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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Creating Shki-kiin, New Worlds: Bending Possibilities and Sustainabilities in Indigenous SF"

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Since its beginnings, science fiction has sought to anticipate the future, which "apparently consists of both external encounters—technological marvels (and horrors), aliens, and outer space—and internal tensions—the mysteries of the human mind and body" (Pinsky 2003: 13). Science fiction has also been, however, a vehicle for "often distorted and topsy-turvy references to colonialism" (Rieder 22). In other words, the relationship between the literary genre and colonial history is, to say the least, complicated. If colonialism and industrialization can thus be seen as "external forces" that have resulted in many "internal tensions," such as intergenerational trauma,

cultural genocide, and loss of language, pedagogies, and ways of life, what is it about SF[1] as a literary genre that interpellates Indigenous writers? How are these impacts translated into Indigenous storytelling? Tellingly, a number of works[2] and anthologies[3] of Indigenous SF have appeared over the last several years, exploring these very questions. SF is useful for thinking about colonial history and projecting better futures. "Indigenous SF"[4] may be thought of, to borrow from Cherokee, Hawaiian and Samoan scholar Jason Lewis, as "counterfactual narratives that re-imagine historical events, often to create more positive contemporary and future realities for Indigenous people" and as a process that allows us to "engag[e] with the infrastructure of the present *to bend it* in a direction more conducive to Indigenous ontologies" (2016: 44; emphasis added).[5] Specifically, what interests me here is this idea of "bending" infrastructure, genre, and literary expectations, so as to reimagine a sense of place and belonging in a damaged, wounded world, but a world in which love and beauty are still possible—as otherwise suggested by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon, to "recover ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (10). To the proposed definition by Lewis, I add Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice's key concept "wonderworks" ("Wonderworks", *Why*). "Wonder," writes Justice, "is thus not a *generic* experience, but a *relational* one. It offers other possibilities than the template. It gives us possibilities" ("Wonderworks" n.p.; emphasis added). In other words, "wonder" allows for stories of resurgence to be explored by way of different kinds of relationships and perspectives, "of other ways of being in the world" (*Why* 152). It questions how

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individuals within a society are informed to function in a certain way, based on the 'normativity' of these interrelationships. Moreover, "wonder," which I read in a similar way to Unangax scholar Eve Tuck's call for a research practice based on desire, rather than damage (2009), invites readers—and protagonists—to explore what *is* wonderful and desireful through story, thereby offering new ways for encounter and engagement with(in) the text, its purpose, and its teachings.

Although some might suggest that Indigenous SF is a more 'recent' phenomenon—perhaps due to the institutional (late) arrival of Dillon's anthology only in 2012—the publication dates of the pieces I have chosen reveal that the trend is not, in fact, that 'new'[6]; rather, it is a sustained, conscious, and embodied literary practice that has built upon and around the rhetoric of SF, while also embracing the concerns and specificities of Indigenous communities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz's "Men on the Moon" (1999), Dogrib Tlicho author Richard Van Camp's "On the Wings of this Prayer" (2013), and Haisla/Heiltsuk novelist Eden Robinson's "Terminal Avenue" (2004) are three strong examples of Indigenous writers exploring contemporary environmental and sustainability concerns, including those collectively shared, and more justly distributed and inhabited spaces within the context of settler-colonialism, through the malleable modus operandi of SF. These examples have inspired me to consider how Indigenous writers have been and are using tropes, imagery, ideas, and narratives that might be identified as something

analogous to SF, but without bearing the baggage and expectations that a reader/viewer/consumer of generic SF might bring to it.

In creating alternative possibilities and spaces for wonder, I argue that these stories enable a relational quest, between humans and other-than-humans, and across times and spaces. I thus read them as, on the one hand, restorative of Indigenous bodies, nations, and epistemologies, at the very centre of and through narratives of resurgence and, on the other hand, as artistic interventions, that are not only generative of change, but call for respectful, consensual, and critical forms of engagement. That said, rather than attempting to apply theoretical or interpretative genre analyses—however these might themselves seek to upset preconceived or anticipated normativities—I want to return to one of the most foundational ideas in the study of Indigenous literatures: that stories are, in themselves, theory. To extrapolate theory, or rather teachings, from the stories themselves, is more in line with Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle's affirmation, as it is with Indigenous literary nationalists: in that in their specific, contextual, and unique perspectives, these stories actively challenge and expand the mainstream critical definitions of genre(s) and ask their readers to reconsider that "*story* is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people" (Maracle 7; emphasis in the original). In other words, my reading practice is about adapting existing scholarship(s) to similar Indigenous artistic interventions—which, in turn, borrow from/are inspired by SF studies, affect theory, queer theory, etc.—so as to consider, on the one hand, the complexity of the lived,

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experiential processes of textualizing or otherwise materializing storytelling traditions and concepts of kinship and, on the other hand, the creation of alternative forms of political action, social transformation, and direct healing. For, to paraphrase Maracle, there seems little point in "presenting the human condition in a language separate from the human experience: passion, emotion, and character" (9)—and, if I might add, the impact(s) of said experience.

Indeed, Robinson's piece was written in 1993, as her response to the Oka Crisis, initially slated to appear in her 1996 short story collection *Traplines*; Ortiz's piece is a reflection on lunar discovery/conquest/colonization following the launch of Apollo 11 back in 1969; and Van Camp's story offers an atemporal warning of the harms caused by the tar sands, a form of petroleum deposit, the commercially profitable extraction of which has continuously increased since the mid-1970s. Thus, while attempting to stay within the adapted frames that combine speculative fiction, dystopia and erotica, I am interested here in looking at these literary interventions as generic alternatives and creative processes that enable a fluidity and provide their creators with numerous opportunities for slippages and crossing/negotiating boundaries, without having to answer to any of them. In other words, these intermedial creative approaches reflect on how what may seem generically 'new,' 'contemporary' and 'alternative' is actually part of a larger, ongoing storytelling tradition that reflects interrelationality, adaptability and, perhaps more importantly, shared responsibility and care for all

beings—that is, if we do not wish to "carry on in fever" (Van Camp, 2013: 173).

Knowledge, Dreams, and Teachings

In Acoma Pueblo author Simon Ortiz's short story "Men on the Moon," we are introduced to the lead character, an Elder, named Faustin, who is visited by his daughter and grandson on Father's Day and is gifted a television set. Among the cacophony of images, programs, and ads, Faustin's attention is caught by "an object with smoke coming from it… standing upright." "'What is that?' Faustin asked. His grandson replies, "'Men are going to the moon... That's *Apollo*'" (Ortiz 88). Faustin is, again, confused. He asks his grandson, "'Are those men looking for something on the moon, Nana?'" To which his grandson replies, "'They're trying to find out what's on the moon, Nana. What kind of dirt and rocks there are and to see if there's any water. Scientist men don't believe there's life on the moon. The men are looking for knowledge.' Faustin wondered if the men had run out of places to look for knowledge on the earth" (88). That night, Faustin had a dream. He dreamt of a Skquuyuh mahkina, a "great and powerful" entity "but of evil origins" (85): "Its metal legs stepped upon trees and crushed growing flowers and grass… It walked over and through everything. It splashed through a stream of clear water. The water boiled and streaks of oil flowed downstream. It split a juniper tree in half with a terrible crash. It crushed a boulder into dust with a sound of heavy metal. Nothing stopped the Skquuyuh mahkina. It hummed" (90-91). Faustin's dream protagonists, Anaweh (Flintwing Boy) and Tsushki the Coyote,

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are terrified of this unknown destroyer and, facing east, cornfood in hand, they begin to pray to the great spirits: "We humble ourselves again. We look in your direction for guidance. We ask for your protection. We humble our poor bodies and spirits because only you are the power and the source and the knowledge. Help us, then. That is all we ask" (91). Flintwing Boy readies his bow and says to Tsushki: "You must go and tell everyone. Describe what you have seen. The people must talk among themselves and learn what this is about, and decide what they will do. You must hurry, but you must not alarm the people. Tell them I am here to meet the Skquuyuh mahkina. Later I will give them my report" (91). Tsushki turns and runs to warn the others. And this is the moment when Faustin wakes up.

The dream has a crucial role here, for not only does it parallel a Pueblo story from oral tradition with the contemporary fear that technology threatens to destroy the integrity and sanctity of the environment, it also comes to Faustin—and inevitably to Ortiz's readers as well—as a warning of the destruction that may ensue. After the spacemen return to earth, Faustin asks his grandson if they are alright, to which he responds that they first must go into quarantine to make sure they have not brought anything back to earth that could be harmful. Faustin is confused because his grandson had said that they thought there was no life on the moon; but, if they had brought back a disease, then there may well be the tiniest bit of something. "Faustin figured it out now. The Mericano men had taken that trip in a spaceship rocket to the moon to find

even the tiniest bit of life. And when they found even the tiniest bit of life, even if it was harmful, they would believe they had found knowledge" (95). In this way, not only does the dream serve as a tool for obtaining knowledge about the destruction of lands through capitalist and 'enlightened' development, it can also be seen as an awakening, as a form of resurgence, that is designed to rectify the state of imbalance in which we have come to live. In *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back*, Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains the importance of dream, or vision, as such: "the act of visioning… is a powerful act of resurgence, because these create Shki-kiin, new worlds" (Simpson 2011: 146). The potential for new, alternative ways of being, seeing, and relating is made clear; however, Simpson warns that such re-imaginings come with a responsibility: "in terms of resurgence, vision alone isn't enough… [It] must be coupled with intent: intent for transformation, intent for re-creation, intent for resurgence" (147). In other words, without intent or responsibility, there is no change, only unfulfilled potential; the recipient of the vision or dream must act upon what s/he has received, because it *is* knowledge. That said, and in the spirit of the necessity to consider, first and foremost, an author's specific, contextual, and unique perspectives (in this case Ortiz's as Acoma Pueblo), I find that Simpson's words, although rooted in an Anishinaabe perspective, do allow for some insight into Ortiz's story and the crucial importance of dreams. Indeed, in his dream, Flintwing Boy instructs Tsushki: "People *must* talk among themselves and learn what this is about, and *decide* what they will do" (Ortiz 91; emphasis added). Similarly, Faustin instructs his grandson, "It's a dream, but

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it's the truth," to which his grandson responds, "I believe you, Nana" (94). This not only acknowledges both story and dream as valuable, but also confers such value upon them as undeniable sources of knowledge, highlighting the need for its protagonists to engage with what is presented to them as knowledge, and its validity. On a larger scale, "Men on the Moon" also compels the reader to question what 'knowledge' is and from where it is acquired, which itself warrants a necessary change in worldview and a reflection on a past of colonialism and the direct link to a contemporaneity of imperialism.

Dogrib (Tlicho) writer Richard Van Camp follows a similar trope in his short story "On the Wings of This Prayer." Objectively, the narrative provides direct and indirect metaphors connected to land stewardship and environmentally destructive projects, particularly the Alberta tar sands. The last words of the story are "Now wake up" (173): the story is the reader's dream, "a message [that] comes from the future, from [the] Dream Thrower" (171). The narrator of this dream comes to know through dream as well; conceptually, Van Camp offers his readers layers of dream worlds, through both content and context, embedded in one another. As a result, the multiplicity of voices makes for a dizzying, nightmarish reading and ultimate message: the zombies are coming. While "Men on the Moon" is, as Dillon notes, in essence "quietly resolved… [by realigning] the practiced way of living and knowledge that sees far more accurately the oil-slick refuse left behind by advancing, trampling space age science" (7), "On the

Wings of This Prayer" is a message from one of the last survivors of the "zombie-pocalypse," warning us, the ancestors, of the danger of the Tar Sands, which will not only "bring cancer to our Mother," but "unleash them" (173).

Set in the future where the Shark Throats, Hair Eaters, and Boiled Faces—a.k.a. zombies—have suppressed humanity, the story begins with a woman who, along with her family, lived "in the way of the Tar Sands" (164). One day, "[stepping] on teeth in the ice and muskeg. The jaws of an old man, a trapper, had thawed enough to bite her… The woman got very sick: buttons of pus boiling through a body rash, the paling, her hands hooking to claws… She said something was coming through her. Something starving" (164). She pleads to be killed; when left unattended, she disappears. "They think she was the first and they say she is still here as their queen, that she gives birth to them through her mouth. Hatching them through her over and over. More and more. The Boiled Faces" (165). The teeth likely came from an old man who lived in the area of the development and refused to move despite the monetary allures made by the industry; "so they built and dug around him" (165). Eventually, he stops going into town, and withers away in his health; "he had gone to white and had eaten his own lips and fingers. He had stepped in bear traps spiked to the floors on purpose" (165). He pleads to be killed and that his limbs and body be separated, burned and buried. "They did everything he asked them to, but the land was uncovered and turned for years by excavators, tractors and the curiosity of men. We think those machines must have moved the heavy rocks that covered his limbs. [We think they didn't burn his heart to

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ashes]… We think his fingers were able to crawl back to the torso and legs and head" (165).

Graphic as these excerpts may seem, Van Camp makes use of them as vehicles for empathy, to cause a reaction, to commend his reader's engagement—whether it be disgust or amusement, a characteristic of horror narratives is to emulate the protagonist's fear and anguish onto the reader. From the perspective of Indigenous horror, however, the story also contains important teachings in sustainability: for instance, "how to [properly] stop the Boiled Faces with the old ways" (166).[7] These include the use of the Tlicho language: "it slows them when you sing or talk to them or chant in the first tongue" (166). The traditional drums, too, will "stop their mewling cry, turn in to ice their throats" (167). Finally, we are told, "The Boiled Faces are terrified of butterflies. They run screaming—as if set to flames—when they see a butterfly" (167). Thus, as in "Men on the Moon," readers are taught that "the old ways" are not regressive and can play an important role in addressing social and environmental problems.

Often times in the corporate environmental narrative, the solution to climate change—or any other environmental concern—is often linked to the progress of technology to save the day; we can continue with resource exhaustive projects because geo-engineering techniques will (somehow) be able to mitigate global warming and its effects. Unfortunately, finding more sustainable solutions through different ways of knowledge are all too often left out of the picture; as noted by Jeff Corntassel and

Cheryl Bryce, "the revitalization of land-based and water-based cultural practices is premised on enacting indigenous community responsibilities, [which] entails sparking a spiritual revolution rather than seeking [or waiting for] state-based solutions that are disconnected from indigenous community relationships" (160). Like Simpson's call for the coupling of awareness and responsibility when searching for knowledge—in this case, forms of knowledge that might help restore broken food chains and ecosystems—revitalization projects cannot be carried out without the necessary support for and belief in those who undertake them. We might consider the rallies held by "Defend Our Climate, Defend Our Communities" in 2013, or the protests that took place at COP25 in Madrid in 2019, which sought to draw attention to the detrimental effects of long-term oil extraction in Northern Alberta. Eriel Deranger (Athabasca Chipewyan), the executive director for Indigenous Climate Action, shared that

> The largest tar sands mine on the planet is being proposed in my peoples territory right now [and] it will impact the woodland buffalo—the last remaining wild whooping cranes on the planet—and many of the animals my people rely on for food… Aside from the detrimental impacts it will have on my people's food security, treaty rights and water, it will add 6.1-million megatonnes of carbon annually to the atmosphere" (qtd. in Heidenreich n.p.).

Are such testimonies not of the same alarming value as the short story's final quote, "Now wake up"? Is this the type of "spiritual revolution" to which Corntassel and Bryce invite us? What is the difference between the short story and the direct quotation by

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Deranger, other than one is fiction and the other not? These are not questions in fact, but rather may act as realizations: if we do not awaken, if we do not challenge the present-day issues, then we will end up like the protagonist at the end of the short story: witness to the disappearance of the "caribou, moose, bear, fox, wolf, bison, buffalo and everything under the earth here," left with only "roots [to eat] pretending they are what we used to love" (171), and hiding from "humans [who] are farming other humans and making deals with the Hair Eaters" (172). "The future," we are warned, "[will be] a curse" (173). Thus, much like "Men on the Moon," readers are left with a somewhat dire urgency to learn from and to acknowledge the validity of stories—whether from the past or the future—and that the ongoing, continued, and current status quo, is no longer an option: immediate, if not urgent, action is required.

Van Camp's story also contains teachings about a history of colonization, ongoing land dispossession, and exploitation, and calls for an adherence to contemporary social and environmental responsibility by connecting us to the voices of future generations who are living the consequences of our inaction. In the short story, the zombies have eaten all of the land animals, and the people have to live on roots and imagine it as real food. If we consider how the Athabasca River today is contaminated by oil sands pollution, and flows directly towards the community of Fort Chip, the Tar Sands—like the metaphorical zombies—are having detrimental impacts on people in neighbouring areas and on the food and water systems. Co-producer of *One*

River Many Relations (2015), a documentary that explores the Athabasca Oil Sands from the perspective of the communities that live downstream, Stéphane McLachlan, in "Water is a Living Thing" (2014), lists how many of the fish, ducks, bison, and moose have been found with lesions, tumours, and deformities, and how about seventy percent of the supermarkets are stocked with imported frozen foods. Junk food is the most affordable item on the shelves, with fruits and vegetables as the most expensive—a melon being sold for twelve dollars, for example, and tomatoes for five to seven dollars (McLachlan n.p.). In other words, an entire way of life is disappearing, including hunting practices and traditional diets, because of the carcinogens found in the wild animals. If we return to Van Camp's story, once again, we are being warned of what is to come: starvation, being hunted, terrified. Much like "Men on the Moon," Van Camp's short story explores the potential for disaster should our obsession for exploring the unknown and its ultimate consumption—whether that be of the land, of food, of stories—get away from us; because otherwise, all we shall be able to do, too, is to "carry on in fever" (173). In this sense then, the trope of a zombie apocalypse fits perfectly well as a parallel for the detrimental effects of colonization and exploitation. As noted by Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy, "as a culture we become obsessed with this end of the world as if nobody has ever had that experience, but there's lots of Native people who can speak to an experience where they lose everything in these massive waves of destruction" (qtd. in Mullins n.p.).[8] That said, and perhaps because of this history, surviving the apocalypse is not only a possibility but also a reality. There is

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hope. And the narrator of Van Camp's story tells us exactly that: "You *can* change the future" (173).

Reimaginings, Recoveries, and Reclamations

Over the summer, a federal-provincial panel ruled that the oilsands project was in the public interest, even though it could fundamentally cause harm to both the environment and to Indigenous people. The panel offered recommendations for mitigating harm to wildlife, tracking pollutants and for consulting with nearby First Nations.

- *Phil Heidenreich, "Indigenous Activists Protest"*

How, then, do we imagine changing the future? How do we imagine a better future? A future that is more just, more equitable, more caring, more reciprocal, more respectful? Media and governmental responses often paint a rather bleak response to such questions, as the quotation above suggests. However, I would like to return to the concepts of wonder and desire, and explore how these might provide for, once again, alternatives towards resurgence. One of the epigraphs to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's collection *Islands of Decolonial Love*, excerpted from an interview with Junot Diaz, asks "Is it possible to love one's broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person?" (Diaz & Moya n.p.) Set in a near dystopian future, Haisla/Heiltsuk author Eden Robinson's "Terminal Avenue" explores this very concept and its possibilities amid dark, hyperbolic representations of systemic racism, discrimination, and exploitation. Published in 2004 as part of the *So Long Been*

Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy anthology, the short story was, however, written in 1993, "the third anniversary of the Oka Uprising," and during the salmon wars in British Columbia when "television helicopters were scanning the Fraser Valley looking to catch native fishermen 'illegally' fishing" (Hopkinson & Mehan 62).[9] Of the delayed publication of "Terminal Avenue," originally slated to appear in her 1996 collection *Traplines*, Robinson says that it was quickly excised. It was my spec fic, bondage, aboriginal response to Oka and the Fraser River salmon wars. After *50 Shades*, I think it probably would have been the title piece, but back in the mid-90s, bondage porn didn't belong in a serious fiction collection" (qtd. in McKenzie n.p.).

Aside from the "bondage porn" aspect of the story, clearly its political intent (and related anxieties) needs to be highlighted as well. As Dillon notes in her introductory piece to the reprint, the story

> implode[s] this future tale with the traditional Heiltsuk sense of parallel worlds appearing on the horizon, so that the historically forbidden potlatches of the 1880s, the severe crackdown on Native practices in the 1920s, and the military-peace-keeping restrictions at Oka of the early 1990s literally "reappear" at Surreycentral [Vancouver]… Robinson offers a snapshot of violent oppression glossed by reflections that reveal the colonized state of mind (Dillon 206).

This "reappearance" is crucial for, as suggested by Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson, "everyday encounters with popular culture and new media" largely take place "in landscapes where Indigenous history is erased by markers of state authority" (n.p.). In

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effect, Ortiz's and Robinson's stories both address this erasure, but circumvent it as well by having at the core of their narratives the ever-present cultural, contextual knowledges that the protagonists make sense of through their experiences. The accepted regime of state authorities is put to the test and readers are invited to think about the stakes of resilient continuance and presence.

Much like Robinson's novel *Monkey Beach*, the short story pieces together memories and flashbacks, carefully stitched together with the present (future) reality of Wil's adult life. Indeed, as the editors have noted, "Terminal Avenue" "explores a future Canada where First Nations peoples face an increasingly apartheid life" (Hopkinson & Mehan 61). Wilson Wilson (Wil), the main protagonist of Robinson's short story, grew up during a time when Potlatches are once again outlawed, feasts are set up under camouflage nets, and singing and dancing are forbidden. He recalls how, as a young boy, he was "embarrassed, wishing his father were more reserved," not understanding "what his father [was] doing, the rules he [was] breaking, the risks he [was] taking, and the price he [would] pay on a deserted road, when the siren goes off and the lights flash and they [were] pulled over" (69). Indeed, Wil's father chose to thwart governmental policies by bringing the entire family to Monkey Beach, where they would sing and dance and feast, ahead of their departure to Vancouver. Standing at the stern of their speedboat, "he does a twirl… He dances, suddenly inspired, exuberant" (69). His mother smiles, "looks like a movie star," while Kevin, Wil's big

brother, "is so excited he raises one arm and makes the Mohawk salute they see on TV all the time" (68). This snapshot moment of bliss, pride, and peace, carefully stitched into the fabric of the short story, acts as both a framework for the narrative and a memory to which Wil can escape for solace and inspiration. For indeed, much like his father, Wil will develop his own means for resisting the regime set in place by "the Adjustment"—unlike Kevin who eventually joins the Peace Officers. As a male "real living Indian" performer in a very exclusive, white-only S&M club, Wil is a "novelty item" (67), a chosen, dangerous occupation that suggests the protagonist's resilience at finding and capitalizing on alternative interventions as the product of his redefined, yet liminal existence. And, although he "has a morbid fear of becoming dead like his father"—that fear of becoming "a living blankness" (67), someone who "didn't want to stay alive" (66), like his father, after the brutal attack on their way back from Monkey Beach—the connections and friends Wil makes selling cigarettes and sweetgrass provide him with just enough solace, so as to keep those fears at bay, while he travels back and forth from the Vancouver Urban Reserve #2 to the downtown core.

Outside of work, Wil "lives inside his head, lost in memories" of his parents and family, Kitimaat, the Douglas Channel, and Monkey Beach. He only becomes "really alive" (67) once he steps into his lover's club, *Terminal Avenue*, a place where "they do things that aren't sanctioned by the Purity laws," a space divided into two: one "where he gets hurt" and the other where he "gives hurt" (67). In the first space, he is the novelty, the object of others' desires and fetishes, the ultimate prize that the club's elite

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clientele has come for:

> [The bouncers] will drag him into the back and strip-search him in front of clients who pay for the privilege of watching. He stands under a spotlight that shines an impersonal cone of light from the ceiling. The rest of the room is darkened. He can see reflections of glasses, red-eyed cigarettes, the glint of ice clinking against glass, shadows shifting. He can hear zippers coming undone, low moans; he can smell the cum when he's beaten into passivity. (64)

In these raw depictions of both glorifying and fetishizing violence, Robinson effectively expands colonial vocabulary and syntax by highlighting a series of cultural binaries interpenetrating one another: the rich and the poor, the permitted and the forbidden, the abuser and the abused, the colonizer and the colonized. The club itself is an in-between space where the unexpected can happen, and it is watched and enjoyed—as are the pages of the short story that the reader turns nervously. For the reader, in fact, becomes an unwilling participant in this violent voyeurism and extractive consumerism;[10] Wil's blood, sweat, and tears are only matched by the moans and ejaculations of his violators, both active and passive, who take pleasure in "the bouncers [who] grab him by his [long] hair and drag him to the exploratory table at the centre of the room" (64).

However, one must remember that this is all a performance, and Wil is a willing participant—ultimately, it is for pleasure, for spectatorship, and for economic reasons.

This is similarly true for the second space in the club which is, in many ways, a stark contrast to the first one: it is Wil's lover's "playroom," where "her bouncers whispered things to her as they pinned her to the table, and he hurt her" (65). Here the hurt is again performed, but it is private, almost innocent: "He kept going until he was shaking so hard he had to stop. That's enough for tonight, she said, breathless, wrapping her arms around him, telling the bouncers to leave when he started to cry. My poor virgin" (65). Wil soon learns that this is "her secret weakness," "it is a cleansing"; and he, in turn, becomes "addicted to her pain" (65). He comes to realize that causing pain "could give pleasure. It could give power" (65). Economically speaking, being the giver of pain allows Wil to maintain the privileged position that he has as an employee of the elite club, enabling him to walk downtown and "no one will mistake him for a terrorist and shoot him" (67). The relationship he shares with "his high priestess" is what gives him pleasure, and power; it allows him to be resilient, adventurous, resourceful, "exuberant"—like his father. And, like his father, Wil "become[s] an example" (67).

The reader is not told who reported Wil's father to the police; nor do we know who reported Wil to the Peace Officers. Their fate suggests that those who resist will not survive; where then, one might ask, is the hope, the wonder, the potential for change in Robinson's short story? In fact, it is everywhere; from the orange slice held up against the sun (first line) to the feeling of ocean spray cool against his skin (last line), Wil's story is all about agency, strength, and resilience: his parents' love for each other, his family's illegal gatherings, both his and his father's breaches of conformity,

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his illicit love affair with a high-end dominatrix. As such, the short story offers readers a unique perspective of what an individual's life might look like, despite a bleak, unforgiving, violent future.

Final Thoughts

In the introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Grace Dillon asks: "Does [science fiction] have the capacity to envision Native futures, Indigenous hopes, and dreams recovered by rethinking the past in a new framework?" (Dillon 2). At the onset of this essay, I suggested that the presented pieces—whether we want to dub them SF, futurisms, inventions, or wonderworks—all had the potential to present readers with alternative *readings* of impending futures, but also that they might convey *teachings* on how to better anticipate and—hopefully—correct the path on which we are. So that the endings presented in these stories do not, ultimately, become our realities. In other words, how might we consider whether the literature itself must present such alternatives or, rather, if their potential resides in the transfer of the pressure of such questions onto the reader? As receivers of these stories, where does our responsibility lie? Thus, if stories are theory, to receive them without considering the importance of their teachings and their potential for change, and without trying to at least learn from them—without *interacting* with them, to conjure up Maracle's injunction—then, all we do invite is "heartlessness" (Maracle 8). And herein lies, I

believe, a crucial explanation about why many Indigenous writers have been privileging these alternative modes of storytelling: in order to be both ethically and pedagogically challenging, the examples discussed in this essay rely on the audience's sensuous and intellectual experience of and response to the abject, desire, and longing; and the audience's bearing witness to indiscriminate or retributive violence against the land and its inhabitants and, ultimately, on their acceptance of, indifference, or reaction to its different representations. Robinson herself suggests that more and more writers are "exploring identity issues through the genres—we've got a lot of horror and spec fic and mystery and thriller and noir writers coming up—which give you more leeway to be transgressive with your narratives. They might not end happy, but they're going to take you on a ride" (qtd. in McKenzie, n.p.).

Perhaps a final "ride" worth mentioning, to wrap up this essay, is the collective audio piece entitled "Zombie 911," penned by Richard Van Camp. As the title suggests, a woman calls in to 911 as her friend (and ultimately she as well) is attacked and dismembered by zombies. The seven-minute audio clip is a rather harrowing sensory experience to say the least, with the caller frantically telling the operator about the zombie's attack, the operator's attempts to calm her down, assuring her "the police, the fire department and the medics" are on their way. Halfway through, the caller yells repeatedly, "he ripped her apart!," while the zombie can be heard screaming in the background. As the police sirens are heard approaching, the operator reassures the caller, "they've got to shoot him. They're going to shoot him… Whatever you do, do not

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get out of the car." Several shots are fired, followed by silence, as the operator tells the sobbing caller to breathe. Suddenly, there is a final crash and what appears to be the zombie yelling is heard, and the line goes dead. The listener is left to wonder about the outcome—likely, the bullets were of no avail, the zombie tearing into the car to attack the caller and possibly anyone else on the scene afterward. Much like the operator, the listener is in a sense held hostage by the experience—the operator stays on the line in the hopes to calm down the victim, to provide comfort and resolution, just as the listener, empathetically, hopes for a positive outcome.[11] But, of course, there can be none—that is the premise of an impending zombie apocalypse. While Van Camp's audio piece hints at such a conclusion, his short story provides us with the aftermath. Both scenarios offer up a reflection around the question that Risling Baldy asks in her analysis of *The Walking Dead*: "Do you think we can come back from this? Will we be able to move on after we have had to live through and do horrible things? What happens to our humanity?" (Risling Baldy n.p.)[12] Rather, perhaps, what can we do to prevent such things from happening (again)? How can we ensure that in the pursuit of progress, we do not lose our humanity along the way? And what does reading, viewing, or listening to such interventions have to do with this?

Ultimately, I want to advocate that reading and engaging with such materials is about practice and responsibility: to participate in these interventions calls for both intellectual and affective engagement. As teachings, they require of us some kind of

continued agency and carried responsibility: among ourselves but, more importantly, to light that fire within our students, to whom we teach these pieces. As settler scholar Paulette Regan suggests, making use of "disturbing emotions [is] a critical pedagogical tool that can provoke decolonizing, transformative learning" (13). At the same time, they bring about certain challenges, in relation to how the work is received, perceived, and especially, taught, or used in public events—because their very use as pedagogical tools, due to their raw, relentless depiction of sites of violence and loss, is complicated.[13] In other words, these pieces also teach us about (self-)care, among each other and beyond, to think about better, healthier spaces in which we might meet: how might these teachings be generative for thinking about the different kinds of relationships and engagements that are at stake whenever we read, or encounter, or teach, alternative, dystopian, erotic, exploitative, beautiful, unsettling, hinged or traumatic stories? For these kinds of contemporary productions—whatever the genre—on the one hand, require a performative reading practice that looks at interactions and relationality and, on the other hand, speak to an artistic flexibility that continues to develop, adapt, and allow for alternative, strength-based perspective narratives that contribute to the development of new practices for community, public, and individual engagement. They also require an emotional engagement and ultimately serve to unravel the "detached, rational, [and] unembodied" (Sium and Ritskes iv) nature of settler/mainstream narratives that fail to speak to colonial violence and to our complicity in ongoing settler violence. In an effort, as suggested by Regan, to

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"reconnect reason and emotion—head and heart" (12), we can read (view, or listen to) these kinds of interventions as forcing the settler-reader/viewer/listener to confront/be confronted by North America's history of colonialism, assimilation policies, and dire intergenerational consequences, as well as impending environmental disasters and, at times, a blatant disrespect for all living beings. Once again, and as revealed by the works analyzed here, the slippery line between commodification and consumption is clear: if we do not care for our surroundings, our environment, its complex ecosystems, if we do not harness greed and conquest, the delicate network of all living things is doomed; there might not be zombies, but something worse. Thus, I truly believe, it is only through active participation, thoughtful engagement, conjuring up wonder in the (im)possible, and marvelling at the endless opportunities, that we can build better, sustainable relationships, grounded in ethical and responsible allyship—"always stubbornly and doggedly struggle[e] to reclaim and hang on" (Maracle 11).

Notes

[1] Because of the very slipperiness of the genre(s) itself, I use 'SF' here and throughout as indicative of both science fiction and speculative fiction.
[2] It would be impossible to list all the new additions to this corpus but, amongst others: Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, Stephen Graham Jones' *Mapping the Interior*, Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, Gerald Vizenor's *Treaty Shirts: October 2034*, Daniel Wilson's *Robocalypse*, Daniel Heath Justice's *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*, Gerry William's revised *The Black Ship*, and many more (including many currently being written).
[3] In addition to Dillon's, of note, *mitêwâcimowina: Indigenous Science Fiction and Speculative Storytelling* (2016), *Love Beyond Body, Space, and Time: An LGBT and Two-*

Spirit Sci-Fi Anthology (2016), *Take Us To Your Chief and Other Stories* (2016), and *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction* (2020).

[4] I am aware here that, as noted by Miriam Brown Spiers, adding "the word 'Indigenous' shifts the emphasis from the tribally specific to broader social and literary categories" (2021: xi), a shift that has its limitations, which I discuss further in the essay.

[5] For Lewis, this applies to his concept of "Indigenous future imaginary," another tentative name for the genre, that has also been called "Indigenous Futurism" (Dillon, 2013), "Indian Invention Novel" (Rader, 2011), and "WonderWorks" (Justice, 2017 and 2018).

[6] As evidence of this, and my personal favorite (and as anthologized by Dillon in *Walking the Clouds* (2012)), is Gerald Vizenor's 1978 *Bearheart*.

[7] Mi'gmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby's 2019 *Blood Quantum* follows a similar thread: the Indigenous peoples hiding away from the zombie apocalypse, barricaded in the reserve, are mysteriously immune to the infection and seek ways to prevent it from spreading.

[8] As the producers of Barnaby's *Blood Quantum* note, "the dead are coming back to life outside the isolated Mi'gmaq reserve of Red Crow, except for its Indigenous inhabitants who are immune to the zombie plague" (Prospector Films, n.p.). The premise of *Blood Quantum* is interesting for it is similar to Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), in which Indigenous peoples have remained immune to another plague: the inability to dream. In Dimaline's novel, Indigenous peoples are also being hunted down, although not for their blood, but for their marrow.

[9] Of note, Ortiz's short story was also written way before its publication, anticipating the anxieties that it was to reveal: "Originally began in the sixties before revising for publication in the 1999 collection… ["Men on the Moon"] anticipates [an actual petroleum products company] Kerr-McGee's development into a subsidiary of Anadarko Petroleum and Western Gas Reserves … [and their operating] large uranium mines in the US Southwest in the 1960s and 1970s … [including] the Ambrosia Lake mine in New Mexico on Acoma Pueblo land" (Dillon 86).

[10] I will add here that having used this short story in class, I have had students who chose not to finish reading it for these very reasons; it was too much for some to bear.

[11] In terms of empathy, here, I am reminded of Anishnaabe writer and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's quote on compassion as necessary for resurgence: "Being engaged in the physical, real-world work of resurgence, movement-building and nation-building is the only way to generate new knowledge on how to resurge […] through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being, in the absence of coercion and hierarchy, and in the presence of compassion" (Simpson 2014: 18).

[12] Risling Baldy specifically uses the example of *The Walking Dead* to illustrate the genocide conducted on Indigenous peoples by white settlers: "California Indians often refer to the Mission System and the Gold Rush as "the end of the world." […] Miners (who were up in Northern California, where I am from) thought it was perfectly fine to

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have "Indian hunting days" or organize militias specifically to kill Indian people. These militias were paid. They were given 25 cents a scalp and $5 a head. In effect, for a long time in California, if you were an Indian person walking around, something or someone might just try to kill you. They were hungry for your scalp and your head. They had no remorse. There was no reasoning with them. And there were more of them then there was of you. (Zombies. But even worse, living, breathing, people Zombies. Zombies who could look at you and talk to you and who were supposed to be human. Keep that in mind. The atrocities of genocide during this period of time, they were not committed by monsters—they were committed by people. By neighbors. By fathers, sons, mothers, and daughters.)" (Risling Baldy, n.p.)

[13] Van Camp shared this audio file with me when I was teaching "On the Wings of this Prayer" in a class on Indigenous Popular Culture. His instructions were specific though, should I choose to play it to my class: "Remember, Sarah: the room has to be pitch black" (Van Camp 2016, n.p.). While tempting, I did not play the file to my class—whether in the dark or not, I was nervous that the sounds and anxiety displayed in the piece might be upsetting for some students.

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