

The End (of the Trail) Is the Beginning: Stephen Graham Jones's *The Bird Is Gone*.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The End (of the Trail) Is the Beginning **Stephen Graham Jones's *The Bird Is Gone***

John Gamber (bio)

House Made of Dawn. Ceremony. Love Medicine (or any of Louise Erdrich's almost impossible to keep up with oeuvre). *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. When we think of Native American literature, these are our go-to texts. Novels and short story collections with lost Native youths who find their way in the world thanks to wise elders guiding them from their confounding amblings in the white world back into their traditions and communities. Traditions are sacred; Indians are wounded but always surviving. White-stream readers want their Indians wounded; Native authors insist on showing they survive.¹ And these themes resound throughout Native American literature, in the works of James Welch, Diane Glancy, Greg Sarris, Louis Owens, Susan Power, and Gerald Vizenor, just to name a few. These texts take place in the present, look backward in time for guidance, and look forward, often through a young protagonist who represents a cultural future. And while this arguably formulaic model represents a number of canonical texts within Native American literature, and while it has certainly proven critically and economically successful, it has never represented the totality of literature written by Native people.

Stephen Graham Jones's 2003 novel *The Bird Is Gone* falls well outside the usual parameters of the homing plot.² This is no tale of a young protagonist's return to Native land. Rather, it marks a thought experiment in which land is returned to Native people. This textual world of the near future grows out of an accidental legal loophole, an ironic chain of events that leads to the Great Plains being returned to Native proprietorship. In imagining this alternative **[End Page 29]** future, Jones's novel represents what Grace L. Dillon has labeled "Indigenous Futurism." Dillon asserts that writers of Indigenous Futurism are "[l]iberated from the constraints of genre expectations, or what 'serious' Native authors are *supposed* to write," and as such "have room to play with setting, character, and dialogue; to stretch boundaries" (3). *The Bird Is Gone* refuses to conform to the genre expectations that Dillon describes. Rather it transports the reader to a near-future pan-Indian Great Plains bowling alley called Fool's Hip, in a tale narrated predominantly by an undercover federal agent, Chassis Jones,

investigating a series of murders, flashing back and forth in time and frequently in drug-addled states.³ The author's choice of an alternate reality for this novel's setting proves critical. I argue that the fundamentally important move in this type of Native Futurism stems from the fact that it enables artist and audience to imagine a postcolonial America that can replace the parcolonial (or pericolonial) one that exists in the present and stretches across some five hundred years.⁴ Within Native Futurism we investigate what an America outside of the settler colonial state (or perhaps beyond, after, or over it) could be. We have the potential for a number of moves, including imagining Native nationhood outside of the Westphalian national construct. In asserting this alternative nationhood, I argue, *The Bird Is Gone* addresses key issues in and beyond Native national sovereignty, including a reexamination of constructions of human presence in the landscape of the Americas (particularly as marked by the recurring image of the vanishing or absent Indian) and the role of race as a colonial identity marker (drawing on the allegorical Ship of Fools). Each of these issues recognizes Native presence in the Americas as existing within grand spans of both time and space. As such Jones's novel refigures time and space within an Indigenous Futurist construction, liberating itself from what Kevin Bruyneel calls colonial time.⁵

The Indian Territory of *The Bird Is Gone* has existed for fourteen years at the time this novel is set and stretches at least from present-day South Dakota to Oklahoma. The novel explains that, "under pressure from Keep America Beautiful," Congress signed into law the Conservation Act.⁶ This act **[End Page 30]**

require[ed] "the restoration of all indigenous flora and fauna to the Great Plains." As wildlife...

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