# Open Library of Humanities

## Imaginaries of the Future 03: Utopia at the Border

## Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

## Copyright:

## Open Access:

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

## Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

Open Library of Humanities

**IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE 03: UTOPIA AT THE BORDER**

# Removed to the Signifier: Utopia in Stephen Graham Jones's *The Bird Is Gone: A ~~Monograph~~ Manifesto* (2003)

Kristina Baudemann

Europa-Universität Flensburg, DE

kristina.baudemann@fulbrightmail.org

This article deals with the speculative utopia in Stephen Graham Jones's *the bird is gone: a ~~monograph~~ manifesto* (2003). Arguing that Jones foregrounds the utopian traits of US-American colonialism, specifically of Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal policy, I explore the conditions of a postcolonial—or rather decolonial—Indigenous-centered utopia. As exemplified in Jones's ~~monograph~~ manifesto, the latter does not consist in setting Indigenous communities back to a pre-colonial default state because colonialism is not reversible. The utopian space is instead moved from the level of representation to the level of signifiers, where it exists in a space of possibility opens up in the continuous shift of meaning/signifieds and humorous play with readerly expectations. As such, Jones's work not only dislodges and subverts, but also renews literary utopia. In its focus on colonial history and textual experimentation, *bird* demonstrates that utopia can serve as both a space for settler colonial exploitation and a tool kit for imagining a decolonial and Indigenous-centered future.

## Introduction

To many people, the term *Indigenous utopia* might appear tautological; after all, the inhabitants of some literary utopias are the Indigenous people of a forgotten island or distant planet. To others, the term sounds contradictory. As various scholars have pointed out, forays into the foreign landscapes of the 'New World,' for instance, were framed as utopian projects in the European colonial imaginary (Sargent, 2010a; Balasopoulos, 2004; Marouby, 1988). In Thomas More's *Utopia* the region of Abraxa only became Utopia after having been colonized by King Utopus (Balasopoulos, 2004: 5; Hardy, 2012; 125; Ashcroft, 2012: 2; Sargent, 2010a: 204). The close link between utopia and colonialism begs the question whether Indigenous utopia—utopia imaged by and for Indigenous people—can exist at all, and if so, what would it look like. Resisting historical silencing and the objectification of their cultures in Eurowestern literatures, North American Indigenous authors have been reimagining utopia in their speculative literatures. Examples range from Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) 'radically more perfect'[1] sovereign tribal nations on houseboats (e.g. *The Heirs of Columbus* [1992], *Treaty Shirts* [2016]) to utopian next worlds where life will be radically re-structured, for instance Vizenor's Fourth World (*Darkness in Saint Louis: Bearheart* [1978]), Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna) Fifth World[2] (*Almanac of the Dead* [1991]), or Nanobah Becker's (Diné) Sixth World (*The 6th World* [2012]). The imaginings of utopia in Indigenous literatures also include the dystopian societies in William Sanders's (Cherokee) short story 'When This World Is All On Fire' (2001) or Jeff Barnaby's (Mi'gmaq) films *File Under Miscellaneous* (2010) and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013).

---

[1] In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), Darko Suvin famously defines the literary utopia as a fictional text depicting an 'imaginary community … in which human relations are organized more perfectly than in the author's community', or 'radically different' from the author's community (Suvin, 1979: 45, 41). While perfectibility as defining characteristic has been contested (e.g. Sargent, 2010b), the idea is nevertheless still widely associated with utopia.

[2] Credit for this idea goes to my friend Ewelina Bańka who discussed Silko's *Alamanac* as a utopian Fifth World in her talks during the Utopia at the Border symposium in Regensburg (2016), and the conference of the Nordic Association for American Studies in Odense (2017).

Throughout the past decade, Indigenous literary scholars have been conceptualizing the heterogeneity of themes and styles in Indigenous literatures. This includes what Sherman Alexie famously termed 'reservation realism' (2005: xxi), as well as Indigenous '[t]ransgeneric [f]ictions' (Byrd, 2014: 344), meaning 'texts that experiment, refuse categorization, and that genre-bend narrative fiction into poetry, traditional stories into science fiction, fantasy into the historical, and horror into the epistolary' (Byrd, 2014: 346). Some of these 'transgeneric' fictions have been called *Indigenous futurisms*, a term popularized by Grace Dillon's anthology of Indigenous science fiction *Walking the Clouds* (2012) and commonly used to describe a heterogeneous field of speculative fictions including, but not limited to, Indigenous science fiction(s) (e.g. Drew Hayden Taylor, *Take Us to Your Chief* [2016]), horror (e.g. Jones, *Demon Theory* [2006]), and fantasy (e.g. Daniel Heath Justice, *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* [2011]). We might also include utopias imagined by Indigenous authors: by no means a new phenomenon. Scott Richard Lyons, for instance, reminds us of Anishinaabe writer George Copway's scheme for the creation of a pan-Indigenous nation called 'Kahgega' (Lyons, 2017: 164), an example of a nineteenth century Indigenous utopia. A discussion of utopia as a form of contemporary Indigenous speculative fiction might give insight into the ways these literatures open into our twenty-first century world and 'infect' it, as Stephen Graham Jones says, 'not with what we are—we're not a "what"—but with who we are' (2016: xvii).

This article deals with the speculative utopia in Jones's 2003 novel *the bird is gone: a ~~monograph~~ manifesto* (*bird*). Texan-born Jones is a member of the Blackfeet, an Indigenous nation in the US-American state of Montana. His fiction habitually crosses the borders between realism and speculative fiction, horror and science fiction; and between Western and Indigenous literatures. In *bird*, Jones describes a tribal utopia: all Indian reservations in the US are removed to North and South Dakota to create an environment in which Indigenous cultures can thrive without disturbance from corruptive Western influences. The so-called 'Indian Territories' are walled off by fences and a desolate borderland. On crossing this border, the Natives must assume a new, all-Indigenous, identity: they are stripped of their English names and told to

hide Western features such as blue eyes or blonde hair behind black wigs and brown contacts. Inside this utopian enclave, the pan-Indigenous society is supposed to flourish with the help of a fixed set of rules condensed into 'the Code', a cultural and behavioral guidebook, adherence to which is closely monitored (although the novel does not explain how). The resulting community is a homogeneous mass of people who share the same looks, the same colonial history and, supposedly, the same vision of an anti-Western and anti-colonial future. *bird* follows a set of characters fourteen years after the creation of the Territories and maps out their individual struggles to adapt to the new order. Set in the bowling alley Fool's Hip in one of the border towns, the major storyline revolves around the disappearance and presumed murder of white tourists in the Territories, while a young employee called LP Deal—arguably the protagonist—is writing a mysterious manifesto.

*bird*, however, is far from accessible: the crime plot is never entirely resolved, and it is frequently interrupted by seemingly unconnected episodes. These include an act from a play; a chapter documenting the movement of a group of Natives across a charred landscape between '~~1852~~ 1854' (Jones, 2013: 53) and '186x' (60); a chapter that is narrated entirely without punctuation in a fevered stream-of-consciousness; and a ten-page alphabetical glossary at the end of the book with definitions of important terms. Even though Jones remarked that '*Bird* is the best I can do, or ever will do' (Lawrence & Jones, 2011), his experimental style was criticized in reviews. I claim that shifting the gaze to utopia and its literal and metaphorical borders in *bird* is a meaningful way to read Jones's ~~monograph~~. Jones' original mode of writing renews the Western literary format of utopia by filling it with historical relevance in a subversive mode that Vizenor has called 'trickster discourse'. Suggesting that, on our quest for utopia, we should consider the metatextual level of signifiers rather than the content level, Jones directs the reader's gaze toward the borders of representation: if a better or ideal society cannot be represented, as various utopian scholars have argued, familiar ways of representing must be abandoned. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson posits that utopia can do nothing but point toward its own shortcomings since 'our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production' (2005: xiii). Since utopia in literature aspires to represent

a radically different alternative, this form of writing inescapably encounters and questions its own representational borders. As Jones demonstrates, this movement toward its own borders is not a flaw nor weakness of utopia but can be understood as potential: it is exactly this 'paradox' of utopia which makes ideal, de-colonized states in and as text possible.

## Utopian Borders and Total Separation: From *Brave New World* to *the bird is gone*

Utopia is not an exclusively Western format. As Sargent has pointed out, the Indigenous oral traditions in the Americas, New Zealand and Australia 'almost certainly included utopian elements' (2010a: 212). Sargent's definition of utopia as 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space' (2004: 207) might moreover be applied to contemporary speculative Indigenous literatures. Novels such as Jones's *bird* or Vizenor's *Bearheart* and *Treaty Shirts*: *October 2034—A Familiar Treatise on the White Earth Nation* imagine Indigenous societies that are secluded and spatially separated from the rest of the world. The inhabitants of these utopian enclaves pursue a way of life notably different from mainstream culture. In *Bearheart*, the Red Cedar Circus is a fictional Indigenous nation that was created as a peaceful sanctuary from repressive tribal governments. In *Treaty Shirts* seven exiles from the White Earth Nation in Minnesota declare their houseboat a sovereign nation. This is similar to Vizenor's sovereign bingo ships in *The Heirs of Columbus*, where mutant children seek refuge from a poisoned civilization to get a manicure and have their cancers cured with stories.

In contrast, the Territories in *bird* do not grant the Indigenous people more freedom than the society they previously lived in. After the Dakotas were declared 'INDIAN again' (Jones, 2003: 170) in a radio broadcast—a plot element reminiscent of *Heirs*, where Stone Columbus declares his bingo ship a sovereign nation over late night radio—its Indigenous inhabitants moved there voluntarily, it seems, in a migratory period of historical dimensions later called the 'Skin Parade' (14). Yet the Territories are not a sanctuary; the inhabitants feel trapped and hopeless. After the borders were closed, it is hinted, suicide became a mass phenomenon: '[t]he year after the parade, twenty percent of the population was floating dead in bathtubs.'

(122) One night, a young Native woman called Courtney Peltdowne walks along the border fence and the atmosphere is laden with loneliness and dread. 'And at night, the Territories are so empty. She understands why Scab Boy [LP Deal] never goes outside. She walks along the fence all the way back to the trailer, holding on so she won't disappear' (23). The implication that losing touch with the world surrounding the Territories—symbolized by the border fence—could make Courtney disappear reveals the origin of her dread: she is afraid of being sucked into the homogeneous mass of Indigenous people in the Territories where she becomes practically invisible because '[e]verything that used to set Courtney apart is standard now—skin, hair, mannerisms; history' (22).

What Courtney feels is the weight of a traumatic history of colonization shared by all the inhabitants of the Territories, a collective pain threatening to stifle her. Utopianism or 'social dreaming' (Sargent, 2004: 207) is a way of dealing with this weight, and is a major concern of Indigenous North American literatures. As Lawrence Gross has pointed out, Indigenous people 'have seen the end of our worlds' (2002: 449). Colonial wars and ideology alongside enduring neo-colonial forms of oppression have damaged Indigenous cultures and caused deep-seated, transgenerational trauma. Nevertheless, like many cultures that survived catastrophe, Indigenous people imagine decolonization and alternate societies in their stories:

> There are no Indian cultures in the United States that remain wholly unaffected by the presence of Euro-Americans … In effect, the old world of our ancestors has come to an end … This is not to say that the worldview that previously informed the cultures has also become defunct. It simply means that American Indians are in the process of building new worlds—worlds that are true to our history but cognizant of present realities. (Gross, 2002: 449)

The reader's past and present arguably play important roles in literary utopias: they serve as social and political models against which utopia's radical difference is measured. As postcolonial forms of utopia—'[t]he term refers to post-invasion rather than post-independence' (Ashcroft, 2012: 1)—Indigenous utopias reconnect with the past as a way to recover from colonial trauma. As Bill Ashcroft points out, 'the

relation between memory and the future … is deeply relevant to postcolonial writing'; and '[i]ntraditional postcolonial societies the radically new is always embedded in and transformed by the past' (2012: 6–7). Rather than the wish to live in the past, this foregrounding of memory and history embodies the Blochian desire to build a better world, or as Sidner Larson has it, to turn past and present into foundations for 'a better-imagined future' (2000: 18): '[w]hile utopias are often set in the future, utopianism cannot exist without the operation of memory … [M]emory is not about recovering a past that was present but about the production of possibility' (Ashcroft, 2012: 6–7). Indigenous utopias are not simply pleasurable speculation, but address the very serious question of survival in light of colonial trauma.

With *bird*, Jones has not merely created a social satire akin to Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* (*BNW*) (2007), in which the New Mexican reservation is merely a metaphor for bygone times and as such part of a point Huxley is making about Euro-American society. In contrast, reservations in *bird* imply a history of colonial oppression that is foregrounded, rather than glossed over. Utopia in *bird* thus has a historical dimension that is absent from Huxley's famous novel, nor in any other literary utopia that uncritically embeds colonial structures and tropes.

Superficially, *bird* and *BNW* appear to do the same thing: both criticize trends in the authors' respective contemporaneous culture and society and imagine worlds in which these trends dominate life—according to Lucy Sargisson a key component of 'dystopias,' where the 'core "wrongs"' of the present 'are stretched to nightmarish extremes', rather than being 'transformed for the better' (2012: 13). Industrialization, modernism's implicit economic religion, becomes the literal religion in *BNW* where people pray to 'Our Ford' (Atwood, 2007: xii). In *bird*, Indigenous separatists are mocked. The 'traditionalists', those who had been arguing that the absolute separation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous lives constitutes the only possible decolonization, struggle to adapt to the new world order in the Territories: 'the traditionalists … —the pullbacks—were the old people clinging to their microwaves and satellite dishes, while the progressives were out in the grassland with their travois and dogs … refusing even the horses that followed them around' (Jones, 2003: 32). The separatists' extremism is thus portrayed as laughably naïve. Most

importantly, both novels represent an 'Indian' reservation that, for the outside world, appears like an exotic enclave of bygone times, but in reality is a place of entrapment and squalor; a veritable ghetto in the midst of a thriving technological world. Significantly, white tourists disappear in both places: Linda, the mother of John Savage in *BNW* is discovered on an Indigenous reservation decades after she vanished in the New Mexican desert, while a group of forty tourists inexplicably goes missing in *bird*.

However, the novels differ in their treatment of Indigeneity and history. Like the reservation, Indigeneity itself is a metaphor in *BNW* made to challenge notions of savagery and civilization: traditional values of Huxley's times, from monogamy to motherhood, are declared savage in *BNW* which 'was first conceived as a satire on the global diffusion of the American way of life' (Bradshaw, 2007: xx). In *BNW*, the obsolete nature of traditional values is emphasized by their association with Indigenous people who, according to conventional colonial code, represent bygone times. In contrast, this code is subverted in *bird* where popular stereotypes of Indigenous people are mocked: from contact lenses to bows and arrows, Indigeneity in the Territories is a disguise, fabricated to fit America's stereotypes of Native people. Stereotypes addressed in this manner in *bird* include the belief that all Natives have long black hair, hence those with brown or blonde hair must dye it black or cover it up with a wig; and that all Natives hunt buffalo and eat meat, which is why Courtney is forced to give up her vegetarianism after moving to the Territories. Furthermore, Natives are said to be disproportionately afflicted with diabetes and conjunctivitis, which is why *bird* opens with the statement that '*pink eye was all the rage*' (Jones, 2003: 11; emphasis in original), and diabetes becomes synonymous with an Indigenous identity.[3]

On the surface, then, the Dakotas are 'Indian again' because they look 'Indian.' Federal Agent Chassis Jones, a blonde white woman of Native ancestry sent undercover into the Territories to investigate the disappearance of the US-American

---

[3] The glossary defines diabetes as follows: '**diabetes**—*n.*, *Pathol.* as Eddie Dial says: '"when I can smell the sugar in my urine, I know then that I'm my father's son, that I'm INDIAN."' (Jones, 2003: 165).

tourists, dons a black wig, inserts brown contacts and applies eye drops that give her the desired conjunctivitis look; she thus single-handedly fakes her Indigenous identity. The glossary significantly defines '**Indian** (inˈdēən)' as 'a mode of dress' (166), suggesting along with many Indigenous scholars such as Vizenor, Philip and Thomas King that '[t]he *indian* is the invention, and *indian* cultures are simulations, that is, the ethnographic construction of a model that replaces the real in most academic references' (Vizenor & Lee, 1999: 85 cf. King, 2013: 53–55). Like the West's invention of the Orient, the 'Indian' is a colonial invention, and the term itself an 'occidental misnomer' (Vizenor, 1999: vii); an artificial 'entity that would stand for the whole' (King, 2013: 82), giving hundreds of different nations 'a definitive and manageable form' (Ibid.).

The utopian future world is purely speculative in *BNW*, a parody of Huxley's times; John Savage appears like a time traveler from the past marveling at the 'brave new world' (Huxley, 2007) outside of his reservation. The 'Indian' discovering white civilization rather than vice versa is a humorous, but not necessarily a subversive trope. In contrast, utopia in *bird* has a revisionist agenda: Jones's novel reveals historical horrors and criticizes seemingly harmless stereotypes, the endurance of which is entwined with economic interests. The Territories are marketed as the last enclave of pure nature and uncorrupted ancient civilization, and the inhabitants are exploited by companies. The harm this exploitation causes is exemplified by the desperate act of a character called Cat Stand who, as a girl, had been the face of a successful US-American milk commercial. In a country that associates Indigeneity with a pure state of nature, buyers would then, by extension, project these characteristics onto the milk in the commercial—the same way viewers of the 'Keep America Beautiful' ads against pollution were supposed to consider the teary-eyed non-Native actor Iron Eyes Cody as a representative of Indigenous people and therefore part of a fragile, natural environment. Cat is forced to drink up to 'seventy-five glasses before the shot was just right' (Jones, 2003: 34) even though she is lactose-intolerant, and after a while she makes a desperate attempt to escape: in an act symbolic of the forced whitewashing of Native culture she downs a glass of bleach. Even though she survives, she is left mute and subsequently unable to speak out against her rapist, a metaphor

for the many unheard, abused and silenced Native women in US-American history, on and off reservations.[4] The image also expresses how a childhood in a system of colonial assimilationist abuse (symbolized by the bleach) can make people much more vulnerable to further harm later in life (such as domestic violence and rape). The irony, however, is also evident: even in (attempted) suicide, Cat cannot escape the role of representative of her culture; she will be read as an Indigenous signifier regardless of her own wishes.

Indigenous utopia in *bird* thus dislodges the utopian tradition. Offering a critique of contemporary society, this form of utopia is explicitly concerned with the ongoing violence of colonial history. *bird* evokes the historical oppression and exploitation of Native peoples in the US as a way to deal with trauma, evaluate historical events and imagine resistance. The speculative reimagination of Native stereotypes and quest for meaningful ways to articulate trauma through narrative is a premise for a better, decolonial future, i.e. a future in which the effects of genocide and ethnic cleansing, theft of land and knowledge, and systematic corrosion of communities will, ideally, be undone. As Dillon notes, 'the histories of Native peoples cannot be forgotten in the rewriting of utopian futures' (2016: 352). Not surprisingly, *bird* shows utopia at the border: using a familiar Western narrative form to discuss Indigenous history and futures also means exploring the limits of a genre that has itself been associated with Western progress and colonial ventures into Indigenous land. By directing the gaze to the margins of the literary canon where Arnold Krupat (1989) has famously located Indigenous voices, *bird* investigates how Indigenous literatures should treat utopia. Jones's novel gives insight into the possibilities and pitfalls by suggesting that the important question is not how the alternate all-Indigenous society in the Indian Territories functions, but how utopia itself functions: if the Territories are utopia—then whose utopia are they?

------

[4] As Verena Adamik has pointed out to me, both bleach and milk are liquids laden with a symbolic sexual meaning and thus foreshadow Cat's rape. In this context, they take up the metaphor of colonialism as a rape of Native cultures that especially plays out in the exploitation of the bodies of Native women. For a discussion of the colonial metaphor of the New World as female (think, for instance, of Henry Nash Smith's 'Virgin land') awaiting the male explorer's penetration and thus providing the discourse to legitimize the actual rape and abuse of Native women, see Lewes (1993).

## Dislodging Utopia: Utopianism and the American Indian Removal Act

Of course, the question of whose utopia is not hard to answer. The Territories are the Western world's utopian dream of Indigeneity. They offer refuge to a society the West has deemed simpler, more fragile, and antithetical to their own fast-paced capitalist culture. The creation of the Territories thus has a distinct colonial flavor. *bird's* glossary links it with the long history of colonial legislations against Indigenous people:

> **Conservation Act**—n., Hist. the accidental solution to the 'Indian Problem' (under pressure from Keep America Beautiful, the American Congress signed into law an aggressive bill requiring "the restoration of all indigenous flora and fauna to the Great Plains." As wildlife biologists soon pointed out, though, for a disturbance-dependent landscape to regain anything approaching self-sufficiency—to say nothing of momentum—the reintroduced grass (*buchloë dactyloides*) needed buffalo (*bison bison*) to "disturb" it, and, just as the prairie dog (*cynomys ludovicianus*) needed the disturbance of the blackfooted ferret (*mustela nigripes*), so did the burgeoning herds of reintroduced buffalo need the INDIAN (*canis latrans*)). (Jones, 2003: 164)

Jones foregrounds the colonial logic of US-American laws such as the Civilization Fund Act (1819), the Dawes Act (1887), and the American Indian Removal Act (1830). Feigning scientific interest, Congress voted a 'solution to the Indian problem' into law—a phrasing used in the context of US-American colonial legislation that prefigured Nazi Germany's justification for genocide. The 'Indian problem' here refers to the alleged lack of self-sufficiency of reservations and their continued economic dependency on the federal government. The 1917 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a government institution entrusted with overseeing the creation and maintenance of American Indian reservations, notes an increase in agrarian produce and 'cultivated land' on US-American reservations in the years 1916/17. It deduces that 'the Indian will be a substantial factor in increasing the country's food supply'. This, they state,

'will materially hasten the final solution to the Indian problem … for the
obvious reason that the Indians gradually achieve self-support and become
independent by means of their increased industrial activity and the better
business judgement employed in handling and disposing of their surplus
products' (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1917: 28).

As this report reveals, the colonial task of civilizing Indigenous people is driven more
economic interest than Christian mission. By evoking the BIA reports, Jones's fictional
by law reveals a long history of colonial thought according to which Indigenous
people are considered a part of the land to be dealt with to whichever end. Such
an approach spans the centuries from Columbus's journal of his 1492 landfall in
the New World to the Keep America Beautiful campaign in the second half of the
twentieth century.

Rather than the 'leave-us-alone agreement' Vine Deloria Jr. demanded in his 1969
manifesto *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1988: 28), the Conservation Act implements
President Andrew Jackson's American Indian Removal policy, instated with the
passing of the American Indian Removal Act in 1830. Reservations were the end
product of Removal, a process that was supposed to clear the land for settlers and
relocate Indigenous nations further West. 'Indian Territory/Territories' is not Jones's
invention. It is a term frequently used in legal documents, for instance in bills passed
by US Congress, to designate the region beyond US state borders to which Indigenous
people were being removed throughout the 19th century. Forced Removal resulted
in long-distance marches that a substantial part of the Indigenous population
did not survive, such as the Cherokee Trail of Tears (1838/39) or the Navajo Long
Walk (1863/64). Federal laws subsequently prohibited Natives from leaving the
reservation.[5] As James Dickerson has argued, reservations were precursors to modern
concentration camps in the US:

---

[5] An act passed during the Forty-Fourth United States Congress in 1876 states, for instance, about the
'Apaches of Arizona and New Mexico' ('Act', 1876: 195) that 'the Commissioner of Indian Affairs shall
direct that said Indians shall not be allowed to leave their proper reservations; and … rations shall not
be issued for a longer period than one week at a time' ('Act', 1876: 195).

> 'It was the first time that federal law acknowledged that white citizens had rights that could not be applied to persons of color … It was also the first federal law to allow internment based on race or ethnic origin and the first to establish a legal basis for restrictive concentration camps' (2010: 23).

King has noted that the federal government went about removing tribes as if they were 'redecorating a very large house' (2013: 97) and moving Indigenous people around the country like 'furniture' (2013: 82). Removal, however, was only a temporary solution:

> Of course, moving Indians around was not enough. Native people were always in the way, always under foot. God knows North America spent a great deal of time and money—Allotment in 1887, Termination and Relocation in the 1950s, Termination once again in the late 1960s, but this time in Canada—trying to find places to put them. (King, 2013: 98)

Under the guise of reversing colonization, the fictional Conservation Act thus perfects it. The Territories constitute the consummate form of American Indian Removal policy: relocated to two of the least populous states, Indigenous nations have arrived at their final, government-mandated destination. During her investigation, Agent Chassis Jones moreover comes across what seems to be the remainder of another kind of forced removal. At the edge of '**Two Burn Flat**', the 'barren, ashen region surrounding FOOL'S HIP' (Jones, 2003: 172), the detective discovers 'shells in the gravel of the parking lot [of a liquor store], all spiraling the same way' (71) and 'a federal [bullet] hole in each side' of a 'faded red truck in the display case' (72)—remainders of grand social upheavals dating back to the creation of the Territories. While millions of Indigenous people crossed the border into the new Territories, white families seem to have been forcefully removed from the Dakotas. Among them, apparently, was Enil Anderson, a white US-American citizen who later visits the Territories and becomes one of the forty missing tourists. When Chassis Jones inspects Enil's house in the border region she comes upon old photographs with cryptic captions, and a suicide on the living room couch: Enil's wife Trudy seems

to have shot herself. The son is nowhere to be found. Chassis Jones concludes that Enil must have known or understood something: 'He had never planned on coming home' (73).

The mystery behind Enil's trip to the Territories, his disappearance and eventual re-appearance as a dried-out corpse impaled on a stake on the roof of Fool's Hip gradually lifts while the reader detects, bit by bit, the grand, historical scheme behind the Conservation Act: the forced Removal and total separation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is inseparably linked with US-American national identity and, it is hinted, US-American prosperity in *bird.* The Skin Parade is defined as 'a TRICK to get all the INDIANS in one place' (172). The alleged natural order of things according to which the 'Indians' are an inherent part of the untouched landscape is revealed to be a colonial lie, locking Indigenous people in an outdoor-museum the size of two states: '"This isn't a reservation", I [i.e. Chassis Jones] told him, an introduction. "Petting zoo", he said back quietly, in his clipped way. It was what America called it—us; the Indian Territories' (45). Like Litmus Jones in Stephen Graham Jones's debut novel *The Fast Red Road* (2000), detective Chassis Jones is one of many in-text alter egos of the author himself. In this function, her mission is to uncover hidden mechanisms and lay them bare for the reader to see. In an episode called 'Red Dawn' Chassis Jones notes that, rather than setting the land back to a pre-colonial default state, the creation of the Territories is colonial history repeating itself in an endless circle:

> Pink eye was all the rage. All the Councilmen had it for the [AllSkin basketball] tournament. They were so Indian the anthropologists launched themselves past with catapults, shutters clicking. It was like a plague of locusts. They [presmably the Councilmen, although this is ambiguous'] didn't look up, though, didn't even smile. The way they held their shoulders said they'd seen it all before, but they hadn't. Not Fool's Hip anyway. (Jones, 2003: 145)

A colonial logic seems to pertain to the utopian belief in perfectibility, radical purity, and spatial separatism.

Of course, utopia itself has moved on from these notions. While Zygmunt Bauman postulated in 1976 that '[i]t was … this idea of perfectibility which paved the way for utopia' (1976: 18–19), Sargent rejects the concept altogether, stating that '[v]ery few actual utopias make any pretence to perfection' (2010b: 104). The heterogeneity of utopia is precisely what makes it a viable concept for Indigenous writers. After all, 'the form itself is suited to the sort of discourse which considers both what is and what is not yet achieved' (Moylan, 2014: 3). As Sargent points out, postcolonial writers make use of the larger concept to lay bare colonial structures while negotiating the possibility of a utopian future created on their own terms (Sargent, 2010a: 213–14). Aware of the fact that 'the whole process of colonial settlement can be seen as a type of utopianism' (Sargent, 2010a: 202), *bird* represents the colonial utopia of American Indian reservations as more than dystopia for Native people. The Territories are a colonial reality and, even though their specific shape is a fictional construct, in *bird* there is nothing hypothetical or speculative about their horrors.

By showing that Indian Removal itself bears the traits of a utopian project, Jones's story irrevocably alters readers' view of history itself. In his Fifth Annual Message to Congress, on 3ʳᵈ December 1833, President Jackson clothed the colonial ideologies of the 'white man's burden' and the 'Vanishing American' into the language of utopianism:

> That those tribes cannot exist surrounded by our settlements and in continual contact with our citizens is certain. They have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race, and without appreciating the causes of their inferiority or seeking to control them, they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear.
>
>     Such has been their fate heretofore, and if it is to be averted—and it is—it can only be done by a general removal beyond our boundary and by the reorganization of their political system upon principles adapted to the

new relations in which they will be placed. The experiment which has been
recently made has so far proved successful. (Jackson, 1833)

From calling Removal a social and political 'experiment,' to outlining the necessity for
borders, spatial separation, and the 'reorganization' of Indigenous social and political
institutions, Jackson weds colonial ideology with the utopian plan for a 'radically
different' community in his speech, i.e. a homogeneous and easily manageable
Native community that would fit into the larger scheme of US economic interests.

The existence of the Territories is crucial for the US-American self-image: they
constitute a part of a purer past, a pastoral idyll that according to the logic of Manifest
Destiny had to give way to progress and civilization. Its preservation provides American
civilization with historical depth. On crossing the border into the Territories, then,
tourists are permitted a rare glimpse into the past. The glossary thus defines 'border'
as 'the looking glass' (Jones, 2003: 164). Like Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through
the Looking Glass*, the visitors encounter a strange and exotic fantasy world in which
everything is reverse—or, in this case, seemingly chronologically reversed. The fact
that only a small number of them are granted visas—and only to visit the border
towns—further contributes to the myth. Without tangible information about life in
the Territories, Americans are free to project their dreams of utopia onto them.

US-American political utopianism is revealed to be interlinked with the colonial
policy of Indian Removal: Andrew Jackson's reservations are the eutopias of the
US-American collective imaginary that Jones's novel criticizes as abusive, exploitative
and unhuman. Rather than depicting a 'non-existent society' (Sargent, 2004: 207),
however, Jones extrapolates from the nightmarish reality of Jackson's experiment.
Like the band of Sioux journeying through a barren landscape in the 1850s and 1860s,
in the chapter 'Indian Corn,' the Natives at Fool's Hip suffer from the consequences
of land theft and forced Removal. The dysfunction caused by transgenerational
trauma triggers suicides, PTSD, rape, murder, and domestic abuse, raising the
question of essence within this hollowed-out utopian dream. While piecing together
the puzzle of the vanishing Americans—in this case the white tourists—the reader
finds themselves asking whether utopia can be Indigenous at all.

## Renewing Utopia: Removal to the Signifier

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Anishinaabe writer George Copway developed a 'scheme' (Copway, 1851: 99) for a pan-Indigenous utopian state called Kahgega that he 'promoted … on his trip to Europe, and mentioned frequently in [his] book' (Lyons, 2017: 164) *Running Sketches of Men and Places, in England, France, Germany, Belgium, and Scotland* (1851). As Scott Richard Lyons explains, the name Kahgega is possibly a play on Copway's Indigenous name Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh and the Anishinaabemowin word '*kaagega*' meaning 'forever' (2017: 164). This utopian nation would gather '"the Indians who are already partly civilized"' into one large state, 'a permanent homeland' located '"between the falls of St. Anthony and the West of Minasotah" [*sic.*]—in other words, Dakota territory' (Lyons, 2017: 164). Considering the complexity of historical references in *bird*, I interpret the striking similarity of Jones's Indian Territories to Copway's nineteenth century Indigenous utopian model as more than coincidental. A more profound comparative discussion of the two models would be interesting but cannot be attempted in this article. Suffice it to say that Jones's book stands in the tradition of at least one Indigenous utopian model that has been heavily attacked for its perceived roots in nineteenth century US-American colonial politics: 'Kahgega is typically characterized as Copway's "removal" scheme, but … it is more accurately described as a colonization plan because its endgame was an Indian state' (Lyons, 2017: 164).

Lyons's comment on Copway's utopia evokes the paradox Jones foregrounds in his book: a radically decolonized, separatist Indigenous nation involves a potentially violent (re-)colonization of colonial territory; the vision of a perfect all-Indigenous state moreover sounds eerily like the 'endgame' of colonial segregationist politics. Karl Hardy has pointed out that 'utopia appears, at best, a controversial notion with respect to Indigenous peoples' (2012: 134). A long history of colonial oppression in the US, fueled by settler colonial utopian desires, seems to make the literary trope unusable for Indigenous people. Indeed, when they do make use of it they are suspected, like Copway, to be reproducing colonial ideologies. On an aesthetic level, Jones, like many other Indigenous writers, thus grapples with the problem of representing an Indigenous-centered better world with colonial tools. From

Western literary tropes like utopia to the English language itself, the range of representations available is inseparably linked with colonial discourses. Like Vizenor, Jones turns to narrative experimentation as a way to solve this problem. Deborah Madsen's analysis of Vizenor's aesthetic program might hence be applied to Jones as well:

> Old words cannot express an original view of the world. Vizenor cannot use a language of colonial dominance and submission in order to articulate his view of social justice; he cannot deploy the mythology of European 'discovery' and American 'expansion' to describe the legacy of genocide that has devastated tribal communities … and he cannot articulate his vision of the future as 'survivance' (his term for resistant survival of tribal people) with a language of victimry. (Madsen, 2009: 1)

Jones likewise renews the 'language of victimry' with humor and a narrative mode Vizenor has called *trickster discourse*. Trickster discourse or trickster hermeneutics refers to a tricky subversion of the colonial rhetoric that is humorous, self-aware and resists absolute definitions. In this context, the trickster, as Vizenor has remarked, is not a character; it is the text itself that teases the reader with open endings and ambiguity. In contrast to the conventional hermeneutic of a text, trickster hermeneutics thus lead the reader astray. Rather than proceeding toward one unequivocal reading of the text, the reader backtracks, moving in the opposite direction, away from the center of the hermeneutic spiral and toward multiple endings and possibilities.

Applying trickster discourse in his own writing at all times, Vizenor has given multiple definitions of the concept. He has noted, for instance, that '[t]he tribal trickster is a liberator and a healer in a narrative, a comic sign' (1993a: 187); and that '[t]he trickster … is a comic and communal sign, a discourse in a narrative with no hope or tragic promises' (1993b: 12). The trickster is thus an abstract textual entity, a semiotic sign consisting of letters or sound chain (signifier) and meaning (signified) that meddles with its textual surrounding. In a poststructural sense, the trickster sign causes shifts and constant movement in the meaning on the page. Pinpointing

an absolute meaning, or essence thus becomes impossible. As Vizenor has pointed out, '[f]reedom is a sign, and the trickster is chance and freedom in a comic sign; comic freedom is a "doing," not an essence, not a museum being, not an aesthetic presence' (1993b: 13). In the speculative literatures of Indigenous survivance, trickster discourse draws attention to the fact that colonial stereotypes and racist names are not *the truth.* They are first and foremost representation, and by meddling with language they can be subverted.

Connected with the renewal of language is a renewal of genre. By 'indigenizing' utopia, Jones innovates a genre or generic trope that relies on fresh literary material. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson argues that as a genre dedicated to radical newness utopia faces a representational paradox since 'even a noplace must be put together out of already existing representations' (2005: 24). This 'crisis' inherent in utopia is reminiscent of Indigenous writers' attempts to create a different de-colonial world with 'old words,' i.e. with familiar representations that have their fixed place in the sign system and already carry colonial connotations. Arriving at radical difference with traditional tools seems an impossible endeavor. Similarly to Vizenor, Jameson concludes that our gaze must be directed toward the level of form and signs. With representations of utopia, '[a]ny discussion of utopia must be shifting the discussion of Utopia from content to representation as such' (2005: xiii). However, representation carries a negative connotation in *Archaeologies*: Jameson considers an 'obsession' with processes of meaning production as postmodern cynicism (Jameson, 2005: 370, 212).

In order to 'unsettle … utopia' (Hardy, 2012: 134)—Hardy's term for the decolonization of utopian discourses and a re-imagination of utopian space on Indigenous terms—Jones's trickster discourse renews utopia by unburdening representation from the task to depict perfection (distribute absolute values) and mediate the truth (distribute unequivocal meaning). As such, Jones's novel fits into the contemporary genre of critical utopias that, according to Tom Moylan, '[negate] the negation of utopia … A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition' (Moylan, 2014: 10). Rather than rejecting utopia point blank, *bird*, to borrow Moylan's words, 'rejects utopia as a blueprint

while preserving it as a dream' (Moylan, 2014: 10). Or, to slightly shift the core of Moylan's argument: *bird* rejects the particular US-American brand of utopianism as fraught with colonial ideology, while suggesting that utopia is yet possible. It subverts 'that tyrannical "reality principle"' (Jameson, 2005: 270) and acknowledges, along with Jameson, that 'literary Utopia is "a determinate type of [textual/literary] praxis"' rather than 'a mode of representation' (Fitting, 1998: 10). In *bird*, the readers' attention is directed from the borderland surrounding the Territories on the level of content to the borders of representation, i.e. to that imagined space on the level of signs and signifiers where meaning begins to slip away. Any decolonization of utopia, *bird* suggests, must start here. The glossary has a significant role in this undertaking. It gives made-up definitions in alphabetical order, such as '**Vanishing Indians**—1. masters of camouflage' (Jones, 2003: 172), '**Mayflower**—casino resort just inside the TERRITORIES —*n.*, *Estab.* **2.** major American getaway —*n. Touris.*' (Ibid.: 168) or '**happy hunting grounds**— *n.*, *Geog.*, *Psychol.* the fifteenth century' (Ibid.: 166). By attributing a new signified, i.e. new meaning, to signifiers such as 'Vanishing Indians', the entire sign is dissolved from its fixed place in colonial discourse. 'Vanishing Indians' no longer solely refers to the tragic trope according to which the '[t]he demise of Indians was seen as a tenet of natural law, which favoured the strong and eliminated the weak' (King, 2013: 60). Rather, the phrase now has a humorous connotation: Jones's definition suggests that vanishment is merely a surface appearance. In reality, Indigenous cultures have changed, and now look unlike the Native persons in colonial ethnographic photographs. What King called 'a working part of North American mythology' (2013: 60) is thus subverted as the term 'Vanishing Indians' takes on multiple meanings.

The humor of Jones's definitions moreover has a vital role. Laughter is healing and subversive, and is considered an important means of decolonization. As Deloria states, '[w]hen a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive' (1988: 167). Vizenor has similarly noted that '[t]he tribes have seldom been honored for their trickster stories and rich humor. The resistance to tribal humor is a tragic flaw' (1999: 83). Trickster discourse can

evoke subversive laughter, for instance when the reader, puzzled by the recurring statement that 'Pink eye was all the rage' (Jones 2003: 145), looks up '**pink eye**', only to be referred back to the main text: '*n.*, *Pharm.*, *Pathol.*, *Socio.* all the rage' (170). The reader is thus directed back and forth across the chapters and, rather than clear meaning, encounters contradictory definitions and ambiguities. 'Pink eye' consequently becomes integrated into a trickster code that consists of colonial terms such as 'Vanishing Indians,' historical terms such as 'Columbus Day' ('*n.*, *Hist.* 21 May' [164]), and a series of neologisms only meaningful within Jones's texts. Representational structures are thus opened through new semantic connections.

The meaning of historical signifiers shifts, while even newly coined words such as Red Alert, Red Dawn or Tabula Rosa escape clear definition. Jones, for instance, gives two explanations for '**Skin Parade**' of which only the first one makes sense in the context of *bird*: '**1.** the mass exodus following the RED ALERT —*n. Hist.* **2.** a chain of topless bars in Florida, America —*n.* **Syn. 1.** Red Tide, RED DAWN, Red Shift; Red Cloud, Red Wind, Red Scare, Relocation' (171). What could be a grave historical signifier pointing toward an event of epic dimensions in *bird* is immediately subverted with a second, comical definition. The list of synonyms, on the one hand, leads the reader further astray. On the other, the term 'relocation' forges a meaningful connection between the fictional Territories and Indian Removal. Jones's humorous definitions thus in no way ridicule the seriousness of historical trauma and the horrors of genocide. Rather, by providing parallel meanings, Jones creates the possibility of alternate readings as a way out of what his characters perceive as the oppressive weight of Indigenous history.

With his glossary, Jones mocks the practice of defining terms and cataloguing historical events. Rather than making a postmodern point about the impossibility of historical documentation or the utter pointlessness of literature per se, Jones dislodges a major means of colonial oppression: ethnographic documents and BIA reports contributed to the colonial surveillance of Indigenous peoples. Jones's humorous definitions thus not only self-consciously question the possibility of defining Indigeneity but, as Birgit Däwes has pointed out, also question the legitimacy of the dominant historical discourse that is deeply intertwined with

colonial tropes such as the Vanishing Indian/American or Manifest Destiny. '*The Bird is Gone* … destabilizes linear hierarchies of chronology and thus radically challenges previously established discourses—both of Western historical knowledge and of reading and making meaning as such—in the interest of an indigenous hermeneutics of survivance' (Däwes, 2016: 113).

Ashcroft argues that due to a colonial occupation of Indigenous lands, postcolonial utopian literature irrevocably widens the notion of place: 'in much postcolonial writing the idea of utopia can be an image of possibility in place. This "place" may not be location but the metaphoric site of freedom itself' (2012: 8). Corina Kesler similarly argues that:

> [i]n addition to experimenting with the tropes of the genre and the language of the previous colonizer, they [i.e. non-Western utopian traditions] have to spatially relocate the utopian paradigm. Because such novels are still inspired by the Western idea of locality, they have to 'discover' new lands and islands for their imagined communities. (Kesler, 2012: 90)

Through this reading of *bird*, I would argue that the space of experimentation can be exactly that 'contested space' on which postcolonial writers 'impose … alternative realities, or uchronias' as well as 'the locales for culturally-relevant intopias' (Kesler, 2012: 90). With his trickster discourse, Jones 'goes far beyond mere reappropriations of historical events' (Däwes, 2016: 113). In *bird*, he creates a radically different mode of representing Indigenous-centered history and reality. In analogy to the glossary where definitions accumulate and words fray into multiple strands of meaning, every single episode of *bird* contains the plot and artistic program as a *mise-en-abîme* of the entire book. The opening chapter entitled 'Ten Little Indians,' for instance, is subdivided into character sketches of LP Deal, Cat Stand, Courtney Peltdowne and others, out of which the reader can piece together the history of the Territories. A subsequent chapter set in the nineteenth century is narrated chronologically and subdivided into years. It follows a different set of characters but seems to tell the same story. The landscape is reminiscent of '**Two Burn Flat**' and colonial history comes full circle: the two chapters give the reader

glimpses of the Dakotas before and after they were the Dakotas. Although more than a century apart, these old and new Indian Days are directly connected. The traumatic journey of the band of 'probably Sioux' (Jones, 2003: 53) Natives post Removal, across a foreign landscape on the verge of suicide and starvation, has directly impacted the characters in the Territories. The knowledge that not much has changed fills Cat with resignation; Courtney with fear; a failed basketball coach called Owen 82 (Owen = 0 win) with hopelessness; and LP Deal with anger and plans of revolution that he clothes in a mask of disinterest. The chapter 'Make Him Dance' contains the retelling of an act of a play performed in *bird*—presumably *Susannah of the Mounties* that is listed in the appendix of Terms, written by Owen 82—that continues mediating Owen's understanding of history even after he shoots himself in the parking lot of Fool's Hip. 'Indian Burn' renders an oral story heard on radio, about a trickster character called Bacteen who time travels to undo colonialism but, in trademark trickster fashion, only succeeds in making everything worse. In 'Roses Are Red' the underlying mystery of *bird* is condensed into seven pages of stream-of-consciousness. In this central chapter, the mute Cat Stand becomes the epitome of her name. In a scene reminiscent of Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, Cat stands and starts spitting out a waterfall of words and sentences that contain the story of her suicide attempt and subsequent rape, articulating what cannot be articulated. The chapters differ in typeface and type size, further fragmenting the narrative. Inserted between them are the bathroom stall etchings that LP Deal, as a Fool's Hip employee, has to erase during his shift, but he often answers instead:

> *why don't you grow your hair like a real Indian?*
>
> because i'm not.
>
> (Jones, 2003: 119)

*bird* thus consists of pieces of texts and phrases that dissolve the linear narration and interfere with the reader's attempt to figure out the mystery of the vanished tourists. As Jones has noted, *bird* represents his attempt to tell the same story in as many different ways as possible:

> A group of characters cycling through, trying different configurations in order to reach a successful ending to the story—that really is attractive to me. I did that again [after *The Fast Red Road*] in *The Bird Is Gone*, and tried to tell the same story, but in a totally different way. And really, *The Bird Is Gone* is probably my favorite novel I've written. It's the only one that matched up with my original conception of the book. Even with the typesetting, everything matched up … I tried to tell the story of *The Fast Red Road* again with *The Bird Is Gone* and I thought it was a success, but then people read it and thought it was a hodgepodge novel, like a quilt, sewn together from different scraps of junk. (Jones & Stratton, 2016: 47–8)

What early readers thus perceived as a clumsy attempt at telling a story is an aesthetic strategy. Where linear narrative fails because it cannot mediate the characters' complex vision of reality, Jones's 'quilt' is able to capture their back-and-forth-movement across history that is a premise for understanding colonial trauma, while simultaneously showing them a way out of the oppressive legacy of the past. No longer trapped at the level of content, the Native characters of *bird* become characters on the page: they dissolve into the text where they forever escape the stasis of fixed meaning.

The self-referentiality of utopia is not a representational dead-end. Rather, it makes us realize that on our quest for a 'radically more perfect community,' we have been setting our expectations on the wrong portion of the text. By indigenizing utopia, *bird* removes utopia from the level of content to the level of signifiers, replacing the desire for perfection with semantic openness. This removal is best exemplified with the book's very title. *the bird is gone*: *a ~~monograph~~ manifesto* contains a *sous rature*, a technique conceptualized by French poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, and frequently used by Jones. Writing *sous rature*, or '"under erasure"' (Spivak, 1997: xiv), means crossing out a word but leaving the crossed-out part there on the page, as a monument to the dysfunctional aspect in representation. As Gayatri Spivak explains, '[s]ince the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible' (1997: xiv). In analogy, the word ~~monograph~~ in the subtitle is inaccurate and

therefore crossed out. However, since it is necessary, it remains legible. Jones's use of *sous rature* imbues the title with depth: it encourages the reader to trace the author's thought process in crossing out a part of the title. Wrapped into the space between 'monograph' and 'manifesto,' then, is a multitude of possible meanings.

The *sous rature* visualizes the path the reader must walk to arrive at the recognition that manifesto is a more accurate term for *bird*. The line visualizes the representational border in language, already suggesting that the level of signifiers has a significant share in the plot. Therein lies the program of the monograph manifesto, and the title already tells us to consider form and content in equal parts. In fact, LP Deal's mysterious manifesto that is frequently referred to in the story seems to be *bird* itself—or at least a precursor to *bird*. It contains, for instance, the bathroom stall etchings that LP 'copies … into his manifesto' (Jones, 2003: 15), along with the transcripts of conversations he taped during his shifts at Fool's Hip. The fact that *bird* does not entirely fit the description of LP's manifesto, of course, is due to the manifesto's aesthetic program according to which accurate representation is impossible, an attempt pointless, and ambiguity is favored. The power of LP's manifesto thus consists precisely in its absence and the curiosity it piques in the other characters and the reader. LP's manifesto is his ticket out of the Territories. Like the characters at the end of Vizenor's *Bearheart* (who leave the world through a vision window in Pueblo Bonito, New Mexico, and start existing in the timeless oral tradition (Owens, 1990: 253)), the characters in *bird*, aware of their own textuality, can dissolve into the text where nothing is impossible, closure denied, and time non-linear. *bird* thus exemplifies that the only way out of the Territories is through structural innovation, narrative experimentation, and a 'thought experiment' on the reader's part, as John Gamber has pointed out (2016: 455). Only by dissolving colonial tropes; and subverting stereotyping and pigeonholing can repetitive historical patterns be broken and new worlds imagined – 'worlds that are true to our history but cognizant of present realities,' (Gross, 2002: 449). Indigenous literary utopia, then, can only ever exist in trickster stories, language games, and ironic subversions of history. It is an ever-shifting system of references that defies representation. As such it acts upon the reader and her world outside the text in anticipation of a better future.

*bird* suggests that Indigenous utopia does not consist in setting Indigenous communities back to a pre-colonial default state because colonialism is not reversible. Like the bird in the title of Jones's book, these utopian pre-Columbian times are gone: they vanished along with the '**passenger pigeon**' (Jones, 2003: 169), once the most numerous species of *bird* in the US, which was driven to extinction during the colonization of the West. The bird comes to a new, different existence as a textual signifier on the cover of Jones's novel, where the word reappears in a broken neon sign that says 'Thunderbird MOTEL'. *bird* becomes a subversive sign in a story of Indigenous utopia, an ambiguous signifier and trickster sign. Indigenous utopia in *bird* is thus the text itself. By teaching readers to embrace parallelism, not be frustrated at multiple endings, and consider alternate plots—in short, by mediating a way of thinking that would dissolve established representational structures— *bird* teaches the readers the very premise for a 'radically more perfect community.' As the final words of Jones's book suggest, utopia is an imagined better world beyond representation that starts where the story ends:

*is this how it begins?*

yes.

(*bird*: 161)

## Acknowledgements

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

**Alexie, S** 2005 Introduction. In: *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, pp. xi–xxii. New York: Grove Press.

**Ashcroft, B** 2012 Introduction: Spaces of Utopia. *Spaces of Utopia*: *An Electronic Journal*, 2nd ser., 1: 1–17. ler.letras.up.pt/site/default.aspx?qry=id05id174id26 40&sum=sim (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Atwood, M** 2007 Introduction. In: Huxley, A (Ed.), *Brave New World*, 1932, pp. vii–xvi. London: Vintage Books.

**Balasopoulos, A** 2004 Unworldly Worldliness: America and the Trajectories of Utopian Expansionism. *Utopian Studies*, 15(2): 3–35. *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/ stable/20718667 (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Bradshaw, D** 2007 Introduction. In: Huxley, A (Ed.), *Brave New World*, 1932, pp. xvii–xxvii. London: Vintage Books. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/ CCOL0521834759.001

**Bureau of Indian Affairs** 1917 *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1917*. UW Digital Collections. images.library.wisc.edu/History/EFacs/CommRep/AnnRep1517/ reference/history.annrep1517.i0003.pdf (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Byrd, J A** 2014 Red Dead Conventions: American Indian Transgeneric Fictions. In: Cox, J H and Justice, D H (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, pp. 344–58. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Copway, G** 1851 *Running Sketches of Men and Places, in England, France, Germany, Belgium, and Scotland.* New York: J. C. Riker, The Internet Archive. Available at: https://archive.org/details/runningsketches02copwgoog (Last accessed 5 February 2018).

**Däwes, B** 2016 "Back to Before All This, He Said": History, Temporality, and Knowledge in Stephen Graham Jones's *The Bird Is Gone.* In: Stratton, B, Jr. (Ed.), *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones*: *A Critical Companion*, pp. 111–31. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

**Deloria, V, Jr.** 1988 *Custer Died for Your Sins*: *An Indian Manifesto*, 1969. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

**Dickerson, J L** 2010 *Inside America's Concentration Camps*: *Two Centuries of Internment and Torture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

**Dillon, G L** (Ed.) 2012 *Walking the Clouds*: *An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

**Dillon, G L** 2016 Native Slipstream: Blackfeet Physics in *The Fast Red Road*. In: Stratton, B, Jr. (Ed.), *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones: A Critical Companion*, pp. 343–56. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

**Fitting, P** 1998 The Concept of Utopia in the Work of Fredric Jameson. *Utopian Studies*, 9(2): 8–17. *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/stable/20719758 (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Gamber, J** 2016 Native American Novels: The Renaissance, the Homing Plot, and Beyond. In: Madsen, D L (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, pp. 448–57. New York: Routledge.

**Gross, L W** 2002 The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion. *American Indian Quarterly*, 26(3): 436–59. *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/stable/4128493 (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Hardy, K** 2012 Unsettling Hope: Contemporary Indigenous Politics, Settler-Colonialism, and Utopianism. *Spaces of Utopia*: *An Electronic Journal*, 2nd ser., 1: 123–36. ler.letras.up.pt/site/default.aspx?qry=id05id174id2640&sum=sim (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Huxley, A** 2007 *Brave New World*, 1932. Kindle ed. London: Vintage Books.

**Jackson, A** 1833 Fifth Annual Message. 3 December 1833. *The American Presidency Project*. UC Santa Barbara. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29475 (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Jameson, F** 2005 *Archaeologies of the Future*: *The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso.

**Jones, S G** 2000 *The Fast Red Road*: *a plainsong*. Tallahassee, FL: Fiction Collective Two.

**Jones, S G** 2003 *the bird is gone*: *a ~~monograph~~ manifesto*. Tallahassee, FL: Fiction Collective 2.

**Jones, S G** 2016 Letter to a Just-Starting-Out Indian Writer—And Maybe to Myself. In: Stratton, B, Jr. (Ed.), *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones: A Critical Companion*, pp. xi–xvii. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

**Jones, S G** and **Stratton, B, Jr.** 2016 Observations on the Shadow Self: Dialogues with Stephen Graham Jones. In: Stratton, B, Jr. (Ed.), *The Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones: A Critical Companion*, pp. 14–59. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

**Kesler, C** 2012 Postcolonial Utopias or Imagining 'Brave New Worlds': Caliban Speaks Back. *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, 2nd ser., 1: 88–107. ler.letras.up.pt/site/default.aspx?qry=id05id174id2640&sum=sim (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**King, T** 2013 *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America.* Toronto: Anchor Books.

**Krupat, A** 1989 *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

**Larson, S** 2000 *Captured in the Middle: Tradition and Experience in Contemporary Native American Writing.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

**Lawrence, J** and **Jones, S G** 2011 Old Depraved Press Interview. *Demontheory.net*, 6 January. Available at: www.demontheory.net/old-depraved-press-interview-10/ (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Lewes, D** 1993 Nudes from Nowhere: Pornography, Empire, and Utopia. *Utopian Studies*, 4(2): 66–73.

**Lyons, S R** 2017 Migrations to Modernity: The Many Voices of George Copway's *Running Sketches of Men and Places, in England, France, Germany, Belgium, and Scotland.* In: Lyons (Ed.), *The World, the Text, and the Indian: Global Dimensions of Native American Literatures*, pp. 143–82. Albany, NY: University of New York Press.

**Madsen, D** 2009 *Understanding Gerald Vizenor.* Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

**Marouby, C** 1988 Utopian Colonialism. *North Dakota Quarterly*, 56(3–4): 148–60.

**Moylan, T** 2014 *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination.* New York: Peter Lang. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0353-0610-1

**Owens, L** 1990 Afterword. In: Vizenor, G (Ed.), *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, pp. 247–54. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

**Sargent, L T** 2004 Utopian Literature in the United States 1990–2000. In: Verheul, J (Ed.), *Dreams of Paradise, Visions of Apocalype: Utopia and Dystopia in American Culture*, pp. 207–19. Amsterdam: VU University Press.

**Sargent, L T** 2010a Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias. In: Claeys, G (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, pp. 200–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886659.009

**Sargent, L T** 2010b *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199573400.001.0001

**Sargisson, L** 2012 *Fool's Gold?: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137031075

**Spivak, G C** 1997 Translator's Preface. In: Derrida, J (Ed.), *Of Grammatology*, 1967, pp. ix–xc. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

**Suvin, D** 1979 *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

**The 44ᵗʰ Congress of the United States** 1876 Act making appropriations for the current and contingent expenses of the Indian Department … 15 Aug. 1876, 19 Stat., ch. 289, pp. 176–200. *Law Library of Congress*, Library of Congress. www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/44th-congress/session-1/c44s1ch289.pdf (Last accessed 4 June 2017).

**Vizenor, G** 1993a Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games. In: Vizenor, G (Ed.), *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, pp. 187–211. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

**Vizenor, G** 1993b A Postmodern Introduction. In: Vizenor, G (Ed.), *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, pp. 3–16. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

**Vizenor, G** 1999 *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, 1994. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

**Vizenor, G** and **Lee, A R** 1999 *Postindian Conversations.* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.