

Ohmygod!

The Bad Guy is Native??

by Skawennati Tricia Fragnito



I love science fiction. It doesn't make a difference to me if it was written in the fifties and blathers on about how the human race has grown up to be a planetful of kind and generous self-actualized beings, or if it's from the disenchanted eighties and describes scenarios of a dystopian, apocalyptic, it-only-gets-worse Earth. Either way, we get to imagine our future.

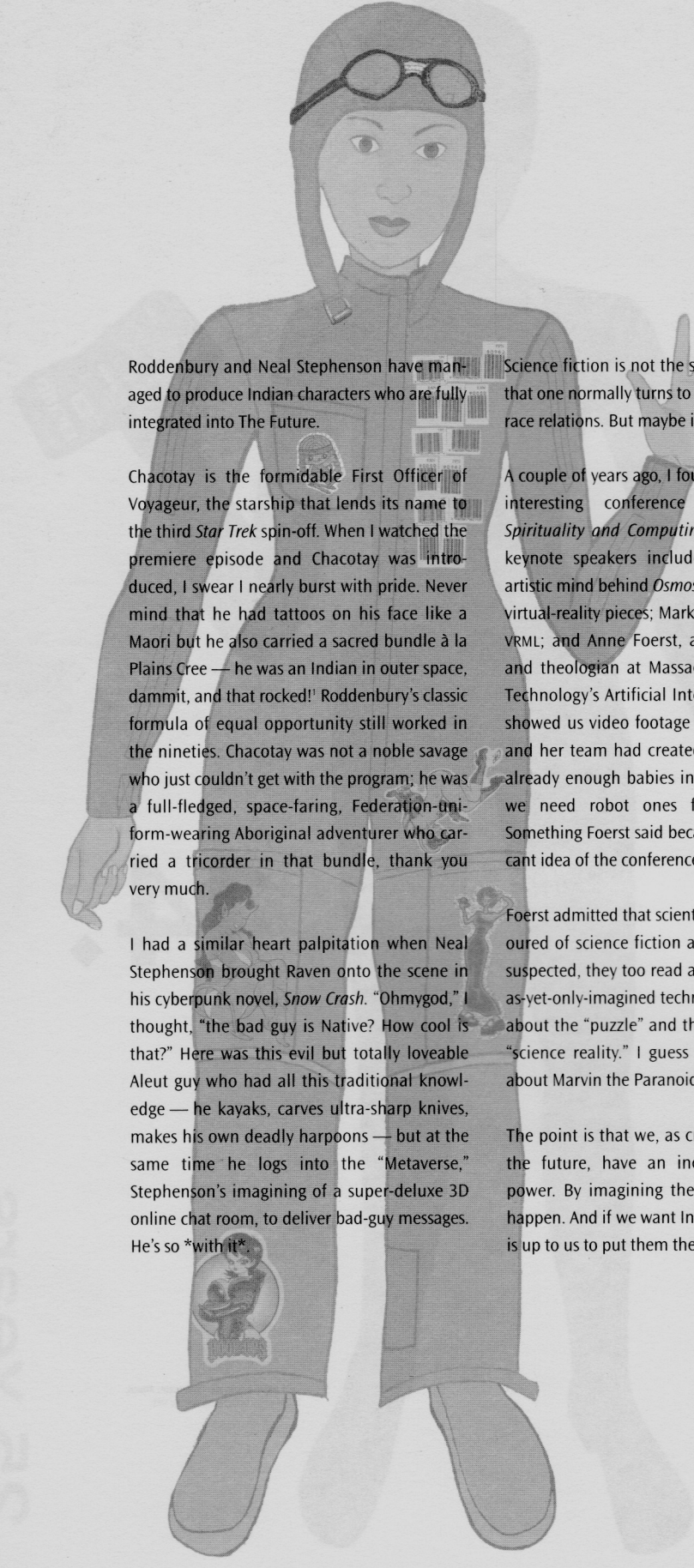
And what a rich and diverse place the future is, filled with every manner of personal device, such as the exoskeleton that Sigourney Weaver puts on to punch out the monster in *Aliens* or the teleporter in *Star Trek*. There is every kind of being, too, from the hyper-intelligent shade of blue we (sort of) meet in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* to good ol' Chewbacca in *Star Wars*. But where, I ask, are the Indians?

I have found only two Aboriginal people in science fiction. Perhaps most sci-fi writers do not see a place for First Peoples in the future. We usually represent the past, after all. Or maybe they think that the future is an era without race or ethnicity. Whatever it is, only Gene

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This page: *Chacotay*. Next page: *Raven*.
From www.imaginingindians.net

25 Years



Roddenbury and Neal Stephenson have managed to produce Indian characters who are fully integrated into The Future.

Chacotay is the formidable First Officer of Voyager, the starship that lends its name to the third *Star Trek* spin-off. When I watched the premiere episode and Chacotay was introduced, I swear I nearly burst with pride. Never mind that he had tattoos on his face like a Maori but he also carried a sacred bundle à la Plains Cree — he was an Indian in outer space, dammit, and that rocked! Roddenbury's classic formula of equal opportunity still worked in the nineties. Chacotay was not a noble savage who just couldn't get with the program; he was a full-fledged, space-faring, Federation-uniform-wearing Aboriginal adventurer who carried a tricorder in that bundle, thank you very much.

I had a similar heart palpitation when Neal Stephenson brought Raven onto the scene in his cyberpunk novel, *Snow Crash*. "Ohmygod," I thought, "the bad guy is Native? How cool is that?" Here was this evil but totally loveable Aleut guy who had all this traditional knowledge — he kayaks, carves ultra-sharp knives, makes his own deadly harpoons — but at the same time he logs into the "Metaverse," Stephenson's imagining of a super-deluxe 3D online chat room, to deliver bad-guy messages. He's so *with it*.

Science fiction is not the section of the library that one normally turns to when thinking about race relations. But maybe it should be.

A couple of years ago, I found myself at a most interesting conference called *Creativity, Spirituality and Computing Technologies*. The keynote speakers included Char Davis, the artistic mind behind *Osmose* and *Ephémère*, two virtual-reality pieces; Mark Pesce, the creator of VRML; and Anne Foerst, a computer scientist and theologian at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Artificial Intelligence Lab. Foerst showed us video footage of a robot baby she and her team had created. I mean, there are already enough babies in the world. What do we need robot ones for? But I digress. Something Foerst said became the most significant idea of the conference to me.

Foerst admitted that scientists are just as enamoured of science fiction as I am. Just as I had suspected, they too read about some fabulous, as-yet-only-imagined technology, get all excited about the "puzzle" and then they try to make "science reality." I guess she just never read about Marvin the Paranoid Android.

The point is that we, as creators who imagine the future, have an incredible amount of power. By imagining the future, we make it happen. And if we want Indians in our future, it is up to us to put them there.

I did a piece about the future of North America, called *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*. It's a bit of web art that allowed me to work out a scenario in which this continent could once again be populated and run by Native people. I was surprised to realize that, far from mass genocide, all that was really required to achieve this goal was a shift in our thinking. Instead of seeing inter-racial marriage as diluting Indian blood, we could just see it as a means of increasing the number of people we call Indian. In other words, we would have to adopt a policy of inclusion rather than the blood-quantum-measuring policy of exclusion we currently have to contend with. I know there are a lot of people out there who want to be Indian, so what is the problem here?

Quite possibly, the problem is a lack of imagination. Native people are so busy trying to regain what was lost in the past that there is little time to see what we'll look like in the far future. The Agreement in Principle recently signed by the James Bay Cree and the Quebec and Canadian governments was eagerly adopted by the Cree mainly because it would mean they could get jobs building hydro-electric power plants. Hydro-electricity is on its way out, man! The Cree are advocating vocational training for their youth when they should be encouraging them to be computer scientists and astrophysicists. Or better yet, science fiction writers...

Endnote

1. If you do a little Googling, you find that Chacotay is actually Mayan, from the jungles of South America.