
Reimagining Resistance: Achieving Sovereignty in Indigenous Science Fiction

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Indigenous science fiction—that is, science fiction written by Indigenous authors, as opposed to texts that simply include Native characters—is a relatively new genre, and the question of how we might define, or even name, that genre is still under discussion. The most popular term, “Indigenous science fiction,” was popularized by Grace L. Dillon in her 2012 anthology, *Walking the Clouds*. In the introduction to that work, Dillon makes two important claims: first, that Indigenous science fiction has “the capacity to envision Native futures, Indigenous hopes, and dreams recovered by rethinking the past in a new framework,” and second, that “Indigenous sf is not so new—just overlooked, although largely accompanied by an emerging movement” (2). While I share Dillon’s optimism for the possibilities of the genre, I am also concerned about the potential consequences of reclaiming older texts as examples of science fiction. For instance, Dillon introduces the category of the “Native slipstream,” which “is intended to describe writing that does not simply seem avant-garde but models a cultural experience of reality” (4). Such a project has obvious value for Native literature and communities, but Dillon’s definition raises other questions about the nature of Indigenous worldviews. If examples of the Native slipstream “model a cultural experience of reality,” then why categorize them as science fiction in the first place? What separates such texts from the multitudes of other Indigenous stories that reflect “a cultural experience of reality” through interactions with ancestors, wendigos, or tricksters?

Although he does not address Dillon’s work directly,¹ Dean Rader illustrates some of the complications that might arise out of such a broad definition. To distinguish between science fiction and the “cultural experience of reality” that Dillon describes, he introduces the term “Indian invention novel” rather than “Indigenous science fiction.” Rader explains that the Indian invention novel:

draws from all of the motifs of science fiction that make it fun, fanciful, and forward looking, but, unlike the “science” and “fiction” components of sci-fi, Indian invention tropes are neither scientific nor fictional. They arise out of the diversity of Indian

narrative—its humor, its disregard for the laws of physics, its trickster traditions, and its sense of circular and unending time. The novels of Indian invention play with creation stories, shape-shifters, coyotes, and all that is atemporal, creating a new genre that takes indigenous aesthetics to new planes. (86)

Rader’s distinction between science fiction tropes and the “diversity of Indian narrative” draws attention to the dangers of collapsing definitions, especially when relying on mainstream, Euro-American critical categories to describe Indigenous literatures. By labeling texts that reflect Indigenous worldviews as “science fiction,” critics run the risk of trivializing Native voices and communities, of reducing lived experiences to mere superstition. Just as Toni Morrison has resisted the term “magical realism” because “[i]t was a way of *not* talking about the politics. It was a way of *not* talking about what was in the books. If you could apply the word ‘magical’ then that *dilutes* the realism,” so too could Dillon’s reclamation of earlier texts be used to imply that all Indigenous literature is simply fictional (226). Although this is clearly not Dillon’s intent, readers who are unfamiliar with Native cultures may mistakenly use these new categories as another way of reading Native literature as myth, as a fascinating but naïve interpretation of reality that ultimately allows readers to dismiss and disregard Indigenous cultures. In effect, although she aims to demonstrate the ways that these texts model resistance to colonization, the problematic nature of these categories might actually reinforce such structures.

Rader’s term, on the other hand, resists reductive readings, instead highlighting and celebrating Indigenous narratives and worldviews. As important as the concept of the Indian invention novel is, however, Rader’s argument does not necessarily refute the existence of Indigenous science fiction—it just asks us to reconsider how we define the term. In fact, the concept of the “Indian invention novel” fails to account for those texts that engage with both Native worldviews *and* mainstream science fictional tropes.

Like Rader, I am concerned with maintaining a distinction between texts that are “science fictional” and those that simply reflect “the diversity of Indian narrative” (Rader 86). While Rader’s genre is populated by texts like Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings*, I would argue that there is also room for Indigenous science fiction, or “sf,” as a related but distinct category. Indigenous sf certainly reflects “a cultural experience of reality,” partially by engaging with elements of Native worldviews such as “creation stories, shape-shifters, [and] coyotes,” but, unlike the Indian invention novel, it also

engages directly with Western science fictional tropes like aliens, apocalypse, and alternate realities (Dillon 4, Rader 86).

The last of these categories, the alternate—or sometimes virtual—reality allows Native authors to explore Indigenous concepts of time, including confrontations with traumatic historical events such as Removal. Both Rader and Dillon point to the possibilities of such engagement: Dillon in her description of the Native slipstream and Rader in his discussion of LeAnne Howe’s theory of tribalography. Dillon argues that Indigenous science fiction “allows authors to recover the Native space of the past, to bring it to the attention of contemporary readers, and to build better futures,” while Rader suggests that, through the lens of tribalography, Native authors are able to depict “history and the contemporary intersecting at the ground zero of tribal identity” (4, 76). I propose that the trope of alternate/virtual realities does similar work, offering Indigenous writers new ways to imagine and explore the intersections of the past and the present. In such stories, as opposed to more conventional time travel narratives, characters are able to revisit and reinterpret the past, but, notably, they lack the ability to change historical events.

One of the clearest examples of Indigenous science fiction is Cherokee writer Blake M. Hausman’s 2010 novel, *Riding the Trail of Tears*, which situates the science fictional trope of virtual reality within a decidedly Indigenous text. By locating his story at the intersections of Native literature and science fiction, Hausman is able to confront the traumatic story of Cherokee Removal and imagine a new interpretation of those events while also acknowledging the ongoing influence of historical narratives in the present day. If, as Thomas King has famously argued, “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” then the stories that we tell about the past must continue to shape our lives in the present (2). Thus, the trope of virtual reality that Hausman employs is important primarily because of its narrative approach, which defies a linear, Euro-American understanding of history and suggests that we might more appropriately confront the trauma of Cherokee Removal by examining its effects, not only on the particular time of the mid-nineteenth century, but within the particular space of Cherokee territory as it continues to exist in both the past and the present.

Because *Riding the Trail of Tears* is set first in the near future and later within a virtual reality version of the 1830s, it is able to confront the trauma of nineteenth-century Cherokee Removal while simultaneously depicting the importance of Indigenous sovereignty in the

twenty-first century. Hausman tells the story of a virtual reality ride based on the Trail of Tears, where tourists can ostensibly learn about Cherokee history and culture while experiencing Removal for themselves. Thus, instead of trying to erase or reverse the history of Removal, *Riding the Trail of Tears* focuses on the ways that contemporary peoples, both Cherokee and not, might understand and respond to that history. Hausman’s decision to use virtual reality rather than time travel is key: if he had introduced a time machine that allowed his characters to go back in time and simply undo the past, the novel would become a work of fantasy, problematically erasing the very real people who suffered and died along the Trail. Moreover, such a text would be less useful for contemporary Indigenous peoples, who have no such time machine to improve their own lives. Instead, by telling a Cherokee story that is simultaneously set in two centuries, Hausman offers a new model of resistance and empowerment in the face of historical trauma.

Based on plot alone, *Riding the Trail of Tears* seems to fit easily into the genre of mainstream science fiction. In the novel, scientists have used a new technology called Surround Vision to create a virtual reality window into the past. This technology has attracted attention primarily for its money-making potential; it has been used to develop a tourist trap in northeast Georgia called the TREPP, or “Tsalagi Removal Exodus Point Park” (Hausman 13). The use of bureaucratic language coupled with the word “Tsalagi,” one of the Cherokee’s names for themselves, hides the violent history inherent in both the ride and north Georgia itself: behind the catchy name, customers are actually paying to experience Cherokee Removal by riding a virtual Trail of Tears (Hausman 51).

Following a familiar generic convention of science fiction, the story begins when the virtual reality mechanism malfunctions and leaves the novel’s protagonist, a Cherokee tour guide named Tallulah, trapped inside the game with a group of disgruntled tourists. When technology malfunctions in a work of mainstream science fiction, we might expect to learn a lesson about putting too much faith in machines or the disastrous consequences of tampering with historical events. But it is not just the presence of the Trail of Tears that makes this novel Cherokee: Hausman also reverses generic expectations by considering these typical science fictional scenarios from an Indigenous perspective. The technology behind the TREPP becomes an organic part of the world, and the opportunity to reshape a painful history is championed rather than condemned. By embracing the conventions of science fiction and then subverting and

adapting those conventions to reflect a Cherokee worldview, *Riding the Trail of Tears* alters the parameters of the genre and creates a space of both virtual and real resistance to Removal. Not only does virtual reality become Indigenized within the world of the novel, but, practically speaking, the presence of the book itself challenges received knowledge about the “Vanishing Indian” and insists that, far from having been removed in the nineteenth century, the Cherokee remain in their traditional homelands—both in the readers’ present and in the near future in which this story takes place.

Despite the difficulty of imagining riding the Trail of Tears as a recreational activity, the attraction is apparently so popular that, in the world of the novel, the TREPP now rivals Helen, a very real “German-theme-town tourist trap” located in the north Georgia mountains (Hausman 94). Tourists ride the TREPP for a variety of reasons: schools schedule educational field trips, while college students can earn extra credit by participating. Computer programmers take an interest in the technology, and the ride is also considered a family-friendly experience. In the TREPP, tourists are zipped into virtual reality suits and, in three hours of real time, they experience several months of life as Cherokee citizens during the process of Removal from the traditional Cherokee homelands of north Georgia in 1838. Customers can choose the level of violence that they are prepared to encounter on the tour. Groups with young children or the elderly should register for Level One, while on Level Four, customers risk such gruesome deaths as being shot in the virtual face by U.S. soldiers (Hausman 179). The ride is so successful that it has spawned two restaurants (the Soaring Eagle Grill and the Turtleback Café), a gift shop, a bookstore, and a movie theatre, all located on a road called Tsalagi Boulevard (Hausman 36, 34).

Although his subject matter is decidedly Cherokee, Hausman also adheres to many of the widely accepted generic conventions of Euro-American science fiction. One of the defining characteristics of the genre, according to theorist Darko Suvin, is the presence of a “novum,” or “strange newness” (4). This novum is produced through the “interaction of estrangement and cognition” (Suvin 7-8). What Suvin refers to as “estrangement” is echoed in Philip K. Dick’s claim that science fiction is defined by the reader’s “shock of dysrecognition” (4). Whatever language we use to describe the reader’s relationship to the unexpected, it occurs in works of fantasy as well as science fiction, but cognition, according to Suvin, “differentiates [science fiction] not only from myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy” (8). In other words, the presence of the novum must be explained logically, rather than magically, if the text

is to qualify as “science fiction.”ⁱⁱⁱ The novum that serves as the catalyst for the rest of the story in *Riding the Trail of Tears* is the TREPP itself, which Hausman explains logically by detailing the creation of the machine: it began as a rough prototype that was invented by Tallulah’s grandfather, and it was later purchased and developed by a large corporation. Through Tallulah’s recollections, we learn how the machine evolved into a large-scale virtual reality program. Because she has been involved with the creation of the TREPP from its inception, she also recalls developing and editing the stock characters within the game. As far as Tallulah and the rest of the TREPP staff are concerned, those characters are merely computer programs, capable of being altered and rewritten as necessary. Throughout the novel, Tallulah relies heavily on the TREPP’s tech crew to answer questions about discrepancies and malfunctions in the game, even when it becomes evident that the crew is no longer in control of their programs. These details all confirm that the TREPP has, up to this point, operated according to the rules of computer science and is therefore a clearly recognizable novum, a kind of “cognitive estrangement” that becomes the catalyst for the events that follow.

When the novel opens, something has gone wrong with the Surround Vision technology, and Tour Group 5709 is stuck inside the game. This opening scenario works staunchly within at least two familiar sf conventions. First, as Everett F. Bleiler notes, early science fiction often focused on “technological perfectibilism” (xiii). One of the most common motifs within that category is “things-go-wrong,” a theme that cautions readers to be wary of putting too much faith in technology (Bleiler xvii). That theme appears in countless science fiction stories: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is an early example of a text that warns against the dangers of relying too heavily on technology, as does HAL 9000 in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the park itself in Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park*. More recently, Cherokee author Daniel Wilson’s *Robocalypse* tells the story of all technology on Earth revolting against humanity. The second generic convention occurs when Tallulah explains that, “[t]he Trail has begun, and we can’t stop it now. We have to see it through” (Hausman 86). The trope of the un-ending game is also familiar, occurring in texts as diverse as *Jumanji*, *TRON*, and several episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, such as “The Big Goodbye,” where the crew is unable to exit the Holodeck. SF has prepared readers to recognize these situations, so the novel fits comfortably within the boundaries of the genre when several members of the tour group disappear and the in-tour violence suddenly jumps from Level 1 to Level 4.

But *Riding the Trail of Tears* is more than a science fiction story that happens to take place in Cherokee country. Hausman takes advantage of the necessary ambiguities in a scientific explanation of the TREPP to introduce a particularly Indigenous perspective, one that challenges both Euro-American worldviews and Suvin's clear-cut distinction between science and religion. The breakdown in technology in this novel cannot be blamed on the technology itself; rather, the TREPP breaks down because the Cherokee Little People, creatures that ethnographer James Mooney describes as "fairies no larger in size than children," are inexplicably living inside the game (331). Moreover, because one of these Little People narrates the novel, readers have no choice but to acknowledge their presence. Although the inclusion of these "mythical" creatures in a work of sf might seem to trouble Suvin's theories, his definitions of genre also establish a space for cultural difference. Suvin argues that a work of science fiction must contain "an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment," which means that "reality" is defined by the author's understanding of the term, *not* necessarily by a Euro-American scientific worldview (Suvin 8). Because Hausman is Cherokee and the Little People fit within the "empirical environment" of a Cherokee worldview, their presence does not necessarily turn the novel into a work of fantasy—or even of science fiction. Although many readers may be unfamiliar with the Little People, their presence does not fit the criteria of a novum because, from a Cherokee perspective such as Hausman's, they should not cause a "shock of dysrecognition" (Dick 8).

However, Hausman's Little People go on to subvert the expectations of a traditional Cherokee worldview, by which act the novel establishes them as a second novum. Rather than following in the footsteps of traditional Cherokee stories about the Little People, the narrator offers some new definitions:

First, there are the Nunnehi, the immortals, who are about the same size as average humans. And then, second, there are the Little People, who are naturally smaller than the Nunnehi. And then, there's us. We're the real Nunnehi, the real immortals, and those human-sized creatures who appear from time to time are actually manifestations of our labor . . . For convenience's sake, you can call me the Little Little Person. Or you could call me Nunnehi, because, as I said, we're the real Nunnehi. (Hausman 5-6)

Unlike the presence of the Little People, the introduction of "the Little Little People" is a secondary novum because these beings are not included in traditional Cherokee stories or

worldviews. It might be tempting to categorize the Little Little People as another piece of mythology, of magic creeping into a work of science fiction, but, once again, Hausman provides a cognitive explanation for their existence—and also for the fact that no one knows about them. Following Mooney, he tells the story of a caste of Cherokee priests who took advantage of their position and sexually assaulted several beautiful young women while the men were away hunting. When the men returned, the people “rose up and killed their leaders, killed them all. Every single priest, dead” (Hausman 4). One result of the revolution was that “the stories began to change” (Hausman 4). The narrator suggests that, “[s]ome stories changed so much that everyone—storytellers and listeners—forgot the originals. Our story is one of those stories. When the priests were killed, we were accidentally cut from the people’s memory” (Hausman 5). While the killing of the priestly class is indeed a story that James Mooney recorded, including pointing to several earlier historical accounts that supported his version, he does not mention any description of lost stories—and perhaps he could not, given that the stories were lost to the Cherokee before Mooney worked with them. Nonetheless, the Little Little People’s story is supported by historical accounts such as Mooney’s,ⁱⁱⁱ suggesting that it is grounded in actual, not virtual, reality. The emphasis on storytelling as knowledge also reflects an Indigenous worldview, and the idea that lost stories must be recovered echoes similar concerns in many contemporary Native communities, where tribal leaders are working to establish language preservation and revitalization programs. This second novum, so clearly grounded in a Cherokee perspective, combines with the TREPP to establish a story that is, by definition, a work of science fiction grounded in a Native worldview.

Although the novel incorporates both Indigenous and Euro-American perspectives, the presence of the Little Little People exposes the differences between the two worldviews. Speaking from a Euro-American perspective, Suvin claims that all “mythical” stories are also “static” because he believes that, in a world determined by religion, there is no possibility for real change (7). But the Little Little People are ostensibly “mythical” beings that also change over time. In fact, rather than referring to them as “mythical,” it would be more appropriate to simply describe them as characters who originate in Cherokee oral tradition. Such characters are not static like those in Suvin’s myths; as the novel demonstrates, they are instead connected to adaptation and innovation. They existed in the people’s stories before the revolution, and, although their stories later disappeared, the Little Little Person narrating the novel has found a

way to recover them and gain a new audience. He tells readers that “I’m probably more indigenous than you, and the digital earth is where I’m indigenous” (Hausman 13). It is unclear how the Little Little People, who existed “before the big colonization, before Cristobal Colon, before Hernando De Soto,” can be indigenous to a digital environment that has only been developed in the last ten years, but these partial explanations certainly suggest a long history of change rather than stability (Hausman 3). Thus, the narrator’s position is both fixed and fluctuating, as we learn when he explains that, “I’m more Nunnehi than you probably thought Nunnehi could be, but I never took such a formal shape until they built their ride” (Hausman 13). Repeatedly, the Little Little People refuse absolute definitions and defy the strict separation of science and religion that is inherent to Suvin’s argument. The novel’s restructuring of categories echoes Tewa philosopher Gregory Cajete’s definition of Native science as “the entire edifice of Indigenous knowledge” (3). Because many Native worldviews do not distinguish between science and religion, the combination of the TREPP and the Little Little People within *Riding the Trail of Tears* empowers Native peoples by insisting upon the value of Indigenous knowledge as a more appropriate framework for understanding our complex world.

This empowerment of Indigenous traditions is reinforced by the fact that the Little Little People ultimately save the day: they are able to literally rewrite the history of the Trail of Tears without erasing the memory of the original events. As a site of virtual reality, the TREPP provides a space to confront the violent history of Removal; the Nunnehi appropriate that space and, with the help of other figures from Cherokee oral tradition, they guide both the tourists and Tallulah in a new and more productive direction. According to Mooney, both the Nunnehi and the Little People are kind beings who often take in lost wanderers and lead them back home (331). This is precisely what the Nunnehi in the novel are able to do as they redirect Tour Group 5709; they lead Tallulah and her tourists away from the Trail of Tears and back to their homeland in North Carolina, where Tallulah also has the opportunity to reconcile with her dead father. Like the fairies described by Mooney, the Little Little People guide Tallulah in the right direction, both in and out of the game.

As proven by the Nunnehi, the TREPP has the potential to create positive change within the world of the novel. Despite the fact that it capitalizes on the attempted genocide of the Cherokee people by the U.S., the game could also offer an educational experience, using virtual reality as a new medium through which to present Cherokee history and worldviews to a

mainstream audience. This goal seems close to what the original creator, Tallulah’s grandfather Art, might have had in mind. In his prototype, passengers ride inside a Jeep Cherokee whose windows have been converted to television monitors. Each screen displays scenes from the Trail of Tears, so, as the car drives virtually, it accompanies the digital Cherokee on their walk “from the stockades in Georgia to the hills and lakes in northeastern Oklahoma” (Hausman 33). Tallulah remembers those first digital Indians as “a mass of bent and broken bodies that stretched up to ten miles long at the beginning of the trip” (Hausman 33). Although her grandfather reassures her “that the Indians walking the Trail were digital and couldn’t see inside the car . . . Tallulah thought they stared right through her” (Hausman 33). As she experiences this early incarnation of the Trail, her “feet felt bruised and raw” and “[h]er knees buckled and shook upon the upholstery,” despite the fact that she experiences the trip from within the relative safety and isolation of the Jeep (Hausman 33). As evidenced by her empathetic physical response and her belief that the digital Indians are looking back at her, it is clear that Tallulah sees the digital Cherokee—at least in this early incarnation—as real human beings. Although she will later be desensitized by working for the commercial version of the TREPP, Tallulah’s first reaction demonstrates her ability to empathize with the digital Indians, as well as the possibility that the prototypical version of the game actually encourages participants to establish a human connection with its non-human characters.

The form of the TREPP also provides a space that could be used to revitalize oral storytelling traditions, as opposed to the more limited written form that we commonly rely on when learning about Native cultures in the twenty-first century. Tallulah notes that, “[t]oday Cherokees around the world learn about their culture from the Mooney book,” but, as many scholars and storytellers have pointed out, oral stories often lose something when they are translated into text (Hausman 57). Within the virtual reality space of the TREPP, the digital Cherokee could be programmed to tell both traditional and contemporary stories, which would then become more accessible to tourists, as well. In fact, because the digital Cherokee are programmed to “react to [tourists’] reactions,” they might be able to reflect the traditional oral storytelling practice of telling particular stories only within the appropriate contexts. The digital Cherokee could be programmed to share certain stories when they are most applicable to the listeners’ experiences, providing a kind of personal connection that is difficult to reproduce in written texts (Hausman 71).

Tallulah demonstrates the possibilities of oral storytelling within the TREPP when she tells her tourists the story of how First Man and First Woman turned into strawberry plants (Hausman 102). This story is appropriate to the situation in two distinct ways. First, the tourists have just picked strawberries themselves, and the story explains how First Man and First Woman gave the world strawberries. Tallulah even makes a conscious decision to “stay on target” by telling this story, since “[t]his patch of digital earth is covered with strawberries” (Hausman 96). The story she tells is connected explicitly to a place and the experience that the tourists have in that place. By telling this story in this place, Tallulah reinforces Vine Deloria Jr.’s argument, which he details in both *God Is Red* and *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*, that Native cultures tend to value space over time; it does not matter *when* First Man and First Woman created strawberries, only that the story explains *how* this particular patch of earth came to be covered in the fruit. If Tallulah could pass her storytelling skills on to the technical crew and, through them, to the digital characters, oral storytelling might easily be integrated into the virtual world of the TREPP.

In addition to the possibilities of oral storytelling, the program also has the potential to bring traditional characters to life for new audiences. Rather than constantly re-enacting the violence of the Trail of Tears, the program could allow tourists to learn about, and even participate in, these traditional stories. Because there are often multiple versions of such stories, tourists would have the flexibility to influence the stories rather than being forced into a strict script. Although no traditional stories are re-enacted in the novel, characters from these stories do exist inside the game. Among the characters who have evolved with the help of the Nunnehi rather than being created by the programmers, Tallulah meets Ish and Fish, twin boys who work in the kitchen with their father, Chef. The family is reminiscent of the traditional story of Kana’ti and Selu and their sons, the Good Boy and the Wild Boy.

In fact, Tallulah connects the twins directly to the story of Kana’ti and Selu, which she presumably learned about by reading Mooney (Hausman 103). In Mooney’s version, Kana’ti provides game for the family, and his wife, Selu, provides vegetables. When their two sons get curious about where their mother gets corn and beans every day, they follow her to the storehouse and watch her produce corn by rubbing her stomach and beans by rubbing under her armpits (Mooney 101). Convinced that their mother is a witch, they kill her. This murder might explain the strange absence of the boys’ mother—or any elder women—within the TREPP

(Hausman 167). After killing Selu, the boys follow her directions to “clear a large piece of ground in front of the house and drag my body seven times around the circle” (Mooney 101). Corn begins to grow along the path where they drag her body, and this story is used to explain the origin of corn for the Cherokee. Because the story of Kana’ti and Selu explains how the first Cherokee obtained staple foods, it makes sense that their corresponding digital versions would be responsible for feeding the Cherokee people within the game. When Tallulah first meets the boys, she wonders whether they are twins and promptly answers her own question: “[o]f course they are . . . How could they not be? It’s all part of the mythology” (Hausman 308). In this instance, Tallulah’s choice of the word “mythology” serves as a reminder that she has come to view the game from a rigidly Euro-American perspective, and, thus, that she does not even pause to consider that such characters could actually exist. Later, Tallulah confirms the boys’ traditional identities when she refers to Fish as “the Wild Boy” (Hausman 318). Even though they have been brought into the game by the Nunnehi rather than the TREPP’s programmers, their presence suggests that the game could be an excellent place for tourists to learn about traditional characters by interacting directly with them.

Although Ish and Fish are clearly connected to Cherokee oral tradition, it is important to reiterate that Tallulah and the programmers did not actually create them; instead, Ish, Fish, and Chef only emerge when the TREPP begins to “malfunction.” As in the case of the Little Little People, the novel demonstrates that characters from oral tradition, unlike those found in Western myths, have the ability to change over time and adapt to new circumstances as necessary. Their spontaneity and flexibility might explain why Tallulah, who insists on sticking to the same unchanging script each time she travels through the TREPP, is initially frustrated by these characters. Because she is eager to finish her tour and leave on vacation, Tallulah is inconvenienced rather than excited or curious when she encounters characters who do not fit into the fixed narrative of the virtual Trail of Tears. Even though the twins interact pleasantly with her tourists, she remains suspicious of their friendship. Rather than these traditional Cherokee figures, who introduce an element of flexibility bordering on chaos into the world of the TREPP, Tallulah prefers the stock characters who can be relied upon to behave the same way every time.

One of the best examples of these stagnant, programmed characters is the Wise Old Medicine Man, who Tallulah created with the assistance of the TREPP technicians. “Old Medicine,” as Tallulah refers to him, is one of the main attractions of the tour. He greets each

tourist who dies on the Trail, but those who survive also get to visit him before returning to reality. As the narrator explains, Old Medicine’s “program ensures customer satisfaction on the Trail of Tears” (Hausman 57). Old Medicine is a mishmash of popular stereotypes, a wise old man who “uses your comments and questions to determine your beliefs. He then reaffirms your personal ideology by showering you with the kind of aboriginal spirituality that only dead people can exude” (Hausman 57). Old Medicine is so popular that tourists sometimes contemplate in-game suicide in order to speed his arrival (Hausman 59). In Tour Group 5709, a tourist who dies a gruesome death on the Trail of Tears later exclaims that, “[t]hat whole Trail of Tears was totally worth it,” because she had the opportunity to meet Old Medicine at the end (Hausman 335).

Despite the tourists’ love of Old Medicine, he reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates the romanticization of Native peoples. He is not tribally specific, nor does he share any actual Indigenous beliefs. Rather, he simply reinforces whatever tourists already believe, “ensur[ing] customer satisfaction” rather than challenging guests to confront the attempted genocide of the Cherokee people directly. Because he is the last thing that people experience before the game ends, he encourages them to disregard the very real suffering that they have witnessed, focusing instead on what a great time they had—an impulse that will encourage repeat customers, but which undermines any educational or ethical goals of the tour. Ultimately, this exaggerated character depicts Indigenous peoples as “mythical and static,” to borrow Suvin’s language, rather than constantly changing or evolving, and thus does a disservice to both the Cherokee and the tourists. Because Hausman’s narrator is so openly critical of Old Medicine, however, readers are encouraged to see the tourists’ response as problematic and, in fact, are invited to reassess their own relationship to stereotypical narratives about Indigenous peoples.

Tallulah’s growing dependence on structure rather than flexibility—even at the expense of Cherokee values and historical accuracy—is reflected in the design of the game itself. Although Tallulah is not a programmer, she has collaborated with the technical team to design the virtual world of the TREPP. Over time, however, she has become critical of other people’s contributions, and, in her own life, Tallulah believes that she “didn’t need anyone’s help” (Hausman 301). The single-player design of the game reflects this desire for independence and individuality: rather than several passengers riding together in a Jeep Cherokee, as in Grandpa Art’s original prototype, “the Chairsuit Visor is totally individualized. It is the single-occupancy

realization of [Tallulah’s] grandfather’s dream” (Hausman 74). In other words, tourists embark upon this difficult experience by themselves despite the fact that communal support might help them cope with and survive the Trail. This desire for control and independence, reflected in the TREPP as well as in Tallulah’s own life, goes against a Cherokee emphasis on community.

This juxtaposition of values is exemplified by Tallulah’s walkie-talkie, which she uses to communicate with the tech crew from inside the game. The walkie-talkie is a physical representation of Tallulah’s connection between virtual and actual reality. This tool is shaped like a water beetle, a tiny creature who plays a prominent role in one version of the Cherokee creation story. In that story, First Woman falls through a hole in the sky and lands on earth, which is completely covered in water. She perches on Turtle’s back while the animals try to create land for her. Several animals dive to the bottom of the ocean in search of mud, and Water Beetle is the first to succeed. As Tallulah explains, he “spent years diving down to the bottom of the ocean and swimming back up with little bits of earth” until he had enough to cover Turtle’s back and create the land (Hausman 97). The water beetle, and the earth diver story in general, serve as a reminder that the world was created collaboratively and required the efforts of even the smallest creatures.

The water beetle walkie-talkie connects Tallulah back to the material world, but it is also a symbol of world creation, a reminder that Tallulah is part of a community that worked together to create the TREPP. As one of the digital Indians reiterates, “[y]ou must remember, the whole of the community is more important than any single individual” (Hausman 117). Unfortunately, Tallulah seems to have lost sight of those communal values and shared experiences: she takes on too much personal responsibility for both her tourists and the TREPP. By trying to make and sustain the world alone, Tallulah overworks herself and fails her community. She has forgotten to be flexible, to adapt, and to turn to others for assistance. Because she has ridden the TREPP so many times, she has come to believe that she can rely on the same script and the same standard responses on each journey, overlooking the fact that the world—even the virtual world—is subject to change. Relying on a standardized script leaves her vulnerable when change actually does occur; she realizes that her stories have become stagnant, like Suvin’s dreaded myths, and the process of reliving the Trail of Tears over and over has worn her down. Moreover, because that script rewards Tallulah and her tourists for giving in without a fight, Tallulah has become a proponent of the Trail of Tears itself. She encourages everyone to keep acting out the process of

Removal, even when other options present themselves. She has repeated these patterns many times, retelling the same stories in the same language until she has become both dehumanized and colonized by continuing to rely on this single, inflexible, and violent narrative.

Not only does exposure to the TREPP continue to inflict harm on Tallulah; it has also trapped its digital characters in an unending and horrific cycle of violence. Rather than confronting and overcoming the violence committed against the Cherokee in the 1830s, Tallulah is forced to relive the trauma of that experience every time she goes to work. As the narrator explains, “Tallulah’s stomach grinds while telling her tourists that it will all be over soon. For her it never ends. This is her one thousand one hundred and third trip through the Trail of Tears” (Hausman 60). The digital Cherokee have undergone a similar kind of violence because they, too, must relive the Trail for each new group of tourists. While Tallulah has only ever thought of these stock characters as computer programs, she eventually learns that some of them have retained their memories of each trip through the virtual Trail. If Tallulah has ridden the Trail of Tears over a thousand times, that number can be multiplied for the digital characters, who ride the Trail not only with Tallulah, but also with each of the other tour guides at the TREPP. The Nunnehi narrator explains that these characters “have all bled to death thousands of times, and they feel it each time. They feel every drop of everyone’s blood, their own blood and the blood of their young ones. They remember every moment” (Hausman 286). This awful description serves as a reminder that, in a closely connected community such as that of the virtual Cherokee, the pain experienced by some has a lasting impact on the entire group.

In addition to this endless torture, the digital Indians also explain that, “[t]he memories are worse than the pain” (Hausman 286). They keep repeating this experience over and over because they have been “made to belong” to a place that “is not our home” (Hausman 112). They have been “made” to live in this place by the programmers who created the characters, who “programmed [them] to be killed, then brought back to life” (Hausman 119). They have been forced into a problematic narrative in much the way that the Cherokee who traveled the historical Trail of Tears were “made to belong” in Oklahoma. One of the lasting effects of Removal is this complicated relationship between multiple homelands; as Tallulah notes, “[e]ven though most Cherokees today live in Oklahoma or somewhere else out west, the center of our culture definitely comes from [the Great Smoky] mountains” (Hausman 53). Both Tallulah and the digital Indians must relive this conflict on a daily basis, so that each experience adds another

layer of trauma to the historical violence done to their people in the 1830s. For both the real tour guide and the virtual Indians, the act of reliving this experience perpetuates the cycle of violence against the Cherokee people.

This literal cycle of violence, which is repeatedly experienced by the same individuals, is only possible because of the presence of the TREPP itself. Within the world of the novel, the TREPP is a novum that has the potential to induce cognitive estrangement in its customers: tourists could be challenged to reconsider their stereotypical assumptions about “Indians,” which could potentially lead to healthier relationships between Native and non-Native peoples in the present. Instead, because the corporation that owns the TREPP has chosen to value customer service above all else, that novum has instead only extended and magnified the violence inherent in the historical Trail of Tears. This is why Hausman has to introduce a second novum in the form of the Little Little People: because the characters within the novel have appropriated the TREPP and used it to repeat the same static and inaccurate narratives of Cherokee history and identity, the Nunnehi must intervene directly in the narrative. Thanks to that intervention, the digital Cherokee seem to be imbued with Indigenous knowledge and an innate sense of their Cherokee homeland—they know that they belong in the mountains of North Carolina, not the artificial stockade where they live in between games. Without ever having been to “the motherland,” the digital Cherokee know “how nice” North Carolina is (Hausman 123, 124). When asked how they can know about a place they’ve never been, one of the Cherokee leaders simply responds that, “[w]e *know* . . . We *all* know” (Hausman 124, italics in original). Similarly, they explain that they know what is going to happen in the game because “[w]e know things” and “[w]e are part of this machine” (Hausman 125). Their information seems to be tied up in both Indigenous knowledge—like knowing about the Cherokee homeland—and Euro-American technical, scientific knowledge, which they hold because, despite having existed long before the creation of the TREPP, they are indigenous to the machine itself. It is this combination of different types of knowledge, both Euro-American and Indigenous, which allows the digital Cherokee to resist their programming, and, thus, to resist assimilation and colonization. By asking Tallulah to lead them back to North Carolina, the Nunnehi encourage her to recognize that she also has access to Indigenous as well as scientific knowledge, and they provide her with the necessary tools to recognize and resist oppressive violence in her own life.

But, before Tallulah can accept responsibility for the digital characters inside the TREPP, she must confront her own problematic role in creating and maintaining the world that exists within the game. Tallulah's position, much like the Little Little People's, is vexed by the complex and contradictory definitions of this virtual Native space. Although the physical building that houses the TREPP theme park is built in historic Cherokee territory in northeast Georgia, that space is today more frequently seen as part of the American South. Tallulah clearly understands that the Cherokee were illegally removed from this place, but most of her tourists are only vaguely aware of that history. The multiple understandings of the land are further complicated by the existence of the virtual space itself, which is ostensibly Cherokee rather than American. Within the game, Tallulah spends her time in "Indian country," but that Indian country has been created by programmers, none of whom are Cherokee themselves. Although Tallulah is a cultural consultant, she does not ultimately have control over the landscape or the characters in the TREPP. Thus, the Indian country of the TREPP is only an imperfect, simulated version of the actual space.

On the other hand, because the game focuses on the experiences of the Cherokee, the majority of the characters who populate the virtual world are Cherokee citizens, despite the fact that their creators are largely non-Native. In fact, even the tourists *appear* Cherokee within the game, leading to the illusion of a Native majority within the virtual space. But "authentic" Native identity is a much more complex concept than either the tourists or the programmers acknowledge, and the tourists' Indigenous appearance further problematizes that question of identity: is it enough to "look Cherokee," to have physical characteristics that mark you as an "Indian"? Tallulah "looks Cherokee," in large part thanks to her braids, which are "the most Indian of her features," but she often worries about her own authenticity (Hausman 361). Native identity is further complicated in a world where virtual reality allows every single tourist to "look Cherokee," but the novel ultimately suggests that Indigeneity requires more than biology, and certainly more than physiognomy; having braids or even meeting blood quantum requirements is less important than cultural identifiers, which are much more difficult to establish, especially within the virtual world of the TREPP.

Even if we accept that the digital Indians are "authentically" Cherokee—and at least those created by the Little Little People seem to be—the TREPP is still a contested territory because it is located in time as well as space. As long as the TREPP is set in 1838, during the

time of Removal, it will always be defined by the violent conflict taking place between the Cherokee and the American soldiers whose goal is to force them west. At the beginning of the game, it appears that, as a result of their programming, the digital Cherokee are largely unable to resist Removal. In fact, those characters who are programmed to resist are most likely to suffer during the game and, in some cases, to be held up as a warning to tourists who might be tempted to fight back. For instance, Tallulah’s tourists always spend the first night inside the game with a digital Cherokee couple, Deer Cooker and Corn Grinder. In every game, the tourists wake up to American soldiers invading the house, and so, every time, the virtual family must walk the Trail of Tears with the tourists. Tallulah compares the digital Indians’ reaction to her own, noting that the family “walks with similar stoicism. They are professionals too” (Hausman 172). By casting Deer Cooker and Corn Grinder in these roles, the programmers have ensured that they will play the part of perpetual victims.

Later, after Corn Grinder’s invariable death at the hands of soldiers, Tallulah considers that

Deer Cooker is programmed to grieve. Traumatized and suddenly weary, Deer Cooker plays the role of a model American Indian—he does not fight back, he does not harbor lasting resentment toward the soldier who killed his wife, and he does not protest when another soldier grabs his arm and hoists him back onto the Trail. (Hausman 178)

Because she is shot when she disobeys, Corn Grinder is used as a negative example, a warning to tourists who might rebel. On the other hand, because Deer Cooker serves as “a model American Indian,” it is his example that tourists are encouraged to follow. Tallulah reinforces this behavior when she “instructs her tourists to do as they’re told and follow the soldiers’ orders” (Hausman 170). If the tourists try to resist, if they try to protect the Cherokee homelands and culture, they, too, will be attacked and perhaps even killed early in the game. Although the goal of the game is ostensibly to teach tourists about the actual Cherokee experience, it instead encourages them to surrender in order to survive.

So long as the digital Cherokee are programmed to give in, and so long as the tourists are encouraged to follow their lead, the ostensibly Cherokee space of the TREPP will never be truly Indigenous. Instead, Deer Cooker’s experience suggests that a certain amount of internal colonization is built into the game. This is quite literally true for the digital characters, who have been “programmed to grieve”—or, worse, programmed to die—and Tallulah, the only “real”

Cherokee who tourists encounter in the TREPP, has come to share this assimilated mindset. So, although tourists may feel that they are getting an “authentic” Cherokee experience, the TREPP is always already a contested space.

The pressure on Tallulah to meet her tourists’ expectations of an “authentic” experience only exaggerates her own discomfort with her Cherokee identity. Although she is well paid, she is simultaneously exploited for her heritage; the pictures in all of the “TREPP promotional literature accentuate her hair,” which is “the most Indian of her features” (Hausman 361). The company takes advantage of her Indigenous knowledge as well as her cultural background, and both tourists and co-workers are eager to treat her like a “real” Indian. Tallulah struggles to reconcile this position with the fact that she is somewhat estranged from her Cherokee roots, both physically and emotionally. Moreover, that sense of displacement is further complicated by her experience on the TREPP, which requires her to literally walk away from her homeland on a daily basis.

The Little Little People, who are introduced as a secondary novum, intervene in the TREPP—and in the novel itself—in order to resist the damage being done by the first novum. As part of that project, they help Tallulah resist the stereotypes that surround her at the TREPP, and, as a result, the novel begins to supply more accurate knowledge and model more appropriate behavior for its readers, as well. Just as Tallulah’s tourists are challenged to reconsider their assumptions, so are Hausman’s readers. At the same time, the novel offers a model of resistance to those readers who may occupy a space similar to Tallulah’s. By introducing Indigenous knowledge into both the machine and the novel, the Nunnehi challenge the fixed boundaries between genres and cultures and establish a new form of resistance and survival for Cherokee peoples.

Like the Little Little People, who became indigenous to the digital environment after being lost from a much older oral tradition, the Cherokee have also migrated from one homeland to another. And, while Tallulah struggles to reconcile her Native identity with her sense of displacement, the Nunnehi narrator is able to announce, with a rather cavalier attitude, that he is indigenous to the digital earth (Hausman 13). His confidence despite such a paradox can serve as an example for Tallulah and other Cherokee, including Hausman’s readers as well as those located inside the TREPP. Like the Little Little People, Tallulah has the opportunity to reclaim her own story despite the fact that it remains incomplete. Rather than continuing to reenact the

Trail of Tears and reinforcing stereotypes about Native peoples for new audiences on a daily basis, Tallulah, alongside the digital Cherokee, ultimately chooses to quit working for the TREPP and return to North Carolina. Although the novel ends without telling us what happens next, it is clear that Tallulah has broken the cycle of violence and begun to tell a new story about her own life.

Because of the intervention of the Nunnehi, Tallulah is able to resist and even reverse some of the violence that has been done to her people. Rather than leading her tourists, as well as the digital Cherokee, on to Oklahoma as she has done eleven hundred times before, Tallulah agrees to lead this group east, into the mountains of North Carolina. The virtual journey corresponds to her real-life plans for the coming weekend: after finishing this tour, Tallulah will drive to her grandparents' home, which is located in Cherokee territory in North Carolina. Throughout the novel, she has viewed this particular tour as the last obstacle before her vacation can begin. By changing her plans inside the tour instead, she takes responsibility for both her own life and the lives of the digital Cherokee rather than continuing to ignore the problem by following the same old patterns. Instead of enacting yet another painful death, Tallulah contributes to a story of survival and reclamation as the Cherokee return to their homeland.

In addition to challenging the Trail of Tears itself, Hausman uses cognitive estrangement to create a space where Tallulah can confront her real-world identity issues. This is possible not because of any program that Tallulah or the tech staff consciously create, but because the Little Little Person who narrates the novel has experienced Tallulah's dreams with her. Because this narrator is indigenous to the digital earth, he can manipulate the TREPP so that Tallulah's dreams take physical form, creating a virtual space where she can encounter and resolve a recurring dream about her dead father. In that dream, Tallulah finds herself in a dark cave with a black bear. She knows that the bear is her father's spirit, but she has thus far been unable to have a conversation with him (Hausman 12). She compares the experience to a vision quest but worries that she is inadequate, wondering, “what was so wrong with Tallulah that she couldn't even experience a vision properly?” (Hausman 323). Inside the TREPP, however, Tallulah finally finds her voice: she shares her insecurities, as well as her anger at her father for leaving her, and, “for the first time in four years, Tallulah Wilson cried inside the Trail of Tears” (Hausman 326). In this moment of catharsis, her father comforts her and says that he loves her. Her dream finally reaches a resolution, thanks to the novum of the TREPP, which serves as an

intermediary between the physical world and the world of dreams. Such a space is only possible at the intersection of religious and scientific contexts—or, more accurately, by viewing the world holistically, as Cajete suggests when he explains that, “[w]hen speaking about Indigenous or Native science, one is really talking about the entire edifice of Indigenous knowledge” (3). Rather than analyzing the world from a Euro-American perspective, which insists that we divide knowledge into discrete—and often artificial—categories, *Riding the Trail of Tears* relies on the TREPP to demonstrate the individual and communal benefits of interpreting experiences through the more inclusive lens of Indigenous knowledge.

Although the TREPP does not allow for actual time travel, and, thus, is not capable of changing the course of history, it still causes real harm by repeating earlier traumas. It is only through the interaction between the first and second nova—between the TREPP and the Little Little People—that the novel becomes a tool for resistance rather than colonization. By creating the digital Cherokee, who rebel against the soldiers and lead Tallulah’s tourists back to North Carolina, the Nunnehi are able to tell a new story. This story does not undo or erase historical events, but it does challenge the tourists to rethink their assumptions about those events. In a more concrete way, the Nunnehi also break the cycle of violence that has trapped both Tallulah and the digital Cherokee. With their assistance, Tallulah learns to recognize the digital Cherokee as non-human members of her community who are therefore deserving of respect. Moreover, Tallulah finally demands that she be treated with respect rather than continuing to play the role of a salesperson who must keep smiling while her tourists treat her—and other Native peoples—as less than human. Finally, by allowing Tallulah to confront her father and sort through her own emotions, the TREPP helps her understand her personal history from a new perspective. She may not be able to change the actual Trail of Tears, but, working as part of a community inside the TREPP, Tallulah can create a new, more hopeful narrative for herself, her tourists, and both real and virtual Cherokee people.

By employing and adapting the science fictional trope of virtual reality, and especially by introducing the TREPP and the Little Little People as joint nova, Hausman is able to offer a new perspective on the historical Removal that affected so many tribes during the nineteenth century. The genre of science fiction, which is inherently interested in encounters with Otherness and the possibility of enacting real change in the world, serves as an ideal form for exploring questions of assimilation and difference. Moreover, because Native worldviews emphasize the importance

of space rather than time, the virtual space of the TREPP, which defies a linear conception of time by existing in both the past and the present, establishes a tangible connection between the 1830s and the 2010s. By following a contemporary protagonist, *Riding the Trail of Tears* demonstrates the ways that the attempted genocide of the Cherokee, which often seems to exist in the distant past, continues to affect Cherokee people and shape Cherokee stories. Ultimately, the novel calls attention to and resists the ways that the ongoing romanticization of Native peoples perpetuates violence in the twenty-first century and, rather than trying to erase past events, it suggests new avenues by which contemporary Native peoples can confront historical trauma without succumbing to internal colonization or losing their tribal identities in the process.

Notes

ⁱ. Rader’s *Engaged Resistance* was published before *Walking the Clouds*, but Dillon had already introduced the topic of Indigenous science fiction by the time that Rader’s book was released. See, for instance, Dillon’s 2007 article “*Miindiwag* and Indigenous Diaspora: Eden Robinson’s and Celu Amberstone’s Forays into ‘Postcolonial’ Science Fiction and Fantasy.”

ⁱⁱ Although such a binary definition might initially seem inappropriate to a discussion of Indigenous literature, Suvin’s explanation actually demonstrates an awareness of his own epistemological position and acknowledges the validity of other worldviews. He defines “cognition” both as a stand-in for “scientifically methodical cognition,” in the Euro-American sense of the term, and as “intrinsic, culturally acquired cognitive logic” (Suvin 66). He further argues that “cognition is wider than science” and suggests that we might take “‘science’ in a sense closer to the German *Wissenschaft*, French *science*, or Russian *nauka*, which include not only natural but also all the cultural or historical sciences and even scholarship” (Suvin 13). These broad definitions encompass Euro-American understandings of science but also make space for alternate kinds of cognition, such as the Indigenous knowledge that determines the underlying logic in many works of Native science fiction.

ⁱⁱⁱ. Mooney traces this story to John Haywood, who recorded his version “some seventy years ago” (667). In addition, he records “a more detailed statement” given “on the authority of Chief John Ross and Dr. J.B. Evans” (668).

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