**Baudemann, Kristina. *The Future Imaginary in Indigenous North American Arts and***

> ***Literatures*. Routledge, 2022.**

https://www.routledge.com/The-Future-Imaginary-in-Indigenous-North-American-Arts-and-Literatures/Baudemann/p/book/9780367754822?srsltid=AfmBOooMPLls8dlsWuwz4CImM5k7JL-rcjAGALnVkqGzRAPcANH4X9oa

Kristina Baudemann's *The Future Imaginary In Indigenous North American Arts and Literatures* draws together texts by Indigenous authors that share a common trope: dreaming of "a common future while nevertheless being mindful of their cultural differences" (2). Her case studies address six novels and eight stories that imagine the future against the backdrop of the past. Positing that the "gradual disappearance of Indigenous people is a narrative—rather than historic fact or natural necessity," Baudemann explains how that narrative is "grounded in the circular logic according to which their supposed absence in times to come justifies the colonizers' past and present genocidal dealings with them" (5-6). Yet, as Baudemann's meticulously researched book documents, the future is not a cemented truth but rather malleable and dependent on actions in both the past and present. As she sets forth in her opening chapter, Baudemann's method of "future analysis" requires that she develop and apply new theoretical parameters that highlight how each text she examines "creates *its own future imaginary*" (7, emphasis in original). Collectively, these new imaginaries overturn the past by offering futures with endless possibilities for indigenous peoples.

In her second chapter, Baudemann explores the elusiveness inherent in defining the future, an intangibility that "can nevertheless be owned, controlled, reached for, or destroyed" (13). Envisioning the contact between Indigenous peoples and colonizers as an always-apocalyptic event, Baudemann upholds storytelling as a site where colonialist futures can be disrupted and

colonial structures dismantled. Imagined Indigenous futures will still be "dependent on the rules and relationships underlying the specific system of representation, be that an ideology, a statement spoken within a specific context or discourse, an oral story, [or] a work of fiction" (24), but now new rules are set through Indigenous creativity. As an example, she analyzes Ryan Singer's *Supply Run* (2017), an acrylic painting depicting an extraterrestrial trading post with Indigenous customers on Tatooine, home to Luke Skywalker. By placing the Navajo homeland adjacent to the *Star Wars* galaxy, Baudemann posits, "Singer creates room in the common future imaginary for real Indigenous people beyond the stereotypes of the primitive and aggressive Sand People" (16). This scene gives rise to a future distanced from the trauma of North American colonization of Indigenous tribes, producing a future imaginary that opens new and exciting vistas on a cultural level, thus offering a universe of unfrozen possibilities.

Baudemann begins and ends her third chapter with an examination of Oglala Lakota Kite's 2017 performance piece *Everything I Say Is True*, connecting the artist's slideshow to Foucault's examination of how colonial archives are structured in order to suggest that "manipulation" of any archive "is possible" (36). Kite's piece "draws on an assortment of different future imaginaries developed in novels, films, TV shows, commercials, and political speeches" (38). Drawing on Derrida's notion of the archive as always opening toward the future, Baudemann speculates that Indigenous artists like Kite negotiate archival structures different from colonial archives, providing a space for various apocryphal Indigenous futures.

Next, Baudemann links Indigenous futurism to "*Afrofuturism/afrofuturism*, the generic denominator for African American sf and the fantastic" (42). Both of these terms, she says, "evoke histories of colonial disenfranchisement and oppression" (42). The connections she envisions in this section prepare the reader for her discussion of "Indigenous sf," Miriam Brown Spier's term

for "science fiction by Indigenous authors as opposed to texts that simply include Native characters" (qtd. in Baudemann 44). Baudemann argues for distinguishing between the initially interchangeable terms "Indigenous Futurisms" and "Indigenous SF," as the two genres reach different audiences and call on distinct generic histories and traditions. In other words, Baudemann acknowledges that Indigenous futures draw on and build upon generic conventions seen in creative works by other oppressed peoples. Furthermore, as she infers, "Future imaginaries are not only shaped by different genre systems but also by the medium through which a story is told, its distinctive features and limitations." (47) To that end, this chapter addresses rapidly emerging digital technologies—cyberspace, smartphone games, virtual realities, and so forth—considering not just how technological mediums impact narration but also how the phrase "native to the device" works as "a pun on a technical term that detached Indigeneity from people and land" (55). This stands out as one of the rare instances in this otherwise-comprehensive book where Baudemann forgoes making a specific application.

For instance, *Prey*, a 2006 immersive first-person shooter video game, features a main Indigenous character—from the Cherokee Nation—who, along with other family and tribe members, is abducted by extraterrestrials. According to Michael Sheyahshe, a member of the Caddo Nation, "The choice to have a main character from this tribe was made because of the large amount of myths and stories (along with a lot of research material)" (32). While initial response to the announcement of a Native American main character was cautious (some worried they would make the character too much of a cartoon caricature), the studio also enlisted the acting skills of Michael Greyeyes (Plains Cree) to serve as the voice of the male version of the protagonist. Commenting on the gamemakers' construction of Indigenous characters, Greyeyes said,

I was impressed with the way they conceived of and wrote Tommy. I have read a lot of

scripts for feature films and television and have grown to recognize the tropes common to

the stories with aboriginal characters or themes … In fact, the overwhelming majority of

roles written for native actors are in the Western genre. There are few opportunities for us

to appear outside that paradigm, and when we do, it is often equally narrow in focus

(Sheyahshe 32).

The actor also related that the game's writers took his comments seriously and "in nearly all

instances, [changed] dialogue or thematic content" (Sheyahshe 32). By the studio's recognition

and valuation of Greyeyes's input, the kind of archival negotiation Baudemann imagines is already

occurring in other digital spaces, though she omits analysis of this game (and games in general) in

her book.

In Chapter 4, Baudemann offers a case study of three of Gerald Vizenor's novels:

*Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990)*, The Heirs of Columbus* (1991)*,* and *Treaty Shirts:*

*October 2034—A Familiar Treatise on The White Earth Nation* (2016). Overarchingly, she sees

*Bearheart* introducing, "on a metanarrative level, the subversive idea of an Other archive of

trickster stories, Anishinaabe songs, and traditional teachings, tellingly hidden away in a file

cabinet of the Washington, D.C. BIA building, a monument to the colonial order" (69). Key to this

subversiveness is the malleability of the archive. While the BIA building stands metaphorically

even if physically destroyed, the titular character—Saint Louis Bearheart—"tells his story of future

times while literally squatting in the archive of settler culture" (80). In this way, Baudemann

concludes, Vizenor's story "demonstrates how Indigenous storytelling forces the colonial archive

to shift out of its form and make room for alternate futures" (80).

As with *Bearheart*, Baudemann reads *The Heirs of Columbus* as measuring "the Indigenous future in terms of a deconstruction and transformation of the colonial archive" (81). Establishing Christopher Columbus's journal entry for the claiming of land in the New World for Spain as "the presumed starting point of American history," she explores Vizenor's rewriting of Columbus's words in ways that imagine "visions of sovereign Indigenous futures" (84). Baudemann's close reading of *Heirs* serves as one of the many highlights of this chapter, as she simultaneously demonstrates, just as predicted in her opening chapter, how to "pervade the semantic layers within a single work" and how "imaginaries are developed throughout subsequent works by the same author or artist" (7). Ultimately, she concludes, *Heirs* un-writes the colonial archive in order to create a transformed New World where Indigenous cultures are once again central in much the same way as *Bearheart* and *Treaty Shirts*.

Baudemann characterizes *Treaty Shirts* as a "form of future history," saying "it maps out a coming world that is presented as a direct result of recent political events" (94). Its connection to the past—and the colonial archive—is embodied through the Constitution of the White Earth Nation (1888), a historical treaty that takes on its own fictional life within the novel, both as a document and as a person, through one of the novel's seven narrators, Archive, who identifies himself as the great-nephew of the Constitution's principal author. The novel ends with the Constitution poised to endure anywhere, as the narrators carry it into a dystopian Indigenous future. In Baudemann's words, "*Treaty Shirts* envisions a sovereign Indigenous archive, with the Constitution of the White Earth Nation at its core" (100).

Chapter 5 offers a case study of three futuristic narratives by Stephen Graham Jones: *The Fast Red Road* (2000)*,* an "Indigenous-centered speculative novel that features elements of science fiction, horror, and fantasy" (113); *The Bird is Gone* (2003)*,* "a speculative novel set in an alternate

present or near future, where Indigenous characters backtrack colonial history, slip through time, and work on a guerilla plan for the end of the world and the dawn of a brighter, all-Indigenous future" (133); and *Ledfeather* (2008), an apocalyptic novel in which the "future at the frontier [is] constituted through an assemblage of epistolary fragments" (167). Baudemann's initial paragraph in this chapter acts as the introduction for and an overview of Jones's work. She draws the three works together somewhat, writing, "In all three words, fragments from texts and oral stories constitute the hinges on which the colonial landscapes are imagined swinging open and uncovering the Indigenous world of the future—" (112). This chapter contains an excellent close reading of each novel. It also includes, in her discussion of *The Fast Red Road*, a sidestep into a discussion of *The Scræling*, "an obscure porn movie" (127) (never marketed and available only in bootleg copies) that features a "trickster ending" (129). Her analysis of this movie, featuring an ending that leaves the Scræling laughing as the final credits roll, suggests that "anything is yet possible" for Indigenous people even as it demonstrates the depth of Baudemann's research (129). The abrupt ending of the chapter after the discussion of the third novel—*Ledfeather*—leaves the reader wishing she had spent just a little more time on drawing an overall conclusion about Jones's work and impact, building on the ideas she raises about them collectively in the opening paragraph to the chapter. Her ending sentence to her first paragraph, "Through [the novels'] discussion of processes of writing and un-writing, Jones's works become themselves subversive texts that threaten to overthrow the colonial archive" (112), reads as her defacto concluding thought to this case study, even though it precedes her actual reading of the novels.

In the sixth chapter, Baudemann turns toward analyzing virtual archiving through "machinima," or the art of creating animated films using video game graphics. She uses as her case study the 1993 documentary *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, by Abenaki filmmaker

Alanis Obomsawin, and its reinvention within Skawennati's machinima series *Time Traveller™*.

In this film series (recorded within Linden Lab's virtual world *Second Life*), the main character

Hunter travels through time to reimagine different outcomes to Canadian oppression of Indigenous

people. As Baudemann writes, "An essential part of Skawennati's future imaginary in

*TimeTraveller™* is her depiction of an imagined future world" (176), a world recreated visually

and auditorily in the game in ways impossible to produce on the page. Interestingly, Indigenous

futures in this series grow less dystopian and "gloomy" as the episodes progress:

> Skawennati's acts of "retelling and reimagining" are not only a necessary premise for
>
> creating a narrative about the future on her own terms. By mirroring this practice in the
>
> time travel plot where Hunter "reimagines" history, Skawennati also connects the
>
> Indigenous past with an imagined positive future. (181)

This future imaginary supposes both a return of sovereignty to Canada's Indigenous tribes and the

use of digital archives as interactive museums that supplement the past in productive ways. Or, as

Baudemann puts it, "Skawennati's machinima … encourages viewers to consider digital media

themselves as 'museums of the future'" (189). These museums do not romanticize the pre-Colonial

past, but they do offer opportunities for digitally preserving and renewing traditional knowledge.

In Chapter 7, Baudemman describes her first-hand experience as a non-indigenous user of

the virtual reality project *2167* (2017), which was developed for Canada's sesquicentennial

celebration. Prepared to be disappointed, she found herself immersed in a future imaginary

depicting "the reality of Indigenous people in Canada in 150 years, or seven generations" (194).

In *2167*, colonialism's end is presented through four cyberpunk worlds, each created by a different

digital artist. In these worlds, only movement into the future is possible, though the future is

connected to the past:

"going back" does not necessarily involve a linear backtracking of history and a reversal of colonization. The reconnection with the traditional knowledges is premised on a complete transformation of the user's physical and mental existence, which amounts to the start of a new cycle of events. (199)

Interestingly, in at least one of these worlds, language is the only measure of the future, as new words are coined in Indigenous languages as the tribes grow through contact with other cultures. Using the example of "blueberry pie," which is not translatable into the Anishnaabe language, Baudeman concludes that "encountering the unnamable does not signify the end of language but instead necessitates change—language itself passes through a metaphorical wormhole into another reality that cannot be imagined yet" (202). Baudemann sees both advantages and disadvantages to using the medium of virtual reality, especially as VR requires a type of active engagement not required by prose or machinima. Ultimately, she regards *2167* as powerful, largely because of its presentation of four varied futures, writing,

> The artists refuse to create a limiting representational code that would be perceived as *the* Indigenous way to unsettle the future. Instead, these cyberspaces map out future imaginaries – in the plural – as complex and diverse virtual landscapes of representation and simulation that negate settler time in multiple different ways while celebrating sovereignty and affirming the continuity of Indigenous cultures. (208)

Baudemann turns her attention to Indigenous women in Chapter 8, focusing on female world building and world builders. Drawing together a dizzying array of topics—the Canada Indian Act of 1876, the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, forced sterilization, colonization, patriarchal structures, and colonial racism and misogyny, to name a few—to demonstrate the complex forces female world builders must simultaneously address. As the focus

of this case study, she examines Skawennati's machinima, *She Falls for Ages* (2017), which is set

in the same virtual world within *Second Space* as *TimeTraveller™*, which she examines in her

sixth chapter. Baudemann's use of two other sources by Skawennati in this chapter adds

complexity to her analysis of the cyberpunk world. The first source, an open letter Skawennati

wrote decrying the 1876 Indian Act, which "stripped Indian women of their status if they married

non-Native men" (qtd. in Baudemann 215), documents the devaluing of Indigenous females that

is inherent in Canadian law. The second source, a personal interview that Baudemann conducted

with Skawennati, explains the choices she made regarding her female characters in *She Falls for

Ages*, especially the choices designed to make her readers ask questions.

Next, she examines Skawennati's *Peacemaker* (2017), a second female-focused

machinima, set in the 31st century, that gender-bends the male character in a traditional Indigenous

story, replacing him with the avatar of a young girl. As Baudemann explains,

> The unexpected rebirth of the cultural hero as a woman in times of political unrest and
>
>  environmental catastrophe gives the traditional story an imagined future that response to
>
> current political issues, from female grassroots activism, the ongoing Inquiry into the
>
> Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls to the new awareness of gender issues
>
> and enduring misogyny in all areas of private life. (221)

In the end, even though there are admittedly criticisms that trouble a feminist label, as she details

in the final paragraphs of this chapter, Baudemann categorizes Skawennati's cyberspace works as

promoting a feminist agenda.

Baudemann's book concludes in Chapter 9, with a short but impactful two-page ending to

her study. Admittedly, she writes, not all Indigenous authors or artists try to capture the present

world or even to imagine future worlds; instead, they seem, surprisingly, to be more "interested in

what literature and new media art can set in motion" (231). As Baudemann posits, in her conclusion's penultimate sentence, "With their Indigenous Futurisms, [Indigenous authors and artists] are building their own canons, continuously exploring new ways to articulate their own subversive visions of the future" (231). Certainly, Baudemann's ambitious project fulfills its purpose by giving scholars new ways of understanding how fictional Indigenous futures rework our understanding of the past and present even as they ambitiously open the way for reimagined possibilities for Indigenous peoples.

Work Cited

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