Speculative Possibilities: Indigenous Futurity, Horror Fiction, and *The Only Good Indians*

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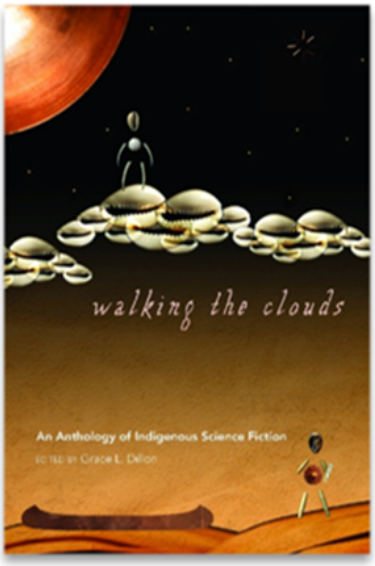
A decade ago when Grace L. Dillon's *Walking on the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* was published, the term 'Indigenous futurisms' began to describe the vast body of work that had already been and would continue to be crafted by Indigenous storiers to create representations in visions of futurity. The term pays homage to Mark Dery's coinage of 'Afrofuturism' in his work, "Black to the Future," from *Flame Wars: Discourse of Cyberculture* (1993). In the 1990s, Dery sought to answer urgent questions surrounding speculative fiction, including why so few African American authors were composing in the genre, despite it being "seeming[ly] uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists" who are "in a very real sense… the descendants of alien abductees" (179-180). Dery posed the question, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of history, imagine possible futures?" (180). Since Dery's inquiry, scholars like Alondra Nelson, Ytasha L. Womack, and Greg Tate, just to name a few, have contributed to the growing body of scholarship on Afrofuturism and the immense possibilities it affords. It is not difficult to discern Dillon's inspiration—Afrofuturism is a vital critical movement that continues to influence Black activists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, scholars, artists, designers, and more, and it



Grace L. Dillon. *Walking the Clouds*. University of Arizona Press, 2012.

seeks to create spaces and futures "void of white supremacist thought and structure that violently oppress[es] Black communities" and to "evaluat[e] the past and future to create better conditions for the present generation of Black people through use of technology" (Crumpton par. 1).

Indigenous futurisms, like Afrofuturism, seek to explore the possibilities of alternate pasts, presents, and futures by decentering Western perspectives. The decentering of Western aesthetics and ideologies is essential and enables Indigenous futurisms to "offer a vision of the world from an Indigenous (or Native American) perspective," helping to address and explore difficult topics like "conquest, colonialism, and imperialism; ideas about the frontier and Manifest Destiny; about the role of women within a community; and about the perception of time" (Fricke 109). As we continue to address and advocate for change regarding the histories and atrocities of conquest, colonialism, and imperialism worldwide, decentering the Western narrative of these events—and therefore the narratives of how these events continue to impact individuals and communities—is crucial.

Decolonizing ideals and aesthetics is a theoretical and political process essential to decentering Western-normative notions and, for Indigenous studies, recentering Indigenous knowledges, cultural practices, and identities. Indigenous futurisms enable Indigenous activists, authors, musicians, and more to decolonize the narratives of the past, present, and future, and because the "Native American novel has been experimental, attracting and modifying subgenres to seek Native cultural survival and development… Native writers have made the novel their place of both formal and social innovation" (Teuton 98). To qualify, I am not suggesting that all Indigenous authors have or *must* use their works in the same ways or to achieve the same goals; to do so would be a gross misstep and extreme miscalculation of the literary and artistic

possibilities afforded when literature by individuals spanning 570+ federally recognized and unique Indigenous tribal nations in the contiguous United States alone are often combined into the category of Indigenous or Native American literature. Unfortunately, though, there is often a misconception about these possibilities. As Indigenous Literature scholar Billy J. Stratton states in a recorded interview with Stephen Graham Jones, prolific novelist, short-story and essay-writer and member of the Blackfeet Nation, "the notion of engaged readers and writers and the recognition of good art has a strong bearing on Native literature because it is not really allowed to be just entertainment. Gerald Vizenor has long been advocating the production of literature as a function of what he calls "surviv[ance], as a means to both persist and resist colonialism and its legacy" (34). Jones responds:

> When you're an American Indian writer, it's like you have all this political burden put on you—that you have to stand up for your people. You have to fight for this, and you can't depict people this way or that way… my big goal, one of the things I've been trying to do is to complicate the issue... (qtd. in Stratton 34)

The Only Good Indians (2020), a recent novel by Jones, exemplifies many strategies and characteristics of Indigenous futurisms while also functioning as an inventive work of horror fiction, a genre that has long been associated with popular culture and stigmatized by literary studies' establishments. Jones is a prolific author of many works of horror fiction including his most recent, *Don't Fear the Reaper* (2023), *The Babysitter Lives* (2022), *The Backbone of the World* (2022), "Attack of the 50 Foot Indian" (2021), "How to Break into a Hotel Room" (2021), *My Heart is a Chainsaw* (2021), "Wait for the Night" (2020), *Night of the Mannequins* (2020), and "The Guy with the Name" (2020), and scholars like Billy J. Stratton, Rebecca Lush, Cathy Covell Waegner, and John Gamber have contributed fruitful conversations concerning Jones and his work. Similarly, scholarship on Indigenous futurisms continues to grow, with

artists, scholars, and authors like Lou Catherine Cornum (Navajo), Suzanne Newman Fricke, Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe and Métis), Jason Lewis, Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache), Danika Medak-Saltzman (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), and Skawennati (Mohawk) cultivating the movement. This article seeks to further both conversations—on Jones and *The Only Good Indians,* as well as on Indigenous futurisms—by exploring the novel as a work of Indigenous futurism, specifically as it relates to rewriting the past, present, and future through various methods of Native slipstream. Jones combines fictional newspaper headlines and articles, a concentrated insistence on rationalization coupled with the inability to achieve such measures, and various points of view in this novel. The result is a depiction of resiliency and possibility for an alternative future in which Indigenous worldviews replace the damaging cycles created and perpetuated by Western ideologies. *The Only Good Indians* is an exceptional contribution to the field of Indigenous futurisms, and it substantiates that both horror and futuristic fiction can serve as an effective medium of decolonization.

Stephen Graham Jones.
The Only Good Indians. Saga Press, 2020.

Science Fiction, Horror, and Possibilities for Futurity

Indigenous futurisms are largely prominent in the speculative fiction subgenres of science fiction and fantasy, but they are certainly not mutually exclusive with these genres; in previous work, I have illustrated how even poetry is an effective and insightful genre being utilized by Indigenous poets to reflect futurity (Rikard). Science fiction is the literary genre that has received the most attention within the movement,

though, and this is due to several factors. First, like other subgenres of speculative fiction, science fiction allows for considerable imagining with technology and worldbuilding. In our innovative, technology-dependent contemporary moment, there is no question that science fiction enables authors to bridge our everyday obsession with and reliance upon technology with fictional world building. Additionally, science fiction has always been and continues to be a medium of alternate perceptions regarding our contemporary moment. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, and Dystopia* (2000), Thomas Moylan acknowledges that the genre is often misunderstood in two primary ways: many people understand it as a medium for depicting an inevitable and undesirable future caused by our contemporary flaws and damaging behaviors (usually classified as 'dystopian' or '(post)apocalyptic' fiction), or that it is simply a metaphorical retelling of the present moment. Moylan argues that the purpose of the genre is actually to "re-create the empirical present of its author and implied readers as an "elsewhere," an alternative spacetime that is the empirical moment but not that moment as it is ideologically produced by way of everyday common sense" (5). For Indigenous futurists, science fiction is used for more than just recreating the current moment in new spaces. Indigenous futurists craft new futures and spaces for Indigenous lives and communities by critiquing and modifying both the contemporary moment and the past. They illustrate how Western knowledge systems and values control the present and how history has been omitted and reconstructed to construe false narratives of Indigenous histories and lives.

Given considerably less attention than science fiction is how Indigenous storiers are using the horror genre to explore Indigenous futurity, especially in literature and literary studies. In recent decades, many works of horror have been acknowledged as critical formations (literary and experimental horror) instead of mere mediums of entertainment (genre horror), though the genre still struggles for legitimacy in many

literary spheres. Compare, for example, Toni Morrison's 'L'iterary *Beloved* (1987), Mark Z. Danielewski's experimental *House of Leaves* (2000), and Stephen King's highly popularized *The Shining* (1977) and the ways in which these novels have been received by popular culture and scholarly discourse. My intention is not to define literary horror and/or genre horror or sort titles into these categories; this is a fraught debate in literary circles that often leads to the blurring of lines between the two forms and an overall dispute to be settled elsewhere. What I argue, instead, is that genre horror fiction, literary or otherwise, often gets overlooked as a well-suited method of exploring contemporary issues and decolonizing Western modes of thinking and knowledge.

Horror fiction has become seemingly easier to define over time, though as already mentioned, it can be difficult to assess and agree upon which novels/stories bend genre conventions and still function as part of the genre. Despite a few misconceptions, horror fiction does not necessarily have to be concerned with the supernatural, but "rather with forces, psychological, material, spiritual, or scientific, that can be 'supernaturalized' and made into a force that threatens the living with annihilation" (Herbert par. 1). Spanning centuries, horror fiction has evolved to be categorized into two types of tales: those determined by an external threat or force, either supernatural or logically scientific, and those determined by an internal, psychological threat. There are, of course, times when stories blend these two types of horrors, such as in the case of *The Only Good Indians.* Whether internal or external threats abound, horror fiction:

> asks us to step back from any straightforward historical realism and read at the very core of what literature and the arts are about, that is, representation and interpretation, the symbolic, and the use of strategies of estrangement and

> engagement to explore and challenge cultural, social, psychological, and personal issues. (Wisker 404)

Horror fiction, like other speculative fiction genres, allows for a revisioning of recognized knowledge and the very Western normative ways in which this knowledge has been enforced and proliferated. This work is not intending to claim that Indigenous horror is new, but instead, that it is overlooked, especially within the literary arts and scholarship in Indigenous studies. And, like Dillon, this work advocates for the continuing use of horror fiction by Indigenous authors and works to subvert Western notions of normalcy regarding knowledge, history, time, and identity. As Blaire Topash-Caldwell states:

> Counter to research on the negative effects of Native American stereotypes on youth, positive representations of Native peoples observed in Indigenous SF portray alternative futurisms to those represented in mainstream SF and celebrate Indigeneity knowledge while making space for Indigenous agency in the future. (87)

As the Indigenous futurisms movement continues, Indigenous authors can use horror fiction to achieve similar possibilities afforded by science fiction and Indigenous futurisms.

Indigenous Horror and The Elk Head Woman

A discussion about *The Only Good Indians* is not possible without recognizing that the novel is a telling of the Elk Head Woman. Known by other Indigenous storiers as Deer Woman, Deer Lady, and in Jones's novel, "Ponokaotokaanaakii," Elk Head Woman is a figure present in many Indigenous tales across North America, including (but certainly not limited to) those from the Muscogee, Cherokee, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Choctaw, and Pawnee nations. These tales vary from one culture to another, but

according to Carolyn Dunn and Carol Comfort in *Through the Eye of the Deer* (1999), "the traditional Deer Woman spirit… bewitches those who are susceptible to her sexual favors and who can be enticed away from family and clan into misuse of sexual energy" (xi). Though not always sexual in nature (Evers 41), these stories are usually didactic and intended to warn youth of the consequences of "losing social identity" through "promiscuity, excessive longing for one person, adultery, and jealousy," ultimately underscoring their responsibilities within the tribe (Rice 21, 28-29).

More recently, Indigenous storiers have been revisioning Elk Head Woman to represent female strength, sexual agency, and the fight for the thousands of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women across North America. *Deer Woman: An Anthology* (2017) showcases various Indigenous authors' and artists' renderings of the figure.

Elizabeth LaPensée. Cover of *Deer Woman: An Anthology*. Native Realities, 2017.

Elizabeth LaPensée. Illustration of Deer Woman in *Deer Woman: A Vignette*." *Deer Woman: An Anthology*. Native Realities, 2017.

Elizabeth LaPensée. Cover of *Deer Woman: An Anthology*. Native Realities, 2017.

Despite the many variations of this figure in tellings and retellings, the blending of the animal and human forms is consistent. This is unsurprising, because as Vine Deloria Jr. states in *God is Red* (1973):

> Very important in some of the tribal religions is the idea that humans can change into animals and birds and that other species can change into human beings. In this way species can communicate and learn from each other. Some of these tribal ideas have been classified as *witchcraft* by anthropologists, primarily because such phenomena occurring within the Western tradition would naturally be interpreted as evil and satanic. What Westerners miss is the rather logical implication of the unity of life… Other living things are not regarded as insensitive species. Rather they are 'people' in the same manner as the various tribes of human beings are people… Equality is thus not simply a human attribute but a recognition of the creatureness of all creation. (88-89)

Jones adds to the revisioning of the Elk Head Woman in *The Only Good Indians,* depicting Ponokaotokaanaakii as a figure seeking retribution for a violent attack that took her life. Ten years before the novel begins, the four narrators—Ricky, Lewis, Gabe, and Cass—decide to break the rules of the reservation and drive their truck through to the section preserved for elders, where they come across a herd of nine elk. Lewis recounts that he "remember[s] Cass standing behind his opened door, his rifle stabbed through the rolled-down window… just shooting, and shooting, and shooting…" (62). Realizing that the smallest elk (still just a calf) is still alive, they shoot her again—and again after she still does not fall. The entire scene is horrific and haunts the men for the rest of their short lives. The game warden finds the men shortly after the slaughter and gives them an ultimatum: throw the entirety of the meat down the hill and pay a high fine for breaking the rules of the reservation or consent to never hunt on the reservation again. The men agree to the second option, apart from entreating to take the body of the calf, which Lewis silently swears to make complete use of so that her horrific death is not in vain. The intended plan is successful for ten years—until Gabe

throws out a package of her meat that was stored in his father's freezer, initiating Ponokaotokaanaakii's vengeance.

Rewriting and Reclaiming History and Narratives in *The Only Good Indians*

Native Slipstream

Jones's tale of the Elk Head Woman exemplifies many characteristics of Indigenous futurisms. *The Only Good Indians* insists on rewriting histories, current realities, and crafting a better future, and it does so by introducing elements of what Dillon terms *Native slipstream*. This is an area of speculative fiction that "infuses stories with time travel, alternative realities and multiverses, and alternative histories" (3), a captivating tactic in Indigenous futurisms. In Native slipstream, characters are seen as "living in the past, future, and present simultaneously" (Cornum par. 2); time flows together, as Dillon notes, "like currents in a navigable stream… [replicating] nonlinear thinking about space-time" (3). In the first few narratives, the reader comes to understand that its temporality is not stable or linear; it is distorted because of how much the past influences the present, and ultimately the future, of each character. In short, Jones utilizes narrative techniques to create temporal distortion which allows him to jump around in the timeline of many years, sometimes neatly and with elaborate transitions, and sometimes unexpectedly and suddenly.

Native slipstream is not entirely synonymous with *slipstream*, a term used to describe all speculative writing that simply defies neat categorization and timelines. Coined by Bruce Sterling and Richard Dorsett in 1989:

> slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against 'reality.' These are fantasies of a kind, but not fantasies which are 'futuristic' or 'beyond the fields we know.' [Slipstream] tend[s] to sarcastically tear at the structure of 'everyday

> life…' Quite commonly these works don't make a lot of common sense, and what's more they often somehow imply that nothing we know makes 'a lot of sense' and perhaps even that nothing ever could… Slipstream tends, not to 'create' new worlds, but to quote them, chop them up out of context, and turn them against themselves. (78)

Native slipstream in Indigenous futurisms is a way to reorient Indigenous ways of thinking and assessing the world; it is the act of decolonizing time as a linear, progressive model and understanding it as a myriad of possibilities. This concept has been around since time immemorial and integrating it into speculative literary genres such as horror and science fiction creates the potential not to disorient the reader and create distrust in the timeline of events, but to exemplify that Western ideology of time is arbitrarily formulated and perpetuated. Indigenous storiers had been crafting slipstream narratives far before a term was created to categorize it, with authors like Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), Sherman Alexie (Coeur d'Alene), Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki), Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe), N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), and of course, Stephen Graham Jones (Piegan Blackfeet), contributing.

In *The Only Good Indians,* Jones uses Native slipstream to contradict 'official' narratives and the ways in which they are retold, warping interpretations of time and events. He begins by integrating extra-textual materials, specifically news headlines and articles. The reader does not have to wait long to realize this will be a reoccurring and important tactic, as the novel briskly opens with one such headline: "The headline for Ricky Boss Ribs would be INDIAN MAN KILLED IN DISPUTE OUTSIDE BAR" (1). Then, immediately following the headline, the narrator tells the reader, "That's one way to say it" (1). In these first two sentences, Jones is outlining his approach not only to use headlines to explain situations, but also his insistence on using them to tell an

important truth: no one, except the person(s) living in the moment and experiencing the situation—and sometimes not even then, completely—truly knows how situations unfold.

Throughout the novel, we realize these headlines are often misconstrued, written by someone who has perceived the situation or would potentially perceive it from a different angle without all the details. For example, in Ricky's case, there is much more that happens outside of the bar that night than a simple news article can explain. Ricky's chapter is a short one, and the ending of the narrative sees Ricky witnessing an elk running full speed in his direction, demolishing cars in the parking lot outside the bar where Ricky stands. He seems to know that this must be some sort of delusion or supernatural occurrence, reminding himself that "elk don't *do* this" (8), but he nonetheless tries to flee from the terrifying animal. Jones weaves perceived realities and delusions here, presenting Ricky as a narrator who might not be the most reliable source for the truth of the situation. Ricky remains self-aware, however, able to understand the bizarre nature of what he is perceiving versus what other bystanders perceive. As the men from inside and outside the bar move to the parking lot and see the damage done to the cars, Ricky "saw it too, saw *them* seeing it: this Indian had gotten hisself mistreated in the bar, didn't know who drove what, so he was taking it out on every truck in the parking lot. Typical" (9). Jones employs temporal distortion throughout this scene, leaving readers unsure whether what Ricky is experiencing with the elk is real or a fabrication of his mind, and this is left ambiguous as Ricky's story ends. (This reliability is examined in more detail later.) After running as far as he can, Ricky sees "a great herd of elk, waiting, blocking him in, and there was a great herd pressing in behind him, too, a herd of men already on the blacktop themselves, their voices rising, hands balled into fists, eyes flashing white" (12). Ricky realizes then that

he is not going to survive this encounter, and Jones integrates the news headline that tells only part of the truth, here. This headline will forever depict Ricky's futurity—whenever people speak of him or his death outside that bar—as a different story from the reality he actually perceived and experienced.

In the next section of the novel, titled "The House Ran Red" and centering Lewis, Jones more elaborately lays emphasis on the importance of perception. Most of the headlines occur in this section; in fact, besides the headline on the first page that has already been mentioned and the two full-length news articles introduced later, this section introduces the only other extra-textual materials, totaling ten headlines in all (16, 22, 36, 39, 45, 88, 121, 127) that compile Lewis's "mental newspaper" (16). He constantly rewrites his situations as they unfold in front of him, giving each situation a headline that would break if anyone else were to find out about his predicament. For example, when explaining why he and his wife Peta will not have any children, the reader learns that Peta doesn't want her children to have to "pay the tab" from the chemicals she put into her body before she met Lewis (38). Lewis thinks to himself that, instead of the headline reading, "FULLBLOOD TO DILUTE BLOODLINE," like he initially thought it would when he married a white woman, the headline would now read, "FULLBLOOD BETRAYS EVERY DEAD INDIAN BEFORE HIM" (39). The truth of the matter is obviously more complex than a single-line newspaper heading could ever convey. With these short newspaper headlines seemingly redefining and limiting the scope of Lewis's everyday situations and realities—and therefore his future (as he will be remembered by others)—Jones is exemplifying the complexity of perception and how simple the process of disseminating inaccurate realities and histories is. When readers realize that Lewis's full name is Lewis A. Clarke and he is the character mostly responsible for crafting these inaccuracies, it becomes even more obvious that his

narration is unreliable: a nod to the many inaccuracies in Captain Meriwether Lewis and Lieutenant William Clark's recording of their nineteenth century expedition.

As mentioned, Jones also weaves two full-length news articles into the narrative. One occurs at the end of Lewis's section, after he has brutally murdered a co-worker named Shaney, who is also of Indigenous, Crow, identity, along with his loving wife. The headline reads, "THREE DEAD, ONE INJURED IN MANHUNT" (129). There are many inconsistencies in Lewis's and the newspaper reporter's accounts, leaving the reader unsure whether to trust Lewis's narrative or the article. Leading up to the news article, the third-person narrator reveals that Lewis is found by four men with rifles; the news article reports that these men were the ones to find Lewis are unconfirmed. It is then stated in the news article that Lewis was apprehended by police, but later chapters reveal he was actually killed. Lewis's chapter ends with him focusing on the elk calf before being shot, though in his account it is unclear whether it is by the hunters or someone else. Additionally, there is no mention of a teenage girl—the form Ponokaotokaanaakii has taken on—though in the news article it suggests the men were attacked by this teenage girl while Lewis and the calf were in the back of their moving truck. Discrepancies such as these highlight how unreliable news articles can be when reporting on complex situations, in addition to reflecting how misinformation and lies are common in the creation of written history, or, as termed by Gerald Vizenor in *Manifest Manners* (1999), the literature, language, and narrative of dominance. Jones uses these 'official' articles, in essence, to rewrite the characters' histories from a dominant ideological point of view; everything must be rationalized through Western norms and presented to the public in easily understandable ways, but often times, this information is inaccurate. These news headlines and articles effectively integrate

elements of Native slipstream into the novel, as they outline the truth, or rather, the lack thereof, about how histories are told and information is disseminated.

(Un)Reliability: The Splitting of the Westernized Mind

Jones's use of newspaper headlines positions the present as a space and time that also exists in the future, as Lewis (presently) predicts how the situation will be perceived by others (in the future). This usage also exemplifies how the past can be recorded imperfectly due to incomplete information, differing perspectives, and intentional falsehoods at play in colonial discourses. As such, Jones challenges notions of Western, scientific thought. Lewis represents this ideology and continually tries to rationalize events that unfold before him. Everything in the novel is centered around that day in the clearing when they killed the elk. These men cannot go back and erase what they have done in their past, and consequently, Ponokaotokaanaakii returns to rewrite their present and futures, reclaiming her own history she never had the chance to experience. Ricky and Lewis spend most of their narratives thinking about this past that cannot be undone, and Jones introduces elements of implausibility in each of their stories. For example, Lewis continuously diminishes the abilities and possibilities of Ponokaotokaanaakii, explaining that the elk *shouldn't* have been able to conceive that young and at that point in the hunting season; how even if she didn't encounter the hunters that day, she *couldn't* have carried full term (73); that he *couldn't* have seen her in his home (20), that she *wouldn't* even have fit in his living room (37); that "of *course* and elk can't inhabit a person…" it had to have been "a shadow he probably saw wrong" (82). Gabe also exemplifies this type of perception where, if logic cannot explain it away, it cannot be true. For example, when Gabe and Lewis are discussing the possibility that the elk herd could remember them from that fateful day ten years ago, Gabe laughs it off and tells him, "they're fucking elk, man. They don't really have

campfires" (27). And when Gabe is about to enter the sweat lodge with Cass and Nate, he thinks he sees a glimpse of black hair in the mirror of Cass's truck, "[e]xcept that couldn't have been" (195). Lewis, Gabe, Ricky, and Cass obsessively rationalize their every encounter and almost always from a Western perspective, trying to explain what *could not* and *should not* have been possible, yet there are obviously things they are not able to explain or fully rationalize. As such, an uneasy tension of unreliability builds between these narrators and readers, challenging the latter to assess the truth with *all* of the information available from the omniscient narration.

To complicate this process, Jones weaves elements of internal and external threats together throughout the novel, challenging the reader to decide if the real antagonist in the novel is an external threat (Ponokaotokaanaakii) or internal ones (the men's psychologies, internalized colonial ideologies, and emotional distress). This is exemplified from beginning to end, with Ricky's narrative indicating that there is indeed an elk responsible for the destruction of the vehicles outside of the bar (as already explored); to Lewis's paranoia, ostensible unraveling, and double homicide of Shaney and Peta; to Gabe's and Cass's gruesome murder-suicide outside of the sweat lodge. Jones's masterful use of indirect characterization—most fruitfully, each character's internal dialogue and external dialogue with others—engages readers and challenges them to determine the truth of the narratives. Toward the end of Lewis's section, this type of characterization reveals that Lewis's mental state has deteriorated significantly and his paranoia is controlling his emotions and actions. Leading up to and after the murder of Shaney, his thoughts become jumbled and panicked, filled with questions and desperate rationalizations for his thoughts and actions:

> She didn't know about the books, he repeats in his head.
>
> *Meaning?*

Meaning she was Elk Head Woman.

Because?

Because she was lying.

That means she's a monster?

…no, he finally admits to himself. It doesn't mean *for sure* she's that monster, but added together with the basketball being so alien to her, and her knowing where to stand in the living room, and to turn the fan off, and, and: What about how she wouldn't touch her own hide on the kitchen table?

Lewis stands nodding.

That, yeah.

She could have been lying…" (118-119)

Lewis can't stop himself from calculating the logic in his and Shaney's actions, breaking it down to modus ponens (If A, then B; B; therefore A) and modus tollens (If A, then B; not B; therefore not A) arguments. By the end, he estimates that "[h]e's not even really a killer, since she wasn't even really a person, right? She was just an elk he shot ten years ago Saturday. One who didn't know she was already dead" (117-118). Lewis's paranoia engages a sort of distortion where it is difficult for the reader to assess if he is losing his ability to accurately assess and engage reality, or if there really is a supernatural, external force manipulating him and the people around him and he is beginning to *see* the world as it truly is—that is, from an Indigenous worldview. His thoughts do become frantic, but in later chapters, it is revealed that at least some of Lewis's assumptions and explanations are true, such as when Gabe confirms that he *did* indeed throw out the elk meat stored in his father's freezer.

In Lewis's, Gabe's, and Ricky's chapters, they struggle with what is *real* and what simply cannot be, and they use Western notions of regularity to do so. When confronted with the unexplainable, their minds seem to crack down the middle. One

side confirms that it is indeed impossible for Ponokaotokaanaakii to exist and be responsible, because Western notions of science cannot explain such an entity and its reign on the real world. The other side reinforces Blackfeet ideology, insisting on a clear, supernatural connection. Blackfeet ideology has always emphasized strong ties with the supernatural and unique ways of seeing the world in relation to it. William Farr asserts, "the Blackfeet world possesse[s] an extra dimension, for amid the visible world, [is] an invisible one, another magnitude, a spiritual one that is more powerful, more meaningful, more lasting. It [is] a universe alive'" (qtd in LaPier xxxi). The invisible dimension is, according to many Blackfeet histories and stories, the real world—and the visible dimension is a mere partial experience of that world (LaPier 25). If these characters' brains have indeed split between Western and Blackfeet ideologies, the 'distortion' of sorts is a battle of principles regarding the supernatural, space and time, and the classification of the 'real.'

Indeed, "this confounding of divisions… between the animal and human—challenges western ways of thinking" (Dunn and Comfort xiii); as such, Lewis, Gabe, Ricky, and Cass cannot accept the events occurring around them as they exercise Western notions of science, nature, and the perception of the Elk Head Woman. "While the non-Native cultural product makes Deer Woman a monster, thus evincing the colonial(ist) impulse of consuming the Indigenous… Native works… interpret Deer Woman as symbolic of the Indigenous worldviews" (Vlaicu 3; Dunn and Comfort xiii). Jones exemplifies the unreliability of Lewis's, Gabe's, Ricky's, and Cass's thoughts as they depend on limiting notions of Western thought to try and understand the Blackfeet world around them. Western ideologies simply cannot account for the strange circumstances that befall the characters throughout the novel, insisting on a more traditional explanation and one that allows a space for supernatural events. If we

attempt to understand the world using Blackfeet cosmology, what does Ponokaotokaanaakii truly symbolize, as the partial experience of the real, invisible world?

Point of View: Perspectives and the Construct of Time

Another tactic Jones utilizes to build upon Native slipstream principles is point of view. The novel begins in third-person narration following Ricky, then Lewis—and then there is an abrupt shift in the point of view to second person. In the second section, "Sweat Lodge Massacre," the first chapter inserts readers into the mind of Ponokaotokaanaakii. The narration reveals the elk's short life and horrendous death, outlining the events of the day she was killed in her own perspective. In horror fiction, it is unsurprising to see through the eyes of the antagonist. However, in Jones's novel, this perspective shift occurs nearly halfway through the entire novel, surprising readers with a fresh, new perspective on the incident that took place ten years ago, the progression of time, and the deaths of the main characters. Beginning in that second section, Jones begins weaving instances of second person into Gabe's and Cass's chapters, reminding readers that there is always more than one perspective of every situation. Ponokaotokaanaakii is always watching and assessing these men, stalking them like prey to attain vengeance. While Lewis becomes obsessed with figuring out why, ten years later Ponokaotokaanaakii has chosen to come after them, she asserts, "for them, ten years ago, that's another lifetime. For [Ponokaotokaanaakii] it's yesterday" (137). Additionally, the ways in which Ponokaotokaanaakii transforms illustrates that she is beyond the understanding of Western notions of time. She recounts:

> Just a few hours ago you [Ponokaotokaanaakii] are pretty sure you were what would have been called twelve. An hour before that you were an elk calf being

> cradled by a killer, running for the reservation, before that you were just an awareness spread out through the herd, memory cycling from brown body to brown body, there in every flick of the tail, every snort, every long probing glared down a grassy slope. (134)

The way in which Ponokaotokaanaakii perceives time indicates that time is an arbitrary construct, at least as the four men perceive it—indeed, the entire construction of time as a linear ideal is deconstructed as their views on time are juxtaposed. In interviews, Jones has described himself as a "Blackfeet physicist," creating timelines that reflect "a Blackfoot framework of loops, glitches, and the constant experience of Indigenous time travel: living in the past, future, and the present simultaneously" (Cornum qtd. in Fricke 118). This is exemplified throughout the novel with the revisioning of the past, present, and the future (with news headlines and articles); the merging of past and present with each character hyperfixated on that fateful Saturday ten years gone, which ultimately defines their futures; and the past and present becoming intertwined as dead characters interact with those that are still alive—Ponokaotokaanaakii throughout, and Ricky and Lewis in the sweat lodge. These revisionings fashion space and time as interconnected and non-linear, a direct contradiction to notions of Western knowledge regarding time. Such a pushback against dominant modes of thinking offers an alternative reorientation of Indigenous knowledge and perception.

Decentering Western Ideologies and Crafting Indigenous Futurity

Ultimately, Denorah, Gabe's daughter, ends the destructive, murderous cycle that has defined and controlled the lives of her father, Lewis, Cass, Ricky, Ponokaotokaanaakii, and more symbolically, everyone controlled by Western perceptions of knowledge, history, time, and identity that has been engrossed in this same cycle. Although it

might appear that this cycle began with the slaughtering of those elk in the clearing ten years ago, it is indeed more complex. Lewis clarifies this when he reflects:

> That craziness, that heat of the moment, the blood in his temples, the smoke in the air, it was like—he hates himself the most for this—it was probably what it was like a century or more ago, when soldiers gathered up on ridges above Blackfeet encampments to turn the cranks on their big guns, terraform this new land for their occupation. Fertilize it with blood. (75)

Lewis explains that he has contributed to a centuries-old cycle with the slaughtering of those elk—one that continues to control him and others because of the hands they continue to play within it. However, Denorah refuses to let the destruction of the past define her present and future, and she takes a courageous stand, ending the long cycle of murder and retribution. Denorah chooses a new path where she, Ponokaotokaanaakii, and everyone else can move on from the atrocities of the past into a new future of possibilities. In this way, Denorah represents and practices an Indigenous worldview. She accepts Ponokaotokaanaakii's existence and, by doing so, the possibilities for a better, alternative future for her generations and the ones to follow, which is illuminated in the final lines of the novel: "It's not the end of the trail, the headlines will all say, it never was the end of the trail. It's the beginning" (305).

Stephen Graham Jones's *The Only Good Indians* is a powerful and timely contribution to the Indigenous futurisms movement. Jones experiments with various forms of Native slipstream tactics, weaving a narrative that attempts to rewrite the past, resituate the present, and create possibilities for the future. Newspaper headlines and articles, an intense focus on rationalization coupled with the inability to achieve such measures, and varying points of view combine to illustrate futurity and possibilities created by breaking the cycle of Western perceptions and dominant ideologies. According to Danika Medak-Saltzman, Indigenous futurist imaginings "create

blueprints of the possible and [provide] a place where we can explore the potential pitfalls of certain paths," enabling us to "transcend the confines of time and accepted "truths"—so often hegemonically configured and reinforced—that effectively limit what we can see and experience as possible in the present, let alone imagine into the future" (143). With *The Only Good Indians,* Jones uses the horror genre to decenter dominant ideologies and to offer potential futures in which Indigenous knowledge systems and practices are centered in Indigenous lives. As Sean Teuton posits, "[t]he Native American novel has become increasingly aware of itself as an art with real world consequences for Native lives" (99), and further, *The Only Good Indians* and other fiction by Jones supports horror fiction, specifically, as an effective medium for subverting Western notions of normalcy regarding knowledge, history, time, and identity. As the Indigenous futurisms movement continues to develop and Indigenous creators continue crafting new spaces and possibilities for representing Indigeneity, scholarship must recognize and address how horror fiction is being used to imbue Native sensibilities and knowledge.

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