

## Days of Future Past: History, Memory, and Indigenous Futurism

Alternative history has long been part of speculative fiction, which is itself a broad term for genres including science fiction, fantasy, and the newer terms “futurism” and “the new Weird.” "Alternate History" looks at "what if" scenarios from history and presents an alternate version of how the world would look today if various historical events had unfolded differently. Some alt histories involve time travel, some the many universes or parallel universes theory, some simply speculate on how different the world might be if the Confederacy had won the Civil War, if Alexander the Great had lived to be an old man. The earliest known example of an alternate history is found in the Roman historian Livy's speculative text in which he contemplates an alternative 4th century BCE in which Alexander the Great expanded his empire westward instead of eastward; thus forcing a confrontation with Rome, which Livy speculates Rome would've won.

We know of Joanot Martorell's 1490 epic romance *Tirant lo Blanc* that images a valiant knight, Tirant the White, who defeats the Turks and saves the city of Constantinople for Christianity, but despite these few texts, surviving examples of alternative histories are few and far between, only entering the realm of popular fiction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, first with French novelist Louis Geoffroy's 1836 novel imagining a utopian world united by Napoleon following a victory, rather than a

defeat, in Napoleon's 1811 invasion of Russia. In the English language, the first known complete alternate history is Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "P.'s Correspondence", published in 1845. It recounts the tale of a man who is considered "a madman" due to his possibly real ability to perceive a different 1845, a reality in which long-dead famous people are still alive such as the poets Burns, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and even Napoleon Bonaparte.

The first novel-length alternate history in English would seem to be Castello Holford's *Aristopia* (1895). While not as nationalistic as Louis Geoffroy's *Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812–1823*, *Aristopia* is another attempt to portray a utopian society. In *Aristopia*, the earliest English settlers in Virginia discover a reef made of solid gold and are able to build a Utopian society in North America.

But we first begin to see a regular stream of alternative histories being published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, not coincidentally as you may have noticed in the topics and subjects of the alt histories I've mentioned so far, accompanying the first indications of the faltering of traditional empires around the globe. As with the concomitant birth of what we today recognize as science fiction, alternative histories come of age in an era of extreme anxiety in the West about race, gender, and empire. Again, not coincidentally, with a few notable exceptions, nearly all of

these early examples of both sci fi and alt history are written by white men, feature white male heroes who, depending on the plot lines, alter the course of world history and shape the future into a recognizable version of what we call reality with only minor changes that reassure readers of the inevitability of white and male world domination. Many scholars suggest that today, sci fi hasn't really changed all that much, and point to the "sad puppies" and "rabid puppies" of the Hugo Awards "gamergate" as proof.

However, beginning the 1980's, publication of alternative histories increases dramatically, and a growing number of those publications come from people of color working across the spectrum of speculative fiction, despite the reluctance of some sf scholars and critics to recognize texts by writers of color as spec fiction..

Martin Delaney's nineteenth-century antislavery novel *Blake, or the Huts of America*, originally appearing serially from January to July 1859 in *The Anglo-African Magazine*, and in 1861–62 in *The Weekly Anglo-African*, was published as a novel in 1970. It is a text that creates an alternative history of the United States, blending fictional and historical personages and events as it imagines the establishment of a black republic in Cuba following a successful slave uprising in the American South. Nevertheless, this novel appears on not a single list of alternative histories I have ever encountered. When William Sanders' (one of only two authors to win the Sidewise award for Alternative history twice) appears on sci

fi and alt history lists, he is nearly always de-raced, despite openly proclaiming his Cherokee heritage, and despite the fact that the vast majority of his novels and short stories, including the two that won Sidewise awards, present alternative histories of native America.

How do we account for this curious whitewashing of speculative fiction in general and alternative history in particular? And is it in any way related to the seemingly contradictory explosion of publications in this field by writers of color?

Anne McClintock's 2014 article in PMLA, "Imperial Ghosting and National Tragedy: Revenants from Hiroshima and Indian Country in the War on Terror," offers some intriguing answers. Like other scholars working in the field of speculative fiction, McClintock surmises that a "closing off of history" begins following World War II, especially in the US, and that it intensifies the already present tendency to imagine history as an inexorable, inevitable progression, a Manifest Destiny that could not possibly have played out in any other way. History, in other words, gets naturalized, its contingent nature reinvented as remorseless and foreordained. This, many scholars suggest, has served to foreclose meaningful engagement with history, and some speculative fiction scholars suggests it is one impetus behind the burgeoning list of alternative history publications. McClintock, however, adds another layer, something she terms "the

administration of forgetting (the calculated and often brutal amnesia by which a state contrives to erase its own atrocities)” (820). This administration of forgetting first emerges in earnest in the US following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, accelerates following 9/11 with official pronouncements from Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage that “History begins today” (Freeman 466), Richard Perle’s declarations that “The world began on 9-11. There is no intellectual history (Packer 41), and President George W. Bush’s statement that “The past is over” (Ross 14). Indeed, McClintock claims that “This repudiation of the past, while it was the understandable aftershock of a horrific attack, expressed the growing repudiation across a broad political spectrum of the idea of history itself” (820).

Instead of being embedded in an historical matrix, she argues, the repudiation of history carried out by the administration of forgetting means 9/11 gets imagined as something entirely new, without any sort of historical precedent, so new that the US gives itself permission to throw out the old playbook, to discard all previous rules of modern warfare, including the Geneva Conventions, in order to prosecute the War on Terror—a war now seen as necessary for the very survival of the US in the face of this utterly new sort of assault on American soil. As Ned Blackhawk has pointed out, of course, the first mass terror attack by foreigners on American soil was not 9/11 but rather the violent invasion and “slow genocide” carried out

by Europeans against Native people. But by positing the 9/11 attacks as utterly without historical antecedents, or even credible cause beyond the pure evil of Islamic extremists, McClintock argues “the Bush doctrine became a political theology of evil, foreclosing any serious engagement with the history of the United States’ involvement in the Middle East and stripping the 9/11 attacks of political complexity” (823). The effectiveness of the foreclosing of history becomes apparent, McClintock argues, in the utterly un-ironic use of the term “ground zero” to describe the ruins of the World Trade Center in New York. Again, as with the horrifying violence of the genocide of native peoples and mass race slavery, the administration of forgetting allowed the American public to forget its own previous actions, in this case the original ground zero, which was, of course, the city of Hiroshima. Instead, the image of the atomic mushroom clouds rising over Hiroshima and Nagasaki get removed from American memory and superimposed on top of the World Trade Center in a sort of alternative, fantasy version of history in which American exceptionalism and innocence are maintained and all past acts of violence are forgotten.

Our collective national susceptibility to “the administration of forgetting” on 9/11 was primed by our earlier national amnesia regarding US history in “Indian Country.” Beginning with the Roosevelt administration’s imperial advancement across the Pacific into the Philippines in 1899, “Indian Country” became the term

of choice for describing any situation in which US troops found themselves in hostile territory. Roosevelt likened Filipino troops to “the Apache of Arizona,” and by World War I it had become commonplace to “Indianize” foreign troops and civilians to such an extent that in World War II “Japanese warfare was characterized as ‘Indian fighting,’ and Japanese soldiers were described as “whooping like Indians” (826). Later, Colin Powell would argue that the My Lai massacre was “understandable as the troops were stuck in Indian Country” (826). More recently, Mogadishu was labeled “Indian Country” during the “Blackhawk down” incident, as were any areas of Baghdad and Fallujah not controlled by US troops. As white Americans were already accustomed to thinking of Indians not as carrying out defensive attacks against an army of merciless invaders but rather (in much the same way as the Bush administration viewed Islamic extremists) as vicious, unthinking savages engaged in acts of unprompted evil directed against innocent white Americans, it became easy to project the sense of injured American innocence contained in the term “Indian Country” onto other sites of American aggression in which “they” are always the savage aggressors and “we” are always the innocent victims.

McClintock terms this swap “victor-victim reversal”(826) and notes that in 1945 the first journalist to describe the mushroom cloud rising over Hiroshima termed it “a living totem pole,” “Imperial déjà vu” she concludes, “Hiroshima had become

Indian Country” (826). In 2005, Robert Kaplan would carry victor-victim reversal to an almost comical extreme when, with no apparent trace of irony, he describes the defeat of Custer’s Seventh Cavalry as “the 9/11 of its day.” (826). In a further whitewashing of history, in the 2011 assault on the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the Pentagon code name for Osama Bin Laden was Geronimo.

In other words, I argue, the administration of forgetting involves a form of official, public production of a fictional alternative history. Many alt histories produced by Indigenous writers function as a direct intervention in the official national fantasy and their concomitant insistence on looking forward, which suggests they be classified as futurism as well as alternative histories, performs the same function of demanding a contingent vision of possible future worlds freed from an administration of forgetting.