Title

Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction

Author

Goad, Alexis N.

Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction. By Miriam C. Brown Spiers. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021. 184 pages. $39.95 paper; $39.95 e-book.

In her debut novel *Encountering the Sovereign Other*, Miriam C. Brown Spiers offers a thorough and intriguing examination of the burgeoning literary field of Indigenous science fiction. By critically intersecting existing science-fiction theory with reflective understandings of Indigenous epistemologies, Spiers offers a framework to examine the ways that Indigenous writers have utilized the genre as a malleable medium to explore, express, and reify Indigenous worldviews and lifeways in texts that rehabilitate what it means to be science fiction.

The genre of science fiction is difficult to concretely define. While it may be tempting to set the parameters of the genre to the strict adherence and utilization of common tropes or motifs, such a practice would inhibit the evolving nature of the genre. Tropes such as time travel, alternate realities, and monster or creature stories may exist broadly across many science-fiction works but their narrative manifestation could differ quite significantly across time and culture (e.g., creatures from outer space replaced by creatures born from radioactive waste). Spiers argues that the mutual constitution of the genre between the author, the reader, and the work allows not only for science fiction to adapt to changing technologies and cultural realities through trope evolution and fluctuation but also to shifting perspectives and worldviews, making it particularly responsive to adaptation by Indigenous writers.

Spiers contends that the heart of Indigenous science fiction lies at the complicated intersection of strategic and simultaneous trope accommodation and trope rejection. The adoption and transformation of science-fiction tropes and themes allow Indigenous writers to "reinforce tribally specific values and emphasize the applicability of Indigenous knowledge in the twenty-first century" (xviii), and allows Indigenous writers to "expand and complicate the boundaries of this historically Euro-American genre in ways that are beneficial to both Native and non-Native audiences" (xl). To better illustrate such selective trope adaptation, Spiers offers in-depth examinations of four Indigenous science-fiction works: *The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan* (William Sanders, 1999), *It Came from Del Rio* (Stephen Graham Jones, 2010), *Field of Honor* (D. L., Birchfield, 2004), and *Riding the Trail of Tears* (Blake M. Hausman, 2011).

Encountering the Sovereign Other excels in its analysis of key tenets of American Indigenous existential concerns. Whereas typical Euro-American science fiction is united by the advancement of the individual protagonist or the reaffirmation of national or political identities in the face of the alien/monster/creature Other, Spiers aptly compiles historical and futuristic perspectives to analyze the ways

in which the four chosen works supplant these strategies with more community-based, reality-as-experienced approaches toward such encounters. For example, Spiers argues that *The Ballad of Billy Badass* exemplifies an Indigenous approach to encountering the Other, in this case, a radioactive creature born from another dimension, by requiring the embracement of the idea of recognizing and respecting differences to cultivate cross-identity alliances in the face of hardship. Alternatively, a usurping of the typical sentient technological Other trope occurs in *Riding the Trail of Tears*. Here, a virtual-reality simulator that transports a group of tourists and a Cherokee tour guide back in time to the Trail of Tears malfunctions, trapping them in the virtual past. Spiers argues that typical manifestations of this trope would involve the technology being a threat to either the individuals involved or humanity as a whole, but in this work, the sentiency of this tech allows for those involved to reshape the history of removal.

Although Spiers offers a complex examination of Indigenous utilization of science fiction, the text is amenable to both scholars and newcomers alike. The theoretical heavy lifting occurs in the introduction, and it is here that Spiers lays the foundation for what will be applied in the main body of the text. Those who are new to critical analysis of the Euro-American genre of science fiction would do well to ensure a close read of these first forty pages. Following this, the analyses of the four target texts each reside in their own individual chapters that are easily read and holistically understood in isolation. This structure not only allows deep immersion in each of the analyzed novels, but also grants an increased level of practicality and utility. The text is especially suitable for classroom use, where either the entire work or individual chapters could be used to demonstrate intriguing literary theoretical advancements as well as analytical applications to the specific texts.

Spiers excels in her integration of classic science-fiction theory, philosophy, and Native American studies in formulating her analyses, allowing the reader to easily access and assimilate the theoretical perspectives of Philip K. Dick, Michael Pinsky, Judith Butler, Vine Deloria Jr., and Grace L. Dillon, to name just a few. However, when utilizing intertextual comparisons, a reader who is unfamiliar with the history of classic Euro-American science fiction might still struggle to see the ways in which Indigenous science fiction stands out among the crowd. For readers who are not immediately familiar with works such as *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Walter M. Miller Jr., 1959) or the film *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), Spiers does a commendable job of parsing out the relevant details, but science-fiction laypersons might be left wishing for more one-on-one comparisons to the "popular classics" to better understand the ways in which Indigenous writers diverge from the classic Euro-American utilization of science-fiction tropes. Indeed, the interspersed comparisons to works such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Independence Day* (1996), and the *Star Trek* series stand out as the most accessible illustrations of classic Euro-American utilization of science fiction to a lay audience.

Despite any limitations in science-fiction expertise they may bring to the text, readers interested in the ways that Indigenous creators utilize the genre in creative and captivating ways to offer affirmations of Indigenous relations and worldviews—or even

readers simply interested in expert analyses of stories in the ever-evolving complexity of the science-fiction genre—would do well to read *Encountering the Sovereign Other*. Readers can expect to leave Spiers's text with not only a deeper understanding of the genre and contemporary Indigenous artistic works within it but potentially a new reading list as well.

Alexis N. Goad
University of Arizona