A Bridge through Time: Epistolary Form and Nonlinear Temporality in Stephen Graham Jones's *Ledfeather*

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In an essay on Stephen Graham Jones's third novel, *The Bird Is Gone* (2003), Birgit Däwes explores the colonial politics of linear time. Däwes argues that *The Bird Is Gone* "destabilizes linear hierarchies of chronology and thus radically challenges previously established discourses" through an "intricately transversal structure" wherein "events and characters are interrelated across centuries through unique narrative and symbolic techniques—back to Columbus and beyond, to Quetzalcoatl and the migration from Siberia, and forward into an unspecified future" (113). For Däwes, the resulting "densely woven web of nonlinear semantic and structural crossings" of *The Bird Is Gone* "powerfully defeats western historiography, poses creative alternatives to linear time, and thus effectively engages Indigenous systems of knowledge" (113). Six novels later, Jones continued this project of structural experimentation in an exploration of nonlinear temporality in his novel *Ledfeather* (2008), turning this time to the epistolary to create a hybridized literary form capable of representing nonlinear, spatialized time.

The epistolary "has a broader function than many other modes" in that its ""very looseness" permits integration with other literary forms (Kauffman XIV). This inherent looseness offers a logical entry point as Jones experiments with literary

hybridizations to contend with multiple distinct but interconnected narratives in a single text. Jones's initial introduction of the epistolary in *Ledfeather* establishes two seemingly independent narratives; the epistolic narrative of Francis Dalimpere, Indian Agent for a Montana Blackfeet reservation in the 1880s; and the non-epistolic narrative of Doby Saxon, a Blackfeet teenager living on the same reservation one hundred years later. As the novel progresses, however, the barriers between the two primary narrative timelines of Saxon and Dalimpere began to wane. Jones's subversion and deconstruction of the epistolary form mirrors the collapse of the novel's two independent narratives as they conflate to become a single, interactive, and cohabitated temporality inhabiting the same textual space, where each narratives' respective form slowly collapses, as well, until the Dalimpere sections become less epistolic, and Saxon's sections become increasingly more so.

The result of this hybridization is the introduction of a new atemporal textual paradigm capable of replicating an Indigenous perspective where space is the vessel of memory, history, and narrative more so than time. In this new atemporal textual space, historical and ancestral trauma is addressed and exorcized by Jones's characters through the interaction between past, present, and future. Jones uses the epistolary form to present two distinct narratives containing separate temporal moments coexisting within the same textual structure simultaneously, undermining Western

concepts of linear time and giving space primacy over time in mapping history, memory, and narrative. Jones then demonstrates the authoritative nature of Indigenous systems of knowledge by deconstructing his epistolary narrative to chart the assimilation of its colonial perspective into that of an Indigenous one. This process of hybridization, deconstruction, and assimilation contributes to a return to what Mark Rifkin has called "Indigenous temporal sovereignty" (2) by creating a textual paradigm capable of replicating Indigenous temporal and spatial ways of knowing.

The divide between Western and Indigenous ways of knowing, especially as it pertains to concepts of time and space, has long been discussed by Indigenous studies scholars, with many calling for new forms or approaches aimed at reclaiming Indigenous ontological sovereignty. In his highly influential work *God Is Red* (1994), Vine Deloria Jr. argues that "American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning," while Euro-Americans "review the movement of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light" (62). The separation results in a foundational divide between conceptions of history between the two groups, wherein "statements of either group do not make much sense when transferred from one context to the other" (Deloria 63). In light of this divide, Däwes summarizes how "Deloria calls for a reconceptualization of history in spatial terms,

whereby, 'the story itself is important, not its precise chronological location'" (Däwes 115). This return to space and place-based models of time and history has become a central tenant of conceptualizing Indigenous futures. Daniel R. Wildcat notes how the very foundations of many "different tribal identities" are "fundamentally spatial in character" and considers an Indigenized future where "humanity has reached a 'time' when spatial or place-centered considerations are emerging around the world" (431, 438). Responding directly to Deloria's work, Glen Coulthard argues that such an understanding of "land and/or place… anchors many Indigenous peoples' critique of colonial relations of force and command, but also our visions of what a truly post-colonial relationship of peaceful co-existence might look like" (80).

As I argue below, this conflict between Western and Indigenous temporal understanding, and the disenfranchising impact it has on the depicted Blackfeet people, plays a central role in *Ledfeather*. In his influential work *Blackfeet Physics* (1994), F. David Peat locates concepts of spatialized and nonlinear time directly to the Blackfeet culture which Jones takes as his subject in *Ledfeather*. Regarding Western conceptions of temporality, Peat writes, "time… was an ever-flowing stream that moved, without resistance or change of pace, from the past into the future… Bodies are immersed in the constantly flowing river of time and nothing that we can do can alter the speed or direction of this flow. Time is linear and totally independent of us

and of all the workings of the cosmos" (199). Conversely, Peat argues that the Blackfeet conception of temporality sees time as "animate," "alive," so that "all of time can be accessed from within the present moment" (199). In the modern history of the United States, however, the two perspectives have hardly been on equal footing, as Mark Rifkin explains:

> U.S. settler colonialism produces its own temporal formation, with its own particular ways of apprehending time, and the state's policies, mappings, and imperatives generate the frame of reference (such as plotting events with respect to their place in national history and seeing change in terms of forms of American progress). More than just affecting ideologies of discourses of time, that network of institutionalized authority over 'domestic' territory also powerfully shapes the possibilities for interaction, development, and regularities within it (Rifkin 2).

The result of this institutionalized authority over both time and space is the systemic denial of what Rifkin calls "Indigenous *temporal sovereignty*" (Rifkin 2). Jones's hybridized novel allows for an obvious textual divide between these opposing worldviews. The letters from an Indian agent within *Ledfeather* demonstrate an attempt to achieve such a dynamic of institutionalized authority over Indigenous temporality, wherein the white Indian Agent works to catalog events, Indigenous spaces, and

Indigenous figures within a U.S. settler colonialist temporal formation. As I will demonstrate, however, Jones deconstructs this portion of the narrative and slowly assimilates the Indian agent into an Indigenous spatial and nonlinear temporal worldview, simultaneously dissolving the assumed U.S. settler colonialism temporal formation and replacing it with an Indigenous one. This process works toward Indigenous temporal sovereignty and acts as a response to calls for spatialized conceptions of history and memory from the likes of Deloria, Wildcat, and Coulthard.

Ledfeather is a hybrid text, where the epistolary narrative is contained and framed by a more traditional prose narrative. When reading a hybrid text like *Ledfeather*, the reader is presented with two narrative timelines; the timeline of the main narrative where the reader of the correspondence physically exists, and the timeline encapsulated within the text of the letter. Such is the case in *Ledfeather*, which opens with six sections set in the late 20th century on a Blackfeet reservation in Montana, where Saxon, the reader of the letters, is the central figure. Dalimpere's letters physically exist within the broader narrative of the novel as objects that Saxon can carry around from place to place to be visited as "islands of the day before," a phrase used by Russell West-Pavlov to discuss postmodern time but is useful in informing Jones's depiction of Indigenous temporality (137).[1] The sixth section ends with Saxon tossing the stack of Dalimpere's letters, which he had retrieved from a

museum, at a passing car, before gathering them back up and beginning to read them. The section ends abruptly mid-sentence, and the reader is transported to around one hundred years previous, on the same Blackfeet reservation, where the last sentence of the previous section, "but he was stuck right at the first of it, sounding it out, just saying," is completed with the opening word of the first epistle—"Claire" (46-47). Upon the letters' appearance in Saxon's narrative, a second narrative timeline is introduced.

This arrangement creates a disruption of linear temporality, as the main narrative is suddenly broken, and the reader is presented with a new narrative "present"– one that has theoretically already passed within the timeline of the main narrative, but which is conveyed in the present tense, as the writer of the letter was "inhabiting the present" at the time of writing (Visconti 299). Janet Altman similarly notes how the "letter writer is anchored in a present time" which is encapsulated and contained within the epistle (117). The represented "I" narrator of the correspondence and the reader of that letter do not, therefore, exist at the same moment, in the same "present," but both "presents" exist simultaneously, as Melanie Micir explains: "The temporal divide present in the initial composition and reception of the letters—that is, the separation of the time of writing from the time of reading—expands into the necessary duality of time" (Micir 44). In the space of one shared sentence, Saxon is

sitting on the side of the road in the 1980s reading the letters "in his stupid way, where his lips followed what was on the page" (46) and Dalimpere is sitting in his federal quarters writing to his wife, Claire, on October 15. 1884. The duality of time expands across the landscape, as the present moment of the two narratives layer atop one another in *Ledfeather's* Montana.

The permanence of the represented moment in the letters permits the "present" of each correspondence to be revisited across time and space, as "the letters, deposited in one generation, are available to be interpreted… by subsequent generations" (Micir 44). This is precisely what Jones does in *Ledfeather*, opening with a narrative in the 1980s before disrupting it by depositing "islands of the day before" in the form of Dalimpere's letters. The sudden break in Saxon's narrative initiates a run of eleven consecutive epistolary chapters where, presumably, Saxon remains in his own time reading the letters. Each of these two primary narratives—that of Saxon's and Dalimpere's—then unfold in fits and starts throughout the novel, each simultaneously possessing their own "present," despite happening one-hundred years apart, before subsequently collapsing into a shared textual space. Inherent in the epistolary form where both epistles and narrative prose exists, therefore, is a representation of a nonlinear timeline that jumps back and forth chronologically, presenting the reader with a frequently changing "present." After taking advantage of the inherent

nonlinearity of hybrid epistolary texts, Jones then turns to subverting standards of the epistolary form to further complicate concepts of linear temporality and establish his dual narratives as more beholden to the physical space of the reservation than to chronology.

Disrupting the Epistolary Pact

When the earliest letters enter into the narrative of *Ledfeather*, Jones establishes many standards of the epistolary form only to subsequently subvert them. The first letter retains all the basic structural components of the epistolary form, beginning with an addressee, a first-person address of that addressee, and ending with a signature and full date—"October the 15th of 1884" (Jones 48). Dalimpere's first correspondence to his wife, Claire, who remains back East, acts as the initiator of what Altman calls an "epistolary pact," in which the writer of the letter sends out a "call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world" (Altman 89). The addressee of this first letter paired with Dalimpere's signature that closes it establishes an "I-you relationship," through which the "'I' becomes defined relative to the *you* whom he addresses" (Altman 118). Jones then strengthens this epistolary pact by turning to one of the oldest and most common genres of the literary epistle—the love letter.

In her highly influential study on the epistolary form, Altman notes that the "letter form seems tailored for the love plot, with its emphasis on separation and

reunion" (14). Altman highlights this aspect of the form by analyzing several of the letters in Ovid's *Epistulae Heroidum*, a collection framed as correspondences between mythological female figures like Dido, Briseis, and Penelope, and their respective absent lovers. Many of the letters in *Epistulae Heroidum* "repeatedly bemoan the distance separating [the mythological women] from their lovers" (Altman 13). In an analysis that could be of the letters in Jones's novel, Altman continues to break down the archetype of the love letter:

> The lover who takes up his pen to write his loved one is conscious of the interrelation of presence and absence and the way in which his very medium of communication reflects both the absence and presence of his addressee. At one moment he may proclaim the power of the letter to make the distant addressee present and at the next lament the absence of the loved one and the letter's powerlessness to replace the spoken word or physical presence (Altman 14).

Dalimpere regularly embodies these yearnings, writing laments like "the absence of you, the resulting incompleteness of myself. I should never have left your embrace. I should never have left you alone" and "I was wrong to ever leave you. I feel it more every day, every night" (Jones 52 and 77). The romantic lean of Dalimpere's early letters solidifies the call for an epistolary pact which would traditionally serve the role of closing the spatial divide for the members of the pact. Altman explains how the letter

"function[s] as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver," which allows "the epistolary author […] to emphasize either the distance or the bridge" (13). The "distance" Altman introduces here is a spatial one—that between the physical location of the sender and that of the receiver—as well as a metaphorical one, where the letter "is seen as facilitating a union" bringing two individuals together (Altman 14). In his first letter, Dalimpere makes clear the bridge he hopes to establish adheres to similar concerns of spatial and romantic reunion, when he imagines the space between he and Claire collapsing, writing of a day dream where his wife arrives at the reservation on a nonexistent trainline, before flipping the fantasy to consider his own return to the East (46-47).

Despite these persistent romantic calls, however, Jones disrupts the epistolary pact by denying the intended response, repurposing Dalimpere's letters as a temporal bridge instead of a spatial one. Dalimpere repeatedly expresses doubt that Yellow Tail, a Blackfeet man who Dalimpere regularly interacts with and an ancestor of Saxon's, is carrying out the delivery of these correspondences. The first mention of this arrangement in Dalimpere's letters is when the Indian Agent notes that a Blackfeet man who is watching him "even as [Dalimpere] writes… knows something" (Jones 48). This, Dalimpere explains, "is the man I've been reduced to entrusting to deliver my correspondence to the stage" (48). Dalimpere's trepidation goes beyond his own

letters being intercepted, however, as he speculates in the second intended correspondence that he is "dead twice over," which "would explain why none of [Claire's] letters have found [him]" (Jones 50). This revelation of no incoming letters implies another fear of Dalimpere's—even if Claire is not receiving his letters, why would she not send her own?

In a lament that encapsulates the duality of presence and absence in Dalimpere's letters, he writes, "Claire. Clair. Clare. If I spell your name in every way will that force the world to give you to me, or will it make it seem I'm a stranger who doesn't deserve you, an admirer who has never received a missive from you in all this time and thus knows not the letters that make you up?" (77). The disruption of the epistolary pact repositions Dalimpere's letters as what Altman calls an "emblem of separation" (Altman 15), the opposite of the bridge Dalimpere hopes them to be. The space between the two distant points grows, and the union between man and wife is called into question by the disruption of the call and response. This disruption figures prominently into the narrative, as Dalimpere goes so far as confronting other readers in his letters, writing "Yellow Tail, if you can follow my hand, know that in his indirect, shuffling ways, Marsh told me about your wife, whom you refused to name" (52).

The fractured epistolary pact is complicated further through the dramatic irony of the reader understanding that the letters likely were never delivered, due to their

presence in the museum where Saxon found them decades after Dalimpere's death, making Saxon, not Claire, the eventual receiver of the correspondence. The dramatic irony of the undelivered letters is eventually alleviated in the sixth letter, when Dalimpere notes that "it's not as if I'm even addressing [the letters] anymore" (66), confirming for both Dalimpere and the reader that the letters now serve as more of a journal for Dalimpere—a call to his absent lover which will never receive a response. The letters, like Dalimpere himself, remain isolated in the space of the reservation. Jones thus subverts the traditional function of the epistle "as a connector between two distant points" across space, and instead facilitates a union between two individuals inhabiting the same space, one hundred years apart from one another. Even Dalimpere eventually sees the failure of his epistolary pact and the new function it will serve, as a sort of historical document, a bridge between his moment in time and the future, writing "I leave you this only as a record… I keep these missives to you rolled tightly in a burlap sack in the hollow post of the frame to my bed" (Jones 72).

Denying this call and response highlights how the memory and historical narrative embedded in the letters are dependent on the land, the space which the memory inhabits, just as the Blackfeet "anchor the story to the land" in the novel (Jones 109). Given the option "to emphasize either the distance or the bridge" (Altman 13) of the epistolary form, Jones subverts both, having the letters remain in stasis as

they slowly march across a time bridge to a future generation. When Saxon accesses the letters, he unleashes the present-of-the-past onto the landscape and a layering effect takes place. The deployable nature of the epistolary "present" and the duality of time created as a result provides Jones with raw material to create a new textual structure where the memories of many moments simultaneously cohabit the same textual space. The Montana landscape that acts as *Ledfeather's* setting holds the memories of both Dalimpere and Saxon's narratives, so as the book moves forward, a single space is populated by the ghostly memories of both characters.

Ghosts of the Past and Future

When the narrative returns to Saxon, a similar transition between sections occurs, with Dalimpere's narrative ending mid-sentence, "so that all I can see is," and Saxon's section completing the thought with, "his back" (79, 80). This time, however, the abrupt change acts as more than a simple disruption of narrative, but as a fusion or overlaying of the two. The object that links the sections, the "back," exists physically in each of the character's narratives. Mikhail Bakhtin defines his theory of the literary chronotope as the instances where "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (Bakhtin 84). In the following sections, a specific plot of what was historically Blackfeet land but is now divided between reservation and federal lands, acts as a shared literary chronotope for Saxon and Dalimpere, where

their individual memories and experiences, as well as other memories contained by the land, all collapse in the same temporal space.

In the next several sections, both Saxon and Dalimpere are traversing the same landscape during a snowstorm, one-hundred years apart. Saxon wanders the landscape through various experiences of his life; following his father, Earl Yellowtail, into the National Park on the day of his father's death, or running out of the casino the day his mother attacks the pit boss, who was trying to cut Saxon off from gambling. Other moments are partially his memories and partially belong to other eras tied to the land, such as when Saxon steps out of the museum after taking Dalimpere's letters and the land he walks into contains the "windswept grass" of Dalimpere's time *and* the "blacktop" of Saxon's own (Jones 91). Saxon's movement through this space begins the process of creating what György Lukács's calls a literary cartograph, a theory of literary spatial mapping closely related to Bakhtin's chronotope. Lukács's concept of literary cartography considers the writer as mapmaker, and the character of a narrative as "surveyor of spaces" (Tally Jr. 48). As the character moves through the textual space, they "sew these spaces into a new unity" and "ultimately 'invent' the world so surveyed and stitched together" to create something much like a narrative map—a textual structure which orients the reader and makes sense of the textual world (Tally,

Jr. 48). Robert Tally, Jr. notes the growing primacy of space to narrative driven by this process:

> Narrative… would seem more closely tied to time, as *narrative* by definition retains a powerfully temporal aspect. That is, narrative entails the temporality of the plot—a beginning, a middle, and end… whereas, arguably, a short poem maintains a 'spatial form' in which all parts are present at once (see Frank 1991: 18). However… narrative is also spatial, and the beginnings middles and ends of a given story may refer as much to sites or locations in a particular spatial organization as to moments in time in a temporal one (Tally, Jr. 49).

Both Saxon and Dalimpere create such a literary cartograph in their movement through their shared space. At issue for Jones, however, is the centrality of space in containing a *multiplicity* of Blackfeet narratives, histories, and memories. A literary cartograph charting a single narrative moment would not suffice to replicate Blackfeet temporality. To return to Deloria Jr., space holds primacy over a narrative's "precise chronological location" (Deloria 112). Peat notes how similar, layered mapping functions in Blackfeet culture, where a "map in the head" is created which acts as an "expression of the relationship of the land to The People" (Peat 86). This internalized map "transcends any mere geographical representation, for in it are enfolded the songs, ceremonies,

histories of a people" and contains "cycles of time that, while stretching back into the distant past, can be renewed in the immediate present" (Peat 86).

To replicate this atemporal space, Jones depicts a literary cartograph where several moments, past, present, and future, all exist within the same literary chronotope, made possible by the layering of disparate "present" moments in *Ledfeather*. The surveys of space carried out by Saxon and Dalimpere are not separate—they are not a map laid over a map—instead, they are like the charting of two journeys on the same shared map. Times collapse on space, on land to create a textual space that is "animate, processual, and part of a shared consciousness" (Baudemann 172). These two journeys are the pertinent ones to this particular literary cartograph, but they are crisscrossed with eons of similar tales on this land by the Blackfeet.

In what is perhaps an attempt to create a "'spatial form' in which all parts are present at once" (Tally, Jr. 49) like that of a poem, Jones signifies the duality of time collapsing on the same space simultaneously by blurring the lines between his two forms and structurally replicating the presence of two narratives. The transition between Dalimpere's letters and Saxon's narrative (79-80) which uses "his back" as a hinge, holds some structural resemblance to the epistolary mode; the two words that cross over, "his back," open Saxon's section above the rest of the text in the way the

addressee does of Dalimpere's letters. Saxon then begins to blur his memories with Dalimpere's experience when he mistakenly laments the lost "horses" instead of the lost snowmobiles (81). The next time Saxon accidentally thinks "horses" instead of "snowmobiles," the word is crossed out on the page, "to the ~~horses~~ *snow*mobiles" (81), creating a structural representation of the presence of both Saxon and Dalimpere in a single textual space, despite the temporal divide. These crossed out phrases and replacements, a technique termed *sous rature* by Martin Heidegger, create what Baudemann calls "time-slipping" within a given section, instead of just between sections (166).[2] Other narrative slips and fixes continue to appear throughout Saxon's experience, such as "head lanterns" being crossed out and replaced by "headlights" (91), extensively connecting both narratives in a shared textual space. Leah Pennywark explains these moments as, "Doby and Francis's shared consciousness… trying to hold together two different times and two different identities that cannot exist together and yet do" (104). Jones's hybridized textual structure makes this seemingly impossible duality possible by layering various moments of time atop the land which anchors it.

We see the density of these various moments in time collapsing on Jones's literary cartograph when the narrative again turns to Dalimpere, whose next section, beginning on page 93, discards the epistolary form to mirror the form of Saxon's section. The section opens like Saxon's previous one, with a single word acting as a

hinge to the preceding section's final sentence. While the word that opens the section is "Claire" it is not in the traditional addressee form, where the name is followed by a comma. Instead, it is finished with a period akin to the "his back" which frames Saxon's section starting on page 80. Furthermore, the "I-you" relationship of the earlier letters, which is essential to the epistolary form, is absent. The fracturing of the epistolary pact limits Dalimpere's ability to define his "I" by Claire's "you." As a result of this fracturing, the "I-you" relationship falls away in this section and Dalimpere is dislodged from the "pivotal present tense" of the epistolary form, and instead navigates the textual space of this section as Saxon does—an evolution of epistolary narrative time which I will cover in greater depth shortly. The merging of both form and narrative acts as a spatial form where two moments are present at once and past, present, and future subsequently interact independent of linear chronology.

Much has been said by critics about the past's impact on the present in *Ledfeather*. Frances Washburn notes how "references to the land… in *Ledfeather*… hold the trauma of the past and bring it, literally, into the present" (Washburn 66), and Pennywark writes that "the seemingly dead past haunts the living" (89) in the novel. But the future plays an equally haunting role in *Ledfeather*. When the narrative returns to Dalimpere, he is lost in his own blizzard of the 1880s, looking for Yellow Tail, who had been leading time to the dugout home of Catches Weasel where a young Piegan

boy named Lead Feather is suffering from a grievous, self-inflicted injury. As he wanders through the wilderness, Dalimpere stumbles upon several ghostly forms from the future; he enters Browning, the town on the reservation from Saxon's time, where he encounters Earl Yellowtail, descendent of the Yellow Tail he had been following through the storm moments before. As he walks through the future town, Dalimpere leans against a building only for it to "waver and dissipate, the storm blowing through as if it wasn't there at all" like an apparition (107). Shortly after, Dalimpere crawls into what he believes to be Catches Weasel's dugout but is in fact the concrete shelter of Saxon's time (Jones 108), where he again meets another figure from the future—Saxon's cousin, Jamie, who overdoses in that same structure decades after Dalimpere's life. Dalimpere imagines this place as an "encampment of the dead" (104) and "ghost ridge," but they are not ghosts of the past which haunt the Indian Agent; while he is certainly traumatized by his actions in the past of denying the Blackfeet their federal rations as a form of punishment, Dalimpere's true ghosts are the Blackfeet in the future who will continue to pay for those actions. In Jones's atemporal literary cartograph, just as the past does to the future, the future creeps back into the past, into Dalimpere's present, creating what might be called islands of the day after, and they are populated by ghosts of the future dead.

The literary cartograph that Jones creates in *Ledfeather* is a space where the past, present, and future all interact with one another. The result is a new textual space which answers Deloria's call for a spatialized history, where land is privileged over chronology as a vessel for memory. Completing his definition of the literary chronotope, Bakhtin explains how "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). Peat cites a similar metaphor specific to Blackfoot conception of the landscape, writing "the Blackfoot say that to walk on the land is to walk on your own flesh" where "the memory of this landscape transcends anything we have in the West, for its trees, rocks, animals, and plants are also imbued with energies, powers, and spirits" (Peat 86). In Jones's literary chronotope, the Blackfeet landscape has the flesh of many moments layered atop it. If "the chronotope is the place where the knots of the narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin 250), then Jones brings the knots of all moments from centuries of Blackfeet to bear in one space in his new hybrid textual space. This fusion and hybridity of forms and narrative is mirrored by the same process in Dalimpere and Saxon, as they come together to share a consciousness. Jones demonstrates the continuation of this assimilation of Dalimpere through the continued subversion and deconstructions of Dalimpere's epistolic narrative.

Escaping the Pivotal Present

Jones's subversion of the epistolary form reorders the power structure between Dalimpere and the Blackfeet people. Dalimpere is traumatized by his guilt grounded in his actions that led to the Starvation Winter where 600 Piegan died.[3] The event acts as a sort of apparition, just on the margins of Dalimpere's letters throughout. In moments when Jones is closest to confronting the trauma, the epistolic standards are most tenuous. Jones's continued subversion and evolution of the epistolary form positions Dalimpere's perspective as a trauma narrative as that perspective copes with the trauma of its colonizing decisions. In the process of this coping, Dalimpere is indoctrinated into a spatially minded understanding of time which dislodges him from his linear temporal reality and disrupts the epistolary form in which he documents this assimilation.

By presenting the tragic events of the historical Starvation Winter through the eyes of the perpetrator of these events instead of the victim, Jones turns to what René Girard calls the "perspective of the persecutors" (6). Girard explains how persecutors of massacres "are convinced that their violence is justified; they consider themselves judges, and therefore they must have guilty victims" (6). Dalimpere's actions take place in a broader scheme of persecution, as both his supervisor, M. Sheffield, and his predecessor, Andrew Collins III, play a pivotal role in crafting the

circumstances of Dalimpere's decision-making. It is later revealed that Collins is actually responsible for the inciting incident, the theft of a blanket, for which Dalimpere decides to punish the Blackfeet, contributing to Dalimpere's realization that he has persecuted a guiltless victim for the transgressions of the network of persecution. In spite of his subsequent guilt, Dalimpere still firmly places himself in the role of the self-righteous persecutor when he finally gets around to confirming the extent of his own role in the Starvation Winter, as he callously recounts, "I had no choice. It was about discipline. If a child misbehaves, should he not be chastised?" (Jones 174).[4] Jones opens his letters with the perspective of the persecutor before depicting the "traumatic disintegration" of Dalimpere's identity, which causes his "consciousness to become increasingly hybrid" (Pennywark 101) reversing the process of assimilation of Blackfeet to Western values and systems of knowledge. Jones repositions the Indian Agent as a traumatized voyager in a strange land, and through his immersion in the land, he is slowly indoctrinated into the Blackfeet systems of knowing, so that his "very self, his identity as both a white man and a representative of the colonizing power, is gradually erased with each successive letter he writes for Claire" (Baudemann 154).

In Dalimpere's earliest letters, he exists firmly within the linear temporal understanding of Western thought. As Dalimpere realizes his isolation, however, completed by the fracturing of the epistolary pact, his grasp on linear time slips.

Sequentially, the first six letters are dated, "October the 15th of 1884," (48) "1884" (53), "21 d'octobre" (55), letter four has no date (60), "10 novembre" (63), and "novembre 1884" (66). Dalimpere also demonstrates a grasp of linear chronology in the early epistles through inter-letter references and comments like "it's been three days since I last wrote you" (49), a claim which opens the second letter. In the same letter where Dalimpere writes that he is no longer addressing the letters, thus confirming to himself that the epistolary pact had been broken, the Indian Agent reflects on the land's ability to reshape an individual: "Perhaps… personality or cultural attitude is in fact defined by the land one is immersed in" (Jones 66). Once Dalimpere realizes he is isolated on the Blackfeet land, his grasp of linearity slips, a fact evident in the following letter, which Dalimpere dates, "1883, 1884, 188-" (67), demonstrating his inability to grasp on to a set date. Dalimpere begins to accept how his immersion in the landscape slowly redefines his system of knowledge, writing that he "would rather be Indian than Indian agent" and he slowly becomes "a product of" the land, and his path to assimilation begins (Jones 77, 106).

As Dalimpere attempts to assuage his guilt, he dedicates himself "completely in the survival of one Indian boy, this Lead Feather" (Jones 152), who Dalimpere had witnessed attempting suicide instead of suffering the reality of the harsh winter brought on by the botched decisions of the Indian Agent. But this is not an entirely

selfless venture as "Francis's attempt to save a Piegan boy… is an attempt to rewrite his own history" (Pennywark 96). Dalimpere's immersion in the land has a profound impact on his outlook, however, and as he navigates the Blackfeet landscape, he is not only sharing a textual space with a Saxon from one hundred years in the future, but a consciousness with him, as well. This potentiality, seen in the mirroring between the two characters' trek through snow, the strike-throughs which replicate both Saxon and Dalimpere's consciousnesses simultaneously as previously discussed, and through Dalimpere possessing "memories not [his] own" (147) when he is traversing the future town of Browning, is later revealed to be a product of an agreement between Dalimpere and Yellow Tail (155). Dalimpere frames this agreement as penance, purgatory in the "Pagan landscape" (155):

> It was his punishment, to become Blackfeet, to be Piegan. To live on the reservation he'd created, the situation he was already leaving behind. To replace his own life with an Indian one, and thus know firsthand the end result of his policies. An end result generations away from last Winter, just so he could see the scope of what he'd done, that it still had traceable effect. So that, in a sense, he could be inflicting it upon himself (117).

Dalimpere's immersion in the landscape and guilt from his "role as a tool of colonial oppression" that "leads to his psychic destruction" (Pennywark 100) set the stage for

the Indian Agent's assimilation, but his new identity is fully initiated when he makes this deal with Yellow Tail. The letters become a ceremony, through which Dalimpere dislodges himself from Western linear chronology and begins to understand history's dependency on the land and forcing him to address his impact on the Blackfeet. This process acts as the "sacred space of the ceremony" where "one can enter the flux of time and move within its vastness" which Peat argues is a "fundamental component of Blackfeet temporality" (199). To replicate this process in his hybrid literary form, Jones depicts Dalimpere finally breaking free completely from the linear restraints of the epistolary form.

Altman explains that the letter writer writes in a "pivotal and impossible present tense" which acts as "a pivot for past and future events" (117-118). This results in the letter writer being "highly conscious of writing in a specific present against which past and future are plotted" (Altman 122). In his early letters, Dalimpere is firmly grounded in this present tense, referring to the past but not engaging with it.[5] In the earliest letters, the past operates just as Altman explains it does in the pivotal present tense—as "interloper, intervening to shed light on the present" (Altman 123). As Dalimpere assimilates into an Indigenous nonlinear and spatially based system of knowledge, his epistles break from the chronological restraints of the "pivotal present" wherein the past and future can only be addressed from a fixed "present," mirroring the

reconfiguring of his understanding of temporality. This is first seen at length in the previously discussed section, where Dalimpere moves through the wilderness in an active present tense (93). While the epistolic standards return in some subsequent letters, the deterioration of the pivotal present continues in Dalimpere's final letters. This deterioration of epistolic standards mirrors Dalimpere's own willingness to accept his pivotal role in the Starvation Winter. When he is most distant from understanding his own guilt, he presents the events firmly grounded in the "I-you" relationship, in the passive, writing "by my rude count… the Piegan numbers were nearly halved last winter, after they'd already been halved by pox" (Jones 66). As he approaches the reality of his role, however, the final vestiges of the epistolary form which had represented his attempt to catalog his experience in Blackfeet land in the temporal and historical framework of U.S. settler colonialism deteriorates, representing his final conversion to an Indigenous temporal model.

When Dalimpere finally gets to his confession, he opens the letter maintaining the "I-you" relationship: "I would need no pen, Claire" (159). He also starts this letter existing firming in the pivotal present tense, referring to past and future moments in relation to his letter-writing present: "When I woke it took me long minutes to place myself in this dug out" (159). When Dalimpere finally decides "it is time" (159) to provide his ceremonial confession, however, the "I" narrator recedes to give way to the

third-person "Indian Agent" and the absolute nature of the epistolary present tense similarly gives way to what instead resembles a memoir, where the reader "is transported to the world of a distant past, experiencing as his new present scenes from the life of the actor in the story rather than experiencing the present of the narrator telling the story" (Altman 122-123). This turn is evident immediately as Dalimpere works through his confession: "The Indian Agent for the Blackfeet was mucking the ration meat out of the tack house when the post came from his superior" (Jones 165). When the "I" narrator appears in this altered narrative, it initially serves a separate role than the "I" narrator of a letter. As Altman explains regarding memoir, "Even when the voice of the narrator interrupts momentarily our involvement in a past-become-present, the present of the memoir narrator intervenes only to shed light on the past that interests us, to add the illuminating perspective of now's reflections to the obscurity of then actions" (123). We see precisely such an intervention by the "I" narrator in Dalimpere's confession, when he returns briefly to lament again the fractured epistolary pact which shaped the decisions of the "Indian Agent" from which he has removed himself: "But allow me if you will how alone with myself I was… I longed for you, or, in lieu of you, just someone to remind me I was alive" (Jones 163). By returning to a memoir-like past-become-present, the letters themselves become a hybridized text, where Dalimpere can step lightly back and forth between his traumatic past and his

epistle present. This narrative movement mirrors his interaction across time he experienced in his trek across the snow, where the past and the future were experiential—pasts-and-futures-become-present. The disintegration of the "I" figure and the final liberation from the confines of the epistolary present are completed in Dalimpere's final letter.

The "I" narrator makes no appearance in this final letter, and the temporal relationship between letter writer and third-person subject makes it impossible for them to co-exist. Despite the presence of a clear addressee "Claire –" (181), and signatory, "Francis Dalimpere" (186), none of the "I-you" language which defines the epistolary form is present. The writer of the letter describes events that could only happen in a future separate from the pivotal present of Dalimpere-as-letter-writer, as the final letter describes how Dalimpere hands the very epistle which the scene is dictated in over to Yellow Tail before he "straightened himself atop the horse… and then this Indian Agent man rode away from his first federal posting, and was never seen again" (186). In these final letters, the necessary pivotal-present of the epistolary form "from which all else radiates" (Altman 122) is gone, and the letter writer writes of past and future moments in a more traditional narrative prose, living them instead of addressing them from a pivotal-present. This final deconstruction of the epistolary mode demonstrates Dalimpere's assimilation into a Blackfeet system of knowing where

he is liberated from the chronological temporal standards of the form so he can navigate both a past and future to address and exorcize his trauma.

Jones's *Ledfeather* offers a unique and evolutionary depiction of Indigenous conceptions of space and time. Evidenced by Däwes's work on *The Bird is Gone*, this is a project that Jones has revisited throughout his career, but it is also a project many other Indigenous writers have engaged with, as well. In an essay on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Craig Womack's *Drowning in Fire* (2001), Joseph Bauerkemper argues how "Nonlinear characteristics… are crucial to their narrations of Indigenous nationhood" (28). Laura Maria De Vos examines how Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) depicts spiralic temporality, which "refers to an Indigenous experience of time that is informed by a people's particular relationships to the seasonal cycles on their lands, and which acknowledges the present generations' responsibilities to the ancestors and those not yet born (2). These novels and many others work to reclaim Indigenous temporal sovereignty by introducing nonlinear and/or spatialized histories through the simple and radical act of depicting various Indigenous ways of knowing. They respond to calls by Deloria and Wildcat for spatialized and Indigenized futures. Jones's *Ledfeather* offers a unique contribution to this facet of Indigenous literature by hybridizing two traditionally Western literary forms to create a new atemporal textual structure, allowing him to both depict a nonlinear

and spatialized view of history and reverse the process of assimilation into a new temporal formation.

Ledfeather ends with Saxon symbolically resolving the long disrupted epistolary pact by delivering Dalimpere's letters to a girl named "Clairvoyant," as Saxon finally abandons his suicidal intentions he has fostered most of the book. The letters filled in much of Saxon's history for him, but in the final scene, he, too, adds to the long historical narrative by symbolically completing the delivery of the letters and contributing to the myth of a man surviving inside of a dead elk during a snowstorm—a story which figures prominently in Saxon and Dalimpere's shared history. The letters thus become more than just an extant historical document—they are themselves a new hybridized textual form which helps Saxon understand and cope with his own trauma, allowing him to continue on to that final temporal frontier which had not yet been traversed in the novel—his own future. By ending with the hopeful move toward a modern Blackfeet individual's future, *Ledfeather* speaks to an Indigenized world where Indigenous ontological and temporal sovereignty is again possible and a process of healing and renewal can take place.

Notes

[1] *Ledfeather*, like many other Indigenous novels, simultaneously "fits within many of the traditional tenets of postmodern literature and Native American Renaissance" (Gaudet 30).

[2] Baudemann offers "Spivak's translation of Derrida's adaption of Heidegger's term" of sous rature as "under erasure." See Baudemann's essay for more on Jones's use of sous rature as a means of narrative and historical erasure.
[3] Jones based this on historical events where hundreds of Blackfeet died during the winter of 1883-1884 due to mismanagement of federal supplies by federal employees. See Pennywark (p. 90).
[4] Pennywark importantly notes that, historically, the supplies Francis was withholding were "neither rations nor gifts but payment for a piece of land the Blackfeet sold the federal government in 1865 in exchange for $50,000 worth of goods annually for twenty years (Wise 68)" (Pennywark 92).
[5] Jones compares this quality of the epistolary form to Sándor Márai's novel *Embers*: "It's just about two old dues at a remote estate, just sitting by a fire and talking about things that happened fifty-eight or sixty years ago. And nothing happens. They're just talking about old stuff from forever ago, trying to figure out the past" (Stratton and Jones 28).

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