

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 46 (2025)

Artikel: Introduction : American futures, American futurisms
Autor: Madsen, Deborah
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1090388>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

DEBORAH MADSEN
(UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA)

Introduction: American Futures, American Futurisms

Just over a century ago, in the seemingly post-apocalyptic, post-war world of 1918, Van Wyck Brooks published his essay “On Creating a Usable Past” in which he famously called for the creation of a new American cultural history that would furnish the nation, and the post-war world, with a “usable past.” In the context of current predictions of climate catastrophe and the mass extinction of life on our planet, Brooks’s call for reinventions of the past in order to imagine alternative futures takes on a particularly powerful resonance. This was felt during the Biennial Conference of the Swiss Association for North American Studies (SANAS), which took place at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, in early November 2024. The present volume of SPELL is based on papers delivered at that conference, on the topic *American Futures*. It was early on the second day of the conference that we heard the announcement of the US election results that have since marked a significant shift in political, social, and cultural life, the implications of which are being felt globally.

Even in that moment, we could feel that our conversations and reflections on the possibilities for “usable” (and also “unusable”) pasts and futures were especially timely. We had set out to consider how we might interrogate the utility of our particular cultural moment which, in some key respects, finds echoes in Van Wyck Brooks’s critique of conservative and especially commercial academic influences on intellectual culture. His criticism focuses upon

the professorial mind [...] [which] puts a gloss upon the past that renders it sterile for the living mind. Instead of reflecting the creative impulse in American history, it reaffirms the values established by the commercial tradition; it crowns everything that has passed the censorship of the commercial and moralistic mind. (338)

The past, he claims, is held up as an accusation that underlines the inferiority of the present. And yet, the answer to his more-than-rhetorical questions – “where are we going to get the new ideals, the finer attitudes, that we must get if we are ever to emerge from our existing travesty of a civilization?” (339) – is precisely in the creative academic return to the multi-

plicitous past. While he regrets the fact that “the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value,” still he is able to entertain the question: “But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one?” (339). For Brooks, the past is “usable” because it is “an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals” (339). To see the past in this perspective, he suggests that the history of America be seen from different national viewpoints. The differences between French and English and Russian understandings of the American past will, Brooks argues, expose the plurality of meanings and significances that this history contains.

Though the essays that comprise the present volume represent a rich diversity of national approaches to American pasts and futures – both US and Canadian – the volume is less oriented geographically than it is focused on the multiple histories that have come to replace Brooks’s monolithic sense of history as white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and, of course, masculine. He regrets the neglect of writers such as Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, and Herman Melville, describing how “[t]he creative past of this country is a limbo of the non-elect, the fathers and grandfathers of the talent of today” (340). While the study of the “non-elect” – women, Indigenous people, and writers of color – dominates much of the contemporary discipline of American literature, it is precisely these fields that are under assault by the recent spate of presidential orders to suppress all initiatives that promote equality, diversity, and inclusion for the “non-elect.” It seems not insignificant that Brooks’s essay was published along with a series of articles interrogating the conditions of literary learning in the US in the early twentieth century. Brooks addresses not creative writers but professors of literature, encouraging a new and productive approach to the literary past in order to invigorate the cultural present moment.

Many of those who contributed to the SANAS conference, and the majority of essays in this volume, take up the challenge that Brooks issued so long ago, by turning to those “non-elect” literatures that have become institutionalized in US (and global) universities in response to Civil Rights activism. The right of Indigenous people to study their own literatures and histories; the necessity that Black and Latinx people study their cultures; the demand that “visible minorities” be visible in school and university curricula: These were among the fundamental demands, made by Civil Rights activists, that are now subject to erasure under “Project 2025.” Included on the list of words now banned, that cannot be used within the jurisdiction of the US federal government are: Black and Lat-

inx; BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color); race, ethnicity, and racial justice; Indigenous and tribal; immigrant and multicultural (Connelly). It is in these circumstances that Brooks (now a largely unknown and neglected voice) is worth hearing. His call to return to and “retrofit” the past in order to meet the needs of the present and future, especially by returning to silenced literary and cultural voices, resonates clearly with present crises.

This strategy of retroactive interpretation promoted by Brooks approximates the concept of “retconning” or the creation of retroactive continuity that Sherryl Vint introduced to the conversations permeating our conference via her lecture entitled “Retconning America.” Retconning involves adding to or revising an established (past) narrative in such a way that it becomes continuous with the present. Vint’s application of this concept, popularized in fan fiction, to the construction of public discourses about the future expressed by influential Silicon Valley ‘founders’ and tech ‘gurus’ exposes, as she says,

the degree to which Silicon Valley’s promised futures are [...] a rewriting of elements of the past story of America to suit the present political need for a specific story of the American Century. These promised high-tech futures through which we are promised solutions to urgent crises such as climate change draw extensively on a tradition of science fiction representations they [Silicon Valley tech gurus] often misunderstand or misconstrue. (Vint).

Related issues were explored by other conference participants, who responded to such questions as: How has the past generated the futures that are now our present? More specifically, how are artists – now and in the past – responding to the pressures of a future that is imaginable but seemingly unachievable? How is a linear, chronological model of time, which offers the cognitive frame for much future thinking, challenged by alternative understandings of the structure of historical time? Within these large questions emerged more specific issues: digital and technological futures, economic futurism, post-humanist futures, climate and environmental futures including future sovereignties such as environmental sovereignty, food sovereignty, and water sovereignty; racial/ized futures; Indigenous versus colonial structures of time; haunting, memory, trauma, and the future; and Apocalypticism(s).

The question explored in many of the conference presentations, and so in most of the essays in this volume, concerns reverberations of the past in the decolonized imaginings of artists working in Afrofuturism, Indi-

genous Futurism, or “CoFuturism,” the latter describing decolonial visions of the future according to the editors of the recent *Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* (2024). In the introduction to that volume – which engages Afrofuturisms, Indigenous Futurisms, Latinx Futurisms, Asian Futurisms, and Gulf/Middle Eastern Futurisms – Taryne Jade Taylor writes that

CoFuturisms use science fictional thinking to build just, inclusive futures; to critique and bear witness to the injustices of the past and present; and, perhaps most importantly, to offer us all hope of extricating ourselves from the dire future we face as a species and that we inflict on other species and the earth, should we not urgently institute change. (1)

A characteristic strategy of Futurisms is to return to a past conditioned by colonialism, slavery, or genocide; a past in which the apocalypse would seem to have already taken place. This past is then “retconned” so that retroactive continuities with alternative futures are created. Taylor explains:

CoFuturisms showcase the way that we, in the face of the postapocalypse [sic], engage in science fictional thinking to build a better tomorrow, to heal and rebuild ourselves and our communities, to look towards a more collaborative, collective way of being in the world. (2)

This understanding is more explicitly political than the description of Afrofuturism offered by the editors of *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-first Century* (2020), Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, who describe Afrofuturism more generally as “an aesthetic practice that enables artists to communicate the experience of science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures” (13), though they go on to nuance this definition with the observation that Afrofuturism is an artistic project “of reorganizing time and space [...] to challenge whitewashed narratives of history and imagine futures in full color” (18). In her Introduction to *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013) Ytasha L. Womack evokes the “dance through time travel that Afrofuturists live for[, which] is as much about soul retrieval as it is about jettisoning into the far-off future, the uncharted Milky Way, or the depths of the subconscious and imagination” (2). The “Black to the future” movement continues to involve people of color in spaces from which they have been excluded or, equally, in which they have been rendered invisible and it does so on decolonial terms.

Following the identification and theorizing of Afrofuturism in the 1990s Grace Dillon, in her landmark anthology *Walking the Clouds* (2012), coined the term “Indigenous Futurism” to capture precisely the sense among Indigenous writers and artists that they, as Native people, had survived the apocalypse and had now to create futures apart from those prescribed by colonialist and imperialist narratives of the past. In her 2016 essay, “Beyond the Grim Dust of What *Was* to a Radiant Possibility of What Could *Be*,” Dillon identifies as typical of Indigenous Futurisms,

Biskaabiyyang, Anishinaabemowin for ‘returning to ourselves,’ [...] a healing impulse and a manifesto for all peoples, whether Indigenous or just passing through, about discarding the dirty baggage imposed by the impacts of oppression, and alternatively refashioning ancestral traditions in order to flourish in the post-Native Apocalypse. (6)

The recovery of silenced histories and the decolonization of the future are the twin axes of Indigenous Futurism specifically and Futurisms more generally. Modifying the colonial past by reinterpreting it through Indigenous and Black epistemologies not only underlines the long histories of alternative ways of knowing and being in the world but also generates possibilities for a decolonized future.

Almost exactly one hundred years ago, F. Scott Fitzgerald had his Gilded Age anti-hero, Jay Gatsby, exclaim: “Can’t repeat the past? [...] Why of course you can!” (106). In our new Gilded Age, our age of neo-Robber Tech-Barons, of renewed threats to Indigenous sovereignty via new tribal Termination strategies, of the new Jim Crow and the Black Lives / All Lives Matter movements, and the increasing threat of environmental apocalypse, creative artists and academic critics alike are returning to the past, not to repeat it but to “retconn” it by proposing strategic modifications that create “usable pasts” and afford new visions of, and for, the future.

The Essays

The collection explores issues of time and temporality; futures past, present, and speculatively future; and a wide variety of perspectives from which futures and futurisms can be studied. There is a strong emphasis on racialized perspectives, indicative of the current US political moment. The essays are organized into three sections: “Futur*s,” “Afrofuturisms,”

and “Indigenous Futurisms.” In the opening essays, Lee A. Flamand and Mehdi Ghasemi establish some of the foundational contexts and explore key issues for the study of futures and futurisms. Lee A. Flamand highlights convergences between strategies of narrative storytelling that are commonly associated with fiction and political strategies in contemporary theorizing about climate crisis. Rather than follow the tendency in environmental scholarship to treat literary texts as venues within which political theory is put to the test in speculative fictional futures, Flamand addresses the use of conventions attributed to literary genres like dystopia or utopia and science fiction in texts that claim a non-fictional status as political theory. Moving beyond issues of ornamental rhetorical and thematic uses of literary storytelling, he explores the deep epistemological hybridity generated in two political treatises or manifestos: the anarchopessimist, anonymously-authored *Desert* (2011) and *Half-Earth Socialism* (2022) by Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettese which (together with the world-building video game accessible from the *Half-Earth Socialism* website) proposes a more utopian techno-managerial solution to the contemporary planetary climate crisis. The intersection of real or mimetic with virtual space is developed by Mehdi Ghasemi within the temporal literary context of “post-postmodernism.” The impacts of digitalization, virtuality, electronic textuality, and multimediality have transformed key functionalities that shaped literary and narrative analysis in the past – concepts like authorship, readership, and the “ownership” of textual production – and, at the same time, have transformed the *technos* of communication along with social relations and identity construction within the “cyberculturalism” that he analyzes in a range of post-postmodern novels: Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* (2019), Helen Phillips’ *Hum* (2024), Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Yudhanjaya Wijeratne’s *The Salvage Crew*, (2020) and Christopher Robert Cargill’s *Sea of Rust* (2017).

In Section Two, the essays engage diverse approaches to American Afrofuturisms. The perception that the apocalypse has already been experienced by colonized people – a fundamental of Afro- and Indigenous Futurisms alike – is explored in the context of a global pandemic in Beatrice Melodia Festa’s discussion of Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011). In this novel, the living survivors who suffer from Post Apocalypse Stress Disorder (PASD) like the living dead (the zombies) against whom they struggle offer an opportunity to reflect upon the racialization of disability and the long history of the discursive identification of Blackness with disease in the US. The discursive norms that construct meanings

and, ultimately, realities are the subject of Marika Ceschia's analysis of decolonial modes of knowing and being that are encoded in the "maternal grammars" of Black women's writing, such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2021), Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1992), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). Mattia Ferraro explores alternative perspectives from which the racialization of US Black culture is exposed. Taking as his corpus James Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village" (1953), Vincent O. Carter's *The Bern Book* (1973), and Teju Cole's essay "Black Body" (2014), Ferraro shows how these accounts of being African American in Switzerland act also as a vehicle for the exploration of American cultural identities. Written at quite different historical moments but all from an authorial location in Switzerland, these texts also reveal different speculative futures based on different pasts. Francesca de Lucia turns to film, an important expressive medium for Afrofuturists, and specifically the Afrofuturistic elements of Boots Ridley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) and Juel Taylor's *They Cloned Tyrone* (2023). Her discussion shows how the conventions of Blaxploitation as well as of science-fiction, speculative fiction, and dystopian fiction work to expose the racial determination of Black identity. The complexity of Black identity, past, present, and future, is complicated by Viola Marchi who, in her essay, highlights a troubling ethical issue that arises from the wide dissemination of images of Black suffering and victimhood in the context of institutional white violence (like police brutality); specifically, the cost of mobilizing political resistance in terms of the continuing spectacle of Black precarity and victimry. In Marchi's analysis, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story "Zimmer Land" (2018) becomes the occasion to reflect upon the possibilities for the future when the archive of images, which perpetuates the spectacle of the Black body, is reframed to expose the generative structures of racialized capitalism and alternative structures of legibility are revealed.

The essays gathered in Section Three look to the pasts, presents, and futures of Indigenous American literature, deploying the concept of Indigenous Futurisms. The two essays that open this section engage with the work of Anishinaabe scholar, theorist, and creative writer Gerald Vizenor whose work was generative of Grace Dillon's coining of the term, "Indigenous Futurisms." Yifei Jing explores Vizenor's recent historical novel, *Waiting for Wovoka: Envoy of Good Cheer and Liberty* (2023) and the significance of the Anishinaabe dream songs that are embedded in the narration of historical events, reimagining and redirecting the events of history towards Indigenous futures. The issue of Native American tem-

poralities provides the focus of Diana Martsynkovska's analysis of Vizenor's short story, "Custer on the Slipstream" (originally published in 1978 in Vizenor's *Wordarrows: Native States of Literary Sovereignty*). This key text in the literary corpus of Indigenous Futurism was reprinted in Dillon's aforementioned anthology, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012). Martsynkovska shows how, in this narrative, Vizenor challenges the understanding of time that is embedded in colonialist epistemologies. Various functions of time within an Anishinaabe cosmology – ceremony, circular time, land-based temporality – are explored to show the potential of Indigenous science fiction to liberate Indigenous identity from pre-modern stereotypes and to liberate Indigenous futures. The concept of time employed by Niki Karamanidou, in her account of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), is informed by Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence": "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The colonial appropriation of Indigenous land, environmental destruction, and anti-Native epistemic violence are all extended temporal processes that assault Indigenous sovereignty. Karamanidou argues that Thomas King deploys characters from mythic time, like Trickster, in the narrative present as a powerful strategy of decolonial resistance against colonialist violence. The same kinds of Indigenous challenge to the linear chronological model of time that belongs to colonialist epistemology are explored by Judit Kádár with reference to Joy Harjo's memoir *Crazy Brave* (2012) and Louis Owens's novel *Nightland* (1996), in the context of her wide-ranging survey of Southwestern Mixedblood writing, with which the volume concludes.

Like dominoes in reverse, this volume is held up by, and has been supported by, a number of very significant forces: the outstanding papers presented at the 2024 conference of the Swiss Association for North American Studies (SANAS) which, in turn was made possible by the kind support of a number of institutions. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the assistance furnished by SANAS, the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW), and the Embassy of Canada in Switzerland for their outstanding generosity, and also the University of Geneva for the support that made possible the conference from which these essays emerged. I would like to thank Aïcha Bouchelaghem for her extensive organizational support before, during, and after the conference. My col-

league at the University of Fribourg Thomas Austenfeld (then the SANAS Treasurer) supported the financial organization of the conference in key ways and I thank him warmly for his cheerful collegiality. Matthew Scully (University of Lausanne) as the SANAS Secretary reliably ran communications support, which was much appreciated. I want to express my profound gratitude for the work of the peer reviewers, who gave generously of their time and expertise to comment productively on the essays that comprise this book. Particular thanks go to Tammy Imboden, the dedicated and eagle-eyed copyeditor of this volume, and to the General Editor of SPELL, Ina Habermann.

References

Brooks, Van Wyck. “On Creating a Usable Past.” *The Dial*, vol. 64, no. 764, 1918, pp. 337–341.

Half-Earth Socialism: A Planetary Crisis Planning Game. Design by Son La Pham and Frances Tseng, 2022. play.half.earth/. Accessed 29 September 2025.

Taylor, Taryne Jade, Isiah Lavender III, Grace L. Dillon, and Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, editors. *Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms*. Routledge, 2024.

Connelly, A.J. “Federal Government’s Growing Banned Words List Is Chilling Act of Censorship.” *PEN America*, 28 April 2025. pen.org/banned-words-list/. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Dillon, Grace L., editor. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science-Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.

---. “Beyond the Grim Dust of What *Was* to a Radiant Possibility of What Could *Be*: Two-Spirit Survivance Stories.” *Love Beyond Body, Space, and Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*, edited by Hope Nicholson with Erin Cossar and Sam Beiko, Bedside Press, 2016, pp. 5–7.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Penguin, 1950.

Lavender III, Isiah and Lisa Yaszek, editors. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*. Ohio State UP, 2020.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

Taylor, Taryne Jade. “Introduction to CoFuturisms.” *Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms*, Routledge, 2024, pp. 1–8.

Vint, Sherryl. “Retconning America.” SANAS Biennial Conference, “American Futures,” 7–8 Nov. 2024, University of Geneva. Keynote Address. unige.ch/lettres/angle/application/files/5917/3015/0681/SANAS2024_Program_28Oct24.pdf.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2025.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Wordarrows: Native States of Literary Sovereignty*. U Nebraska P, 1978.

Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review Press, 2013.