



BOOK REVIEW:

*Encountering The Sovereign Other:
Indigenous Science Fiction*

Hogan D. Schaak

Brown Spiers, C. Miriam. *Encountering The Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction*. Michigan State UP, 2021. ISBN: 9781611864052.

Miriam C. Brown Spiers's *Encountering the Sovereign Other* is a well-thought-out and welcome addition to the conversation around Indigenous futurism. The emergence of a large number of Indigenous North American writers in genre fiction is a recent and ongoing phenomenon that has yet to be adequately theorized. Exploring how authors who identify as Indigenous North Americans interact with Western genre fiction, Brown Spiers does an excellent job analyzing Indigenous North American engagement in the tradition of SF. The only drawback to this book is that its focus on SF ignores the transgeneric qualities of many of the novels Brown Spiers discusses, opening her argument up to criticism from other sub-fields within genre studies. At the same time, this is the first book-length scholarly assessment to join the still nascent critical conversation around Indigenous SF. In the relatively short span of 140 pages (including introduction), Brown Spiers contends that although the traditions of Western SF and Native American studies clash, Indigenous authors have recently been engaging SF in ways that expand what SF can be – specifically as they challenge the traditional separation of religious and scientific thinking in Western SF.

Brown Spiers starts her critical work with Darko Suvin's "novum" theory of SF. While she acknowledges the potential in Suvin's framework for cognitive estrangement to serve as a framework for SF that is open to other voices, she also critiques how this dominant theoretical framework limits considerations of Indigenous interventions in SF. In Suvin's theory, the cognitive and the scientific leave no room for religion or myth as legitimate influences of SF

narratives. In contrast, Brown Spiers argues that the cognitive, science, religion, and myth are combined in Indigenous SF, positing that while novums are important in Indigenous SF, they specifically do combine religion and science. In this way, she brings novum theory to the field of studies in Indigenous North American literature and introduces antiracist Indigenous North American responses to novum theory into SF studies.

In her discussion, Brown Spiers intervenes in the ongoing conversation on what to call recent Indigenous speculative fiction. She disagrees slightly with Grace Dillon's broader theory of Indigenous futurism, preferring Dean Rader's description of Indigenous speculative fiction as the "Indian invention novel" (xv). However, she gets even more specific, arguing for the potential of reading some Indigenous North American invention novels as Indigenous science fiction that both criticize Western SF from an Indigenous perspective and engage with the tropes of the genre in a way SF readers broadly would find appealing. Throughout, Brown Spiers insightfully argues that Western SF has a traditionally temporal center, while Indigenous SF tends to have a spatial center. Beyond pointing out that the "Other" encountered in Western SF is often a stand-in for Indigenous peoples and that Indigenous authors often play with this trope, she notes that Indigenous North American worldviews do not see the same binary opposition of science and religion that is common to the Western tradition. Instead, Brown Spiers argues that Indigenous SF contains a more holistic, spatially grounded approach that combines a community-based land ethic with scientific knowledge. Because of this, she is able to support her argument that Indigenous SF reveals how many Western religious values have become normalized in a genre that traditionally prides itself on its commitment to a universalizing logic.

In *Encountering the Sovereign Other*, Brown Spiers explores radiation monsters and borders in Indigenous SF, examines Indigenous resistance to Western SF through alternative and virtual histories, and provides a plethora of examples beyond the few selected for in-depth analysis within the book. Brown Spiers writes at length about William Sanders's *The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan* (1999), Stephen Graham Jones's *It Came From Del Rio* (2010), D. L. Birchfield's *Field of Honor* (2010), and Blake M. Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears* (2011). While Brown Spiers's overall argument about Indigenous intervention in SF is convincing and her arguments in each part of the book are well made, issues such as the absence of transgeneric theory leave considerable gaps in her argument that could potentially undermine parts of her logic throughout the book.

Discussing radiation monsters and borders in Indigenous SF, Brown Spiers insightfully explains how the Western tradition of SF relies on a notion of time inherited from Christianity – specifically Millennialism. In Millennialism, time is imagined as constantly marching forward, bringing with it a positive progression in technology and quality of life for humans. Brown Spiers posits that Millennialism in SF also relies on the idea that faith and religious thought evolve into cognitive, scientific values. In other words, while the religious aspects of Millennialism disappear in Western SF, the belief in time inevitably being tied to a positive progression for humans remains. Brown Spiers posits that this is used in SF to justify abuses of land, the Other (specifically the Indigenous Other), and power in general for the sake of the progression of Western civilization. In contrast, the spatial focus of Indigenous

worldviews, she argues, centers on what happens within a particular place. This spatial focus allows for a more fluid understanding of how science and religion interact practically and ethically in a specific environment. Within this discussion, Brown Spiers argues effectively for the intersection of religion and science. Her comparison of Western and Indigenous literatures contrasts the problematic religious figures and wisdom keepers in Western SF with the responsible wisdom keeper and religious leader figures in Indigenous SF. Then, while theorizing Indigenous resistance to Western SF through alternative and virtual histories, Brown Spiers claims that even when traditional Western SF narratives focus on multicultural casts of characters, these characters are tied to political and military institutions and represented as coming together around an Anglo protagonist in ways that erase cultural difference when a clearly hostile alien enemy is fought. Brown Spiers compellingly argues that these characters resist institutions inherited from imperialist Western civilization. She then posits that in this kind of Indigenous SF, protagonists tend to come together around a common enemy while still maintaining their cultural difference.

However, the marked absence of transgeneric and other genre theory, such as fantasy and horror, stands out in arguments such as the one summarized above. When writing about Stephen Graham Jones's SF/horror novel *It Came from Del Rio* (2010), for example, Brown Spiers overlooks the transgeneric quality of the work in order to focus on its SF aspects. Her argument is that "*It Came From Del Rio* reminds readers that racial and national borders are permeable and artificial, easily crossed no matter how humans try to reinforce them" (31). This argument is well made, and she is certainly right to posit that differently from the individual exceptionalism of Western SF, this very anti-separatist, anti-racist ethos underlies "an Indigenous perspective that portrays people as dependent upon and responsible to one another, as well as to the world around us" (31). However, by ignoring the fact that *It Came From Del Rio* is transgeneric, Brown Spiers risks overemphasizing the importance of SF within the novel. The novel contains strong horror elements and is populated with monsters. Horror and monster theory are both often studied through the lens of the transgeneric. For example, Kathryn Walkiewicz, Gary E. Anderson, Cari Carpenter, and Jodi Byrd have mapped many of the transgeneric properties of Stephen Graham Jones's fiction, and Brown Spiers makes no mention of their work. This is an important oversight, especially since Byrd claims that genre itself colonizes texts by collecting, categorizing, and arraying textual productions into shelved units for instant marketability as it produces and reproduces interpretation and meaning (345). Addressing this point, and considering how, for example, horror theory may also be mapped onto a novel like *It Came From Del Rio*, would have further strengthened Brown Spiers's theories.

Having said that, Brown Spiers's argument shines when she gets comparative. References to SF films like *Godzilla* (1954) and *Independence Day* (1996) serve as great examples that lend a clear background to Brown Spiers's analysis throughout the book. She also engages with very recent research, using David M. Higgins's 2021 work on alternative victimhood in SF as a baseline for her examination of multiculturalism in Western SF. This focus on very recent research does seem a little patchy, though, considering that the most recent horror theory that Brown Spiers's uses is Julia Kristeva's relatively old 1980s

philosophy of abjection and a brief mention of Judith Butler's 1990s theory of monstrous Others. Consideration of Indigenous horror and transgeneric theory, such as that found throughout *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones: A Companion* (2016), would have been welcome. As a result, while the research in SF throughout *Encountering the Sovereign Other* is otherwise accurate and up to date, considerations of broader genre theory which should be framing the SF lens Brown Spiers adopts seem to be missing.

Toward the end of the book, Brown Spiers offers a brief nod to the recent Indigenous films and websites as well as other novels of Indigenous futurism that do the same kind of worldbuilding she has been exploring. This conclusion provides the reader with a long list of material to pursue related to Indigenous SF. All in all, *Encountering the Sovereign Other* does an excellent job theorizing Indigenous SF, providing convincing and in-depth comparisons between Western SF standards and themes across works by Indigenous North American SF writers and laying the groundwork for other theorists to examine the ways in which Indigenous authors intervene in traditional Western genres to show and explore real cultural difference. This is the first book-length attempt to theorize such specific genre interaction with Indigenous North American fiction, and I would recommend it to anyone studying Indigenous North American literature. It could be quite useful in crafting a themed undergraduate or graduate course on Indigenous SF. Even as the lack of consideration for transgeneric theory and theories from other genre studies which her selected texts invite leaves Brown Spiers's treatment open to a number of criticisms, this is a much-needed book and will undoubtedly be a launching point for many other theorists interested in how Indigenous writers interact with the traditions of Western genre fiction. I suspect it will become a staple of Indigenous North American literary theory, grounding future examinations of genre within the field.

Works *Biography*: Hogan D. Schaak is a PhD candidate of English and the Teaching of English at Idaho State University. While his doctoral work concerns Indigenous North American gothic and horror fiction, Hogan has published on a range of topics including detective fiction, 19th century gothic poetry, and Indigenous speculative fiction with journals such as *Transmotion*, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, and *Studies in the Fantastic*.

Cited

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