

*Walking the Clouds*  
An Anthology of Indigenous  
Science Fiction

EDITED BY GRACE L. DILLON

Volume 69

*Sun Tracks*  
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With the moon  
My young father comes to mind  
Walking the clouds

—Gerald Vizenor, from *Empty Swings* (1967)

wondering what worried her so much about Blue Strike's seemingly innocuous comments.

When she returned to the bridge David relinquished the command chair. Enid read the fleet's status reports; most of the fleet was gathering at Brian's Planet as planned. The border worlds had heard of what happened in Sector Five and the disappearance of the Fifth Fleet. Everyone braced for an all-out war with the Repletians. Enid hoped that an escalation of the fighting, which so far had been limited to border fights, wouldn't happen. She knew that her promotion was part of such a hope. The Amphorian Council hoped that the Repletians would wait before firing on a fleet led by one of its own.

Yet, there were so many questions about the destruction of the Fifth Fleet. For one, Repletians tended to use hit-and-run methods that suited their smaller ships. They had never tried to attack a fleet head-on, nor did the council think they had the strength to do so.

As her officers gathered on the bridge, Enid's thoughts were only half on her duties. A part of her mused on the red lights of her panel. She idly tapped her pencil on the arm of her chair to a tune she dimly recalled from her childhood, one of the few things she could remember of her past.

## Men on the Moon

SIMON ORTIZ

(1999)

The reach of imperialism into "our heads" challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we perceive a need to decolonize our minds, to recover ourselves, to claim a space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity.

—*Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori)*

OUR FINAL INSTALLMENT in the "Contact" section, Simon J. Ortiz's "Men on the Moon," shares skepticism for a common sf trope, the discovery of "new worlds" that offer plunder and adventure to technologically advanced colonizers. The story quietly questions assumptions about Native peoples' "technoprimitivism" by juxtaposing the television imagery of the first lunar landing with an elder's dream of a machine monster on the moon. "It's a dream," he warns, "but the truth." Ortiz's imagery masters technosurrealism by likening the greatest advancement in western science at the time to a traditional *Shequ-wynb mahkina*, great and powerful but of evil origins, a living entity to beware. The sublime wonder typical in pulp sf contact narratives is inverted from an Indigenous perspective, which sees nothing of new worlds discovered, only rupture as the old world is catastrophically changed.

Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), Professor of English at Arizona State University, prolific writer of more than two dozen volumes of

Indigenous poetry, prose fiction, children's literature, and nonfiction, has played pivotal roles in bringing cultural studies and Native American literatures to mainstream attention, and in offering generous mentorship for many involved in the current Native intellectual movement's attention to Native-centered theory. He also has succeeded in getting the scholarly community to reframe its thinking about Indigenous peoples transnationally, unifying tribal, national, hemispheric, and global perspectives.

Darko Suvin's concept of "cognitive estrangement," a typical strategy, guides the reader through the story, as we meet an old man—Faustin, a grandfather—who is unfamiliar with both television and the English language, and thus depends on a grandson's translations, explanations, and possible teasing about the momentous *Apollo II* mission. The televisual images and montage scenes of white smoke and *mahkinas*, huge machines, compound Nana's uneasiness with Mericanos who laboriously quest for knowledge in an arena where they believe there is no life.<sup>1</sup> This irony perhaps informs Nana's perspective on the wonders of the technological sublime conceived "to better mankind" and the astronauts' overwrought efforts to discover "where everything began a long time ago and how everything was made in the beginning." Surprised at the lengths they'll go to in search of answers to simple questions, he wonders, "Hasn't anyone ever told them?"

Ortiz flips the elitism of those immersed in the technological sublime, the testing grounds of the atom bomb, the testing out of space travel, and the search for the "tiniest bit of life" on other planets. This allegorical and abstract story in fact is linked to a sequence that explores the specifics of Kerr-McGee Corporation, an actual petroleum products company that began operations in Depression-era Oklahoma and went on to operate large uranium mines in the US Southwest in the 1960s and 1970s. One site was the Ambrosia Lake mine in New Mexico on Acoma Pueblo land. Presciently, Ortiz's "Men on the Moon," which he originally began in the sixties before revising Kerr-McGee's development that shares its title, anticipates and Western Gas Reserves, and Ambrosia's subsequent dubious status as one of the largest uranium tailings in the Western world.<sup>2</sup>

The full cycle of the history of Eurowestern contact thus lies beneath the surface of Ortiz's marvelous little allegory. After making

the people's land lifeless, the colonizers take their final trip to a lifeless land.

## A

### I

Joselita brought her father, Faustin, the TV on Father's Day. She brought it over after Sunday mass, and she had her son hook up the antenna. She plugged the TV cord into the wall socket.

Faustin sat on a worn couch. He was covered with an old coat. He had worn that coat for twenty years.

It's ready. Turn it on and I'll adjust the antenna, Amarosho told his mother. The TV warmed up and then the screen flickered into dull light. It was snowing. Amarosho tuned it a bit. It snowed less and then a picture formed.

Look, Naishriya, Joselita said. She touched her father's hand and pointed at the TV.

I'll turn the antenna a bit and you tell me when the picture is clear, Amarosho said. He climbed on the roof again.

After a while the picture turned clearer. It's better! his mother shouted. There was only the tiniest bit of snow falling.

That's about the best it can get, I guess, Amarosho said. Maybe it'll clear up on the other channels. He turned the selector. It was clearer on another channel.

There were two men struggling mightily with each other. Wrestling, Amarosho said.

Do you want to watch wrestling? Two men are fighting, Nana. One of them is Apache Red. Chisheh tsah, he told his grandfather.

The old man stirred. He had been staring intently into the TV. He wondered why there was so much snow at first. Now there were two men fighting. One of them was a Chisheh—an Apache—and the other was a Mericano. There were people shouting excitedly and clapping hands within the TV.

The two men backed away from each other for a moment and then they clenched again. They wheeled mightily and suddenly one threw the other. The old man smiled. He wondered why they were fighting. Something else showed on the TV screen. A bottle of wine was

being poured. The old man liked the pouring sound and he moved his mouth and lips. Someone was selling wine.

The two fighting men came back on the TV. They struggled with each other, and after a while one of them didn't get up. And then another man came and held up the hand of the Apache, who was dancing around in a feathered headdress.

It's over, Amarosho announced. Apache Red won the fight, Nana.

The Chisheh won. Faustin stared at the other fighter, a light-haired man who looked totally exhausted and angry with himself. The old man didn't like the Apache too much. He wanted them to fight again.

After a few minutes, something else appeared on the TV.

What is that? Faustin asked. In the TV picture was an object with smoke coming from it. It was standing upright.

Men are going to the moon, Nana, Amarosho said. That's *Apollo*. It's going to fly three men to the moon.

That thing is going to fly to the moon?

Yes, Nana, his grandson said.

What is it called again? Faustin asked.

*Apollo*, a spaceship rocket, Joselita told her father.

The *Apollo* spaceship stood on the ground, emitting clouds of something, something that looked like smoke.

A man was talking, telling about the plans for the flight, what would happen, that it was almost time. Faustin could not understand the man very well because he didn't know many words in the language of the Mericano.

He must be talking about that thing flying in the air? he said.

Yes. It's about ready to fly away to the moon.

Faustin remembered that the evening before he had looked at the sky and seen that the moon was almost in the middle phase. He wondered if it was important that the men get to the moon.

Are those men looking for something on the moon, Nana? he asked his grandson.

They're trying to find out what's on the moon, Nana. What kind of dirt and rocks there are and to see if there's any water. Scientist men don't believe there is any life on the moon. The men are looking for knowledge, Amarosho said to Faustin.

Faustin wondered if the men had run out of places to look for knowledge on the earth. Do they know if they'll find knowledge? he asked.

They have some already. They've gone before and come back. They're going again.

Did they bring any back?

They brought back some rocks, Amarosho said.

Rocks. Faustin laughed quietly. The American scientist men went to search for knowledge on the moon and they brought back rocks. He kind of thought that perhaps Amarosho was joking with him. His grandson had gone to Indian School for a number of years, and sometimes he would tell his grandfather some strange and funny things.

The old man was suspicious. Sometimes they joked around. Rocks. You sure that's all they brought back? he said. Rocks!

That's right, Nana, only rocks and some dirt and pictures they made of what it looks like on the moon.

The TV picture was filled with the rocket spaceship close-up now. Men were sitting and standing and moving around some machinery, and the TV voice had become more urgent. The old man watched the activity in the picture intently but with a slight smile on his face.

Suddenly it became very quiet, and the TV voice was firm and commanding and curiously pleading. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, liftoff. The white smoke became furious, and a muted rumble shook through the TV. The rocket was trembling and the voice was trembling.

It was really happening, the old man marveled. Somewhere inside of that cylinder with a point at its top and long slender wings were three men who were flying to the moon.

The rocket rose from the ground. There were enormous clouds of smoke and the picture shook. Even the old man became tense, and he grasped the edge of the couch. The rocket spaceship rose and rose.

There's fire coming out of the rocket, Amarosho explained. That's what makes it fly.

Fire. Faustin had wondered what made it fly. He had seen pictures of other flying machines. They had long wings, and someone had explained to him that there was machinery inside which spun metal blades that made the machines fly. He had wondered what made this thing fly. He hoped his grandson wasn't joking him.

After a while there was nothing but the sky. The rocket *Apollo* had disappeared. It hadn't taken very long, and the voice on the TV wasn't excited anymore. In fact, the voice was very calm and almost bored.

I have to go now, Naishtiya, Joselita told her father. I have things to do.

Me too, Amarocho said.

Wait, the old man said, wait. What shall I do with this thing? What is it you call it?

TV, his daughter said. You watch it. You turn it on and you watch it. I mean how do you stop it? Does it stop like the radio, like the mahkina? It stops?

This way, Nana, Amarocho said and showed his grandfather. He turned a round knob on the TV and the picture went away.

He turned the knob again, and the picture flickered on again. Were you afraid this one-eye would be looking at you all the time? Amarocho laughed and gently patted the old man's shoulder.

Faustin was relieved. Joselita and her son left. Faustin watched the TV picture for a while. A lot of activity was going on, a lot of men were moving among machinery, and a couple of men were talking. And then the spaceship rocket was shown again.

The old man watched it rise and fly away again. It disappeared again. There was nothing but the sky. He turned the knob and the picture died away. He turned it on and the picture came on again. He turned it off. He went outside and to a fence a short distance from his home. When he finished peeing, he zipped up his pants and studied the sky for a while.

## II

That night, he dreamed.

Flintwing Boy was watching a Skquuyuh mahkina come down a hill. The mahkina made a humming noise. It was walking. It shone in the sunlight. Flintwing Boy moved to a better position to see. The mahkina kept on moving toward him.

The Skquuyuh mahkina drew closer. Its metal legs stepped upon trees and crushed growing flowers and grass. A deer bounded away frightened. Tsushki came running to Flintwing Boy.

Anahweh, Tsushki cried, trying to catch his breath. What is it, Anahweh?

You've been running, Flintwing Boy said.

The coyote was staring at the thing, which was coming toward them. There was wild fear in his eyes.

What is that, Anahweh? What is that thing? Tsushki gasped.

It looks like a mahkina, but I've never seen one quite like it before. It must be some kind of Skquuyuh mahkina, Anahweh, Flintwing Boy said. When he saw that Tsushki was trembling with fear, he said, Sit down, Anahweh. Rest yourself. We'll find out soon enough.

The Skquuyuh mahkina was undeterred. It walked over and through everything. It splashed through a stream of clear water. The water boiled and streaks of oil flowed downstream. It split a juniper tree in half with a terrible crash. It crushed a boulder into dust with a sound of heavy metal. Nothing stopped the Skquuyuh mahkina. It hummed.

Anahweh, Tsushki cried, what can we do?

Flintwing Boy reached into the bag hanging at his side. He took out an object. It was a flint arrowhead. He took out some cornfood.

Come over here, Anahweh. Come over here. Be calm, he motioned to the frightened coyote. He touched the coyote in several places on his body with the arrowhead and put cornfood in the palm of his hand.

This way, Flintwing Boy said. He closed Tsushki's fingers over the cornfood. They stood facing east. Flintwing Boy said, We humble ourselves again. We look in your direction for guidance. We ask for your protection. We humble our poor bodies and spirits because only you are the power and the source and the knowledge. Help us, then. That is all we ask.

Flintwing Boy and Tsushki breathed on the cornfood, then took in the breath of all the directions and gave the cornfood unto the ground.

Now the ground trembled with the awesome power of the Skquuyuh mahkina. Its humming vibrated against everything.

Flintwing Boy reached over his shoulder and took several arrows from his quiver. He inspected them carefully and without any rush he fit one to his bowstring.

And now, Anahweh, Flintwing Boy said, you must go and tell everyone. Describe what you have seen. The people must talk among themselves and learn what this is about, and decide what they will do. You must hurry, but you must not alarm the people. Tell them I am here to meet the Skquuyuh mahkina. Later I will give them my report.

Tsushki turned and began to run. He stopped several yards away. Hahrudzaimeh! he called to Flintwing Boy. Like a man of courage, Anahweh, like our people.

The old man stirred in his sleep. A dog was barking. He awoke fully and got out of his bed and went outside. The moon was past the midpoint, and it would be daylight in a few hours.

### III

Later, the spaceship reached the moon.

Amarosho was with his grandfather Faustin. They watched a TV replay of two men walking on the moon.

So that's the men on the moon, Faustin said.

Yes, Nana, there they are, Amarosho said.

There were two men inside of heavy clothing, and they carried heavy-looking equipment on their backs.

The TV picture showed a closeup of one of them and indeed there was a man's face inside of glass. The face moved its mouth and smiled and spoke, but the voice seemed to be separate from the face.

It must be cold, Faustin said. They have on heavy clothing.

It's supposed to be very cold and very hot on the moon. They wear special clothes and other things for protection from the cold and heat, Amarosho said.

The men on the moon were moving slowly. One of them skipped like a boy, and he floated alongside the other.

The old man wondered if they were underwater. They seem to be able to float, he said.

The information I have heard is that a man weighs less on the moon than he does on earth, Amarosho said to his grandfather. Much less, and he floats. And there is no air on the moon for them to breathe, so those boxes on their backs carry air for them to breathe.

A man weighs less on the moon, the old man thought. And there is no air on the moon except for the boxes on their backs. He looked at Amarosho, but his grandson did not seem to be joking with him.

The land on the moon looked very dry. It looked like it had not rained for a long, long time. There were no trees, no plants, no grass. Nothing but dirt and rocks, a desert.

Amarosho had told him that men on earth—scientists—believed there was no life on the moon. Yet those men were trying to find knowledge on the moon. Faustin wondered if perhaps they had special tools with which they could find knowledge even if they believed there was no life on the moon.

The mahkina sat on the desert. It didn't make a sound. Its metal feet were planted flat on the ground. It looked somewhat awkward. Faustin searched around the mahkina, but there didn't seem to be anything except the dry land on the TV. He couldn't figure out the mahkina. He wasn't sure whether it moved and could cause harm. He didn't want to ask his grandson that question.

After a while, one of the bulky men was digging in the ground. He carried a long, thin tool with which he scooped up dirt and put it into a container. He did this for a while.

Is he going to bring the dirt back to earth too? Faustin asked. I think he is, Nana, Amarosho said. Maybe he'll get some rocks too. Watch.

Indeed, several minutes later, the man lumbered over to a pile of rocks and gathered several hand-sized ones. He held them out proudly. They looked just like rocks from around anyplace. The voice on the TV seemed to be excited about the rocks.

They will study the rocks, too, for knowledge?

Yes, Nana.

What will they use the knowledge for, Nana?

They say they will use it to better mankind, Nana. I've heard that. And to learn more about the universe in which we live. Also, some of the scientists say the knowledge will be useful in finding out where everything began a long time ago and how everything was made in the beginning.

Faustin looked with a smile at his grandson. He said, You are telling me the true facts, aren't you?

Why, yes, Nana. That's what they say. I'm not just making it up, Amarosho said.

Well then, do they say why they need to know where and how everything began? Hasn't anyone ever told them?

I think other people have tried to tell them but they want to find out for themselves, and also they claim they don't know enough and need to know more and for certain, Amarosho said.

The man in the bulky suit had a small pickax in his hand. He was striking at a boulder. The breathing of the man could be heard clearly. He seemed to be working very hard and was very tired.

Faustin had once watched a work crew of Mericano drilling for water. They had brought a tall mahkina with a loud motor. The mahkina would raise a limb at its center to its very top and then drop it with a heavy and loud metal clang. The mahkina and its men sat at one spot for several days, and finally they found water.

The water had bubbled out weakly, gray-looking, and did not look drinkable at all. And then the Mericano workmen lowered the mahkina, put their equipment away, and drove away. The water stopped flowing. After a couple of days, Faustin went and checked out the place. There was nothing there except a pile of gray dirt and an indentation in the ground. The ground was already dry, and there were dark spots of oil-soaked dirt.

Faustin decided to tell Amarosho about the dream he had had.

After the old man finished, Amarosho said, Old man, you're telling me the truth now, aren't you? You know that you've become somewhat of a liar. He was teasing his grandfather.

Yes, Nana. I have told you the truth as it occurred to me that night. Everything happened like that except I might not have recalled everything about it.

That's some story, Nana, but it's a dream.

It's a dream, but it's the truth, Faustin said.

I believe you, Nana, his grandson said.

#### IV

Some time after that the spacemen returned to earth. Amarosho told his grandfather they had splashed down in the ocean.

Are they alright? Faustin asked.

Yes, Amarosho said. They have devices to keep them safe. Are they in their homes now?

No, I think they have to be someplace where they can't contaminate anything. If they brought back something from the moon that they weren't supposed to, they won't pass it on to someone else, Amarosho said to his grandfather.

What would that something be?

Something harmful, Nana.

In that dry desert land of the moon there might be something harmful, the old man said. I didn't see any strange insects or trees or even cactus. What would that harmful thing be, Nana?

Disease which might harm people on earth, Amarosho said.

You said there was the belief by the men that there is no life on the moon. Is there life after all? Faustin asked.

There might be the tiniest bit of life.

Yes, I see now, Nana. If the men find even the tiniest bit of life on the moon, then they will believe, the old man said.

Yes. Something like that.

Faustin figured it out now. The Mericano men had taken that trip in a spaceship rocket to the moon to find even the tiniest bit of life. And when they found even the tiniest bit of life, even if it was harmful, they would believe that they had found knowledge. Yes, that must be the way it was.

He remembered his dream clearly now. The old man was relieved.

When are those two men fighting again, Nana? he asked Amarosho.

What two men?

Those two men who were fighting with each other the day those Mericano spaceship men were flying to the moon.

Oh, those men. I don't know, Nana. Maybe next Sunday. You like them?

Yes. I think the next time I will be cheering for the Chisheh. He'll win again. He'll beat the Mericano again, Faustin said.