the face of the abyss, far from any semblance of a traditional home? This becomes essentially a question of how we must be compelled to find new ways of making contact. The vision of the world as terra nullius, or empty land, was the perspective of settlers in North America, Australia, and on other bloody frontiers who did not see Indigenous peoples as human, but inconvenient features of the land that needed to be civilized and contained. We must not fall into the trap of colonial visions of outer space and the future. Indigenous Futurism is an extension of already-existing relationships to time, technology, and worlds. For me, it starts from a point of always being dynamically interconnected to a vast unknown.

Past/Future

Indigenous Futurism seeks out, understands, and dwells in non-linear time. The past is always-already in the present, as is the future. Indigenous artists, authors, and thinkers constantly struggle to represent these complex, bundled times in a world dominated by a linear, forward-plodding timeline. **Stephen Graham Jones**

(<http://english.colorado.edu/stephen-graham-jones/>) is the author of speculative fiction works who calls himself a Blackfoot physicist because of his experiments with writing timelines according to a Blackfoot framework of loops, glitches, and the constant experience of Indigenous time travel: living in the past, future, and present simultaneously.

Nurturing and exploring these alternative relationships to time affects our relationships with our environment. We are always going back to the origin, our creation stories, as a starting point for moving forward, or up, or sideways. This mode of thinking can motivate us not only to consider how our actions will reverberate into the future, but also how they build on—or, as is all too often disregarded, erased or disrespected—the historical past. Stories are a technology we use to guide us through the chaos of overlapping times and spaces. Indigenous Futurism is about honing our technologies to the most liberating ends.

Survival. Adaptation. Dynamism. These are the skills of the inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic earthscape we have lived in since European expansion to Africa, the Caribbean, and Americas. Columbus's voyages did not only destroy the worlds of Indigenous peoples in these scattered yet now connected locations; these journeys were also the birth of a monstrous new worldview, as Europe sought to twist these lands to their ends of conquest, expansion, and further conquest. In the wake of this destructive experiment of modernity, the Indigenous survivors of the globe have been increasingly severed from land, knowledge, and the relationships that sustained us prior to colonization. Perhaps more incredible than what we have all lost, however, is what we have managed to hold onto and create. One of the most powerful narratives offered by Indigenous Futurism is that we Indigenous peoples are carriers of advanced technical knowledge that can be applied in ways much more profound and generative than the extractive, destructive, life-denying processes of capitalism and Western progress.

Indigenous Futurists might find it helpful or empowering to reveal the white settler as the alien. As **Grace Dillon** (<http://web.pdx.edu/~dillong/>) describes in *Walking the Clouds* (<http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/Books/bid2331.htm>), there is a sense of victory in pulling back the benevolent face of settler colonialism to reveal the insidious, cold-blooded reptilian beneath. However, I also like to think about embracing the alien and becoming the alien. By now, it has become a racist cliché that many would rather speculate that the Egyptian pyramids, or the large mound structures of the Mississippi tribes, or any other example of the virtuoso structures of non-European groups, were made possible only by extra-terrestrial assistance. The joke's on them, because it's us—those perpetually-underestimated Brown people—who are the advanced race capable of large-scale works of technology, memorial, etc. In other words, we are the aliens we've been waiting for. We are the highly intelligent beings the government has tried to cover up. Indigenous peoples who have suffered genocide and dispossession for more than five hundred years are used to thinking in terms of global conspiracy, and that's because we've been in the middle of one all of this time.

It takes only a slight shift in perspective to understand visions as traditional technologies, or storytelling as a technical knowledge. This is not an exercise in matching up to the European model of technological mastery. Rather, Indigenous Futurism is about thinking up distinctly alternate visions of progress and advanced technology. We must learn and unlearn, and learn and unlearn over and over again not to see our technologies as unsophisticated or backwards. Technology is never just about the tools themselves—it is about how we use them. How can we use our technologies differently, in the interests of non-hierarchical, non-coercive relationships with ourselves and the worlds around us?

The 6th World (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7f4Jm0y_iLk) is a short film with lasting power. It tells the story of Tazbah Redhouse, a Navajo astronaut, spaceship captain and one half of an experimental team attempting to grow a self-sustaining genetically modified corn in space. The title of the film refers to the Navajo creation story, which tells of the first people traveling through different worlds until emerging between the four sacred mountains in the Southwestern United States. A history of movement is borne into who we are. When I first saw *The 6th World*, I couldn't believe that I had found another Navajo who thought about Navajos living on Mars. A Navajo astronaut (a woman of course, because who else would you send to save the world?) uses ancestral corn to sustain humankind on Mars—this was the kind of movie I'd been waiting for ever since I could watch movies.

After I watched *The 6th World*, a kind of aphorism began to take shape in my mind. I now call it the Space NDN Motto: *The creation story is a spaceship*. The creation story is always being re-told, made anew. We are in a process of ongoing creation all around us, as well as destruction, death, and decay. The stories must grow to reflect that process. That means coming up with new words for our own social realities in our own languages. We have advanced knowledge about how not only to survive on this planet but to thrive on a cosmic level.

Origins/Diaspora

The NDN in space has helped me think about what it means to be an Indigenous person who moves or is moved far away from the homeland. Again, we do not need to travel to outer space to confront this. All over the Earth, Indigenous peoples have been displaced, dispossessed, stolen, and/or become mobile by less coercive means. Systems of apocalypse have struck at the roots of many of our previous patterns of life and left us scattered and fractured. Thus, many futurist narratives are also apocalypse stories. They record the attempts to create a world after another has been destroyed. Those who were supposed to be disposable remain, and continue creating from the ruins of a world gone very much awry.

In Australia, a group called **Sovereign Apocalypse** (<http://sovereignapocalypse.com/>) has cleverly appropriated the idea of apocalypse as the end of the current world of white domination. Their website, where one can find their zines and mixtapes, describes them as such: "Sovereign Apocalypse is an independent and autonomous collective. The concept is based on future imaginings of total Indigenous sovereignty. Our work is positioned in an apocalypse that has ended colonization and lifted the white veil to disclose inherent sovereign knowledge and return [[[to country]]]." The sense of apocalypse here is essentially a cataclysmic moment of decolonization reminiscent of the biblical sense of revelation. The apocalypse is a celebration of destruction. It brings to mind the purity of violence Fanon describes as a liberating act for colonized peoples. Sovereign apocalypse also suggests a certain self-determination to the apocalyptic moment. While Indigenous peoples have suffered since the endings of our traditional worlds and systems of relations in the wake of a post-Columbus world, we have also been capable of creating beauty and meaning on a bloody Earth.

The post-apocalyptic Indian then is not a victim and not merely a survivor. The post-apocalyptic Indian is indicative of the Indigenous drive to create. My favourite example of this post-apocalyptic Indian figure is Betonie, the medicine man in **Leslie Marmon Silko** (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/leslie-marmon-silko>)'s classic of Native American literature, *Ceremony*. While it is Silko's magnum opus, *Almanac of the Dead*, that would be rightly considered a futurist work, *Ceremony* has many of the trappings of an apocalyptic redemption story. Betonie, for instance, lives quite literally in a wasteland, in a dried up riverbed outside Gallup, New Mexico that is used as a dumping ground and campsite for otherwise homeless Indians. Despite the settlers' attempts to turn his home to trash, Betonie takes the refuse and litter from his surroundings and incorporates it into his medicine bundles and ceremonial settings.

The 2014 short film **Wakening** (<http://www.nsi-canada.ca/2015/01/wakening/>), directed Danis Goulet, also portrays a bleak future shot through with Indigenous resilience and power. In the film, a lone Cree woman warrior hunts the Weetigo through an urban hellscape. In the first seconds of the film, she runs past a wall graffitied with the words: “This is Indian Land.” The apocalyptic conditions of this near-future city are redeemed through the warrior’s hunting of an ancient beast. Future, past come together. There is also an incredible shot of a tree growing inside an abandoned movie theater: the triumph of that which survives. The movie theater and the larger cityscape it exists in are shown here as vulnerable and temporary as compared to the longevity and resilience of organic forms such as the tree.

While these two narratives focus on gathering scraps of sacredness and power from the ruins of a settler-made disaster near or on the traditional territories of Betonie and the Cree warrior, I am also interested in narratives that describe what it is like when this world is so badly destroyed that there is no possibility of redemption. It seems more and more likely that this Earth will soon take its revenge for all the destruction wrought on its lands and seas. *Star Waka* is an epic poem by Maori poet **Robert Sullivan** (<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/robert-sullivan>) that explores how a group of Maori space travellers navigate their search for a new home in a place they hardly understand. It asks the provocative question of how we can move our land-based traditions to alien soil. In light of these diasporic travels, we can also think of slave narratives as post-apocalyptic Indigenous stories. These narratives relate the incredible struggle of peoples stolen from their homelands and thrust into a brutal structure of oppression that has yet to fall.

These histories of movement, shared across the African diaspora and via the movement of Indigenous peoples from their home territories in North America, challenge our conceptions Indigenous identity as based solely in a people’s sovereignty over a discrete bounded territory. If Indigenous peoples are forced or choose to leave their ancestral territories, how do they continue to know themselves as belonging to a place, a group, and/or a shared understanding of mutual relationships? Indigenous Futurism and Afrofuturism provide narratives that not only bring the past into the future but also bring that dynamism into land relations in the present.

Conversations and projects around new media and revolutionary uses of technology also probe new ways of understanding territory. According to the creators of the website Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), an online community of Native scholars, artists, and technologists who collaborate on websites, online games, and other virtual spaces, “Even on the Internet, Native people need a self-determined place to call home.” The Internet, like outer space, is a new place where old conversations about sovereignty, self-determination, belonging, and relationship need to be reconsidered and reworked for the possibility of liberation for all. Indigenous peoples on this earthly domain have had our connections to land severed, bludgeoned, and continuously mauled by colonial machinations. These same processes can manifest in cyber and cosmic space as well. On the Internet, in outer space, we are all thrust into the position of diaspora. The Internet is also a place of movement. We link quickly from one corner of the vast “web” to another while communicating across wide stretches of material earthland. This place is not where we come from but it may be where we find ourselves.

Utopia/Change

Science fiction (SF) has long been about estrangement. For many years, SF was thought of as the genre of meeting the Other. That is, the narrative of white male explorer or protector meets exotic, primitive, mysterious, threatening alien. In Indigenous SF, authors, artists, and creators of all kinds have the ability to imagine encounters with the Other not in

terms of aggression, competition, conquest, and violence but collaboration, exchange, mutual respect, and co-specificity.

As I wrote at the beginning of this essay, Indigenous Futurism is in part about imagining and cultivating relationships to land/space and each other. These texts, artworks, ideas are attempts at learning to live together within the entanglement of suffering, resilience, and creation. Indigenous Futurism illuminates the vast network of complex connections that link everything in this world, and then further on out, to everything in other worlds. In a universe that continues to collect more and more history, our lives will only become more and more entangled with one another and with the impending environmental shifts of a world that has taken too much destruction. How we deal with these loops and knots is the goal of futuristic thinking.

Nalo Hopkinson (<http://nalohopkinson.com/>) once said, while referencing Octavia Butler, “Utopia is dead; dynamic tension reigns.” [1] She was riffing off of the now-famous adage from Butler’s invented future religion, Earthseed, whose motto is, “God is change.” Change, dynamic tension, and a rejection of perfection are the starting principles for a clear-eyed, engaged, and deeply empathetic attempt to make a new world. Futurist narratives are models of how different sets of relationships might develop, unravel, and emerge in unexpected ways.

Hopkinson is the author of *Midnight Robber*, along with many other brilliant, richly-layered speculative fiction novels that depict worlds in chaos, in which relationships are turned destructive and hurtful. She also, however, presents models of how these relationships might be healed. In *Midnight Robber*, a young girl named Tan-Tan comes of age in exile on a planet that exists in an alternate dimension to the planet she was born on. When she meets and then eventually lives with New Half Way Tree’s Indigenous population, the douen, Tan-Tan must renegotiate the terms of personhood she had previously understood. This is the contact story, but stripped of its usual defining whiteness. Thus, Hopkinson presents a world in which some problems have been removed, but we must still contend with our hierarchical impulses. *Midnight Robber*, to me, represents the aspirations of contact without conquest, the choice to live with complex interrelatedness to each other and the environments we share. Outer space becomes the literary laboratory where we can test out re-arranged models of existence and consider the possibilities they engender.

These thought experiments are being performed by more authors of colour than ever. ***Octavia’s Brood: Speculative Fiction from Social Justice Movements* (<http://octaviabrood.com/>)** was released this year and contains story after story of political organizers and radical thinkers testing out visions of a future resistance. As the name of the collection implies, the authors are inspired by the work of Octavia Butler, a true ancestor of futurist speculation and its ensuing political theorizing. Zainab Amadahy is another speculative fiction writer who has been envisioning possible political futures for years before the current explosion of awareness and discussion around SF as a political tool of the Brown and Black Indigenous peoples of the world. Amadahy situates her writing thus: “I aspire to write in a way that views possible alternatives through the lens of a relationship framework, where I can demonstrate our connectivity to and interdependence with each other and the rest of our Relations.” [2] If there was any ambiguity about it before, speculative fiction has of late secured its position as the de facto literary genre of political resistance. With the genre’s distinctive appeal to a wide swath of demographics, speculative fiction is also poised to reach and inspire more people than other kinds of literature. Of course, science and speculative fictions are not limited to the written word alone. In many ways, these futurisms are total cultural projects, manifesting in our literary, cinematic, artistic, and personal projects.

I don’t necessarily expect that everyone will suddenly take an interest in the multiple moons of Jupiter, devote their reading schedules entirely to SF by people of colour, or obsess over the complexities of time travel—though really, why wouldn’t you? But what I hope futurism can achieve is an increased willingness to accept and develop new ways of thinking about how we relate to each other across multiple spacetimes. I call this a “cosmic consciousness,” borrowing from and building on Rob Nixon’s idea of “planetary consciousness” from his book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*. [3] Cosmic consciousness is the attempt to understand my location across multiple dimensions of possible histories and disparate locations. As a queer Diné person, I have histories of movement and migration engrained in my creation story. Indigenous Futurism and Afrofuturism have been my guiding literatures in untangling how to relate the Indigenous to the diasporic. Space travel helped me understand how our identities can be fluid and in flux without being any less valid. As an Indigenous North American, who like many, if not the majority of other Indians, has lived away from

my traditional territory more than I have lived on it, I began to question why other Indigenous peoples, specifically Afro-Indigenous peoples both in the African diaspora and on the African continent, were not included in discussions of Indigeneity. Canadian scholar Rinaldo Walcott states that the “invention of Black people troubles understandings of land, place, Indigeneity, and belonging.” [4] By creating narratives of the space NDN, Indigenous authors also participate in complicating our notions of home, Indigenous identity, and shifting relationships to land and belonging. Despite the history of anti-Blackness throughout Indian country, I find hope in the converging pathways of Indigenous and Afro-futurisms. These are both movements using non-Western knowledge systems to counter the destruction of land relations, create new conceptions of the human outside the racial logics of settler colonialism and slavery, and forge expanded understandings of space/time to incorporate the vast distances of outer space into our sense of home. In these complimentary imaginings we can witness our entanglements with each other, and instead of cutting through these empathetic bonds we can trace them toward a new world free from the specter of white supremacy.

Let us build together the world we want to emerge into.

Notes

[1] Jennifer Burwell and Nancy Johnston, “A Dialogue on SF and Utopian Fiction, between Nalo Hopkinson and Elisabeth Vonarburg,” *Foundation* 30:81 (2011): 40-47.

[2] Grace Dillon, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 172.

[3] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[4] Rinaldo Walcott, “The Problem of the Human: Black Ontologies and the the Coloniality of Our Being,” in *Postcoloniality - Decoloniality - Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker, eds. (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 95.

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