SFRA Review is an open access journal published four times a year by the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) since 1971. SFRA Review publishes scholarly articles and reviews. The Review is devoted to surveying the contemporary field of SF scholarship, fiction, and media as it develops.

Submissions

SFRA Review accepts original scholarly articles; interviews; review essays; individual reviews of recent scholarship, fiction, and media germane to SF studies.

All submissions should be prepared in MLA 8th ed. style and submitted to the appropriate editor for consideration. Accepted pieces are published at the discretion of the editors under the author's copyright and made available open access via a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

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SFRA Review History

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FROM THE SFRA REVIEW

From the Editor

Sean Guynes

THIS issue is my largest so far as editor, bringing together the usual features—an article on SF film as neoliberal allegory, a new column on SF in translation, and an interview with Skye Cervone—as well as two symposia. The first collects together several excellent essays reflecting on the fifth year anniversary of Jeff VanderMeer’s by now well-known Southern Reach Trilogy, consisting of Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance, all published in 2014. The second symposium collects just over a dozen papers from the 2019 SFRA conference held in Honolulu, Hawai’i.

This is also the first issue during which I was operating with an expanded editorial team, including the two new associate editors, Virginia Conn and Amandine Faucheux, and my partner in crime, Ian Campbell. We have been working closely to plan the future of the journal in cooperation with the SFRA Executive Committee, and working to expand the scope and breadth of what we do at SFRA Review. We intend to provide more information to SFRA members in the coming year, and will have much more to say at the 2020 meeting in Bloomington.

In addition to all the important changes to come, and the incredible articles and reviews in this issue, you will note that we are currently looking for two new editors: a Fiction Reviews Editor and an Assistant Fiction Reviews Editor. As part of our plans to expand the journal, we have brought on assistant reviews editors for every section and were already planning to announce a call for an Assistant Fiction Reviews Editor when Jeremy Brett, who has worked as the Fiction Reviews Editor for the past four years, announced his "retirement" from the position. His work has been invaluable to the journal, since SFRA Review remains one of the few journals in our field that reviews fiction—and has for going on fifty years. So I want to personally thank Jeremy for all of his work these past years. Whoever follows him will have big shoes to fill!

Finally, let me note that this will be the last issue of the Review with the sequential numbering—and isn’t 330 such a nice, round number! But why the change? Starting with the Winter 2020 issue, we will be moving to the volume/issue numbering scheme to celebrate our achievement of 50 volumes/years of publication with SFRA Review, vol. 50, no. 1, Winter 2020.

That’s all until next time. Be seeing you!
From the Managing Editor

Ian Campbell

I’VE been working with Arabic literature since before the turn of the century, but only began to focus on Arabic SF six or seven years ago, when it came to my attention as part of a different book project. Yet I grew up on SF: my 1970s childhood was nothing but plastic Apollo-Soyuz models and an in retrospect likely problematic mix of late-period Heinlein and self-consciously weird New Wave. So I’m steeped in the genre but a latecomer to the theory: there’s always a critic or book I’ve yet to fully experience.

Arabic SF is a new but vibrant discourse: while it dates from the mid-1960s, it’s only become visible to the slice of the public that reads literature in the last couple of decades. Written literary Arabic bears about the same relationship to the various spoken dialects as Chaucerian English does to the modern language(s), so there’s an odd tension in Arabic SF between the archaisms of the past and the technologies of the not-quite-future. Since much of the technology comes from outside the Arab world, there’s also tension between science as fundamentally foreign and the long, storied history of the dominance of Arabic speakers in science and technology in the Middle Ages. The discourse has much to offer, even if relatively little of it is yet available in translation: I highly recommend Ahmad Sa’dawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad.

I hope as managing editor to continue and expand the work SFRA Review has already done toward bringing to readers’ attention SF from previously-marginalized discourses, whether these be other cultures or languages or voices historically ignored or suppressed. Most of you are well aware that the overall diversity of subgenre, voice, topic, form, setting and character even in Anglophone Western SF has increased dramatically in recent years; I hope that I can do my part to bring the specifics of that diversity to your fingertips.

In addition, Sean Guynes and I want to expand the role of SFRA Review in offering a forum for scholarship. There will be much more to say about this as the process unfolds; for now, look for us to retain the same approach to reviews while we continue to focus on scholarship. I look forward to serving the community of SF readers and scholars.
Call for Fiction Reviews Editor

THE SFRA Review is seeking a Fiction Reviews Editor who will continue the Review’s 50-year history of providing critical scholarly reviews of recent sf. The ideal candidate will have a passion for and familiarity with the genre and will be aware of the major contemporary sf publishers, imprints, authors, trends, etc.

Because this position requires the solicitation of review copies and mailing of those copies to reviewers, we request that only folks with a department willing to pay the mailing costs apply. Thus, this position may be best for a tenure-track professor or an adjunct/lecturer/visiting professor with good departmental support for academic projects such as book review editing.

Prior editing experience is not essential, but it is desirable. Applicants should be SFRA members.

Responsibilities will include:
- Maintain contact with relevant publishers and distributors to secure review copies
- Update Google document of available works for review to be shared with the Editor
- Organize and maintain a database of reviewers
- Seek out and solicit possible/interested reviewers
- Edit submitted reviews as necessary
- Revise editorial guidelines as may become necessary
- Coordinate activities with the Assistant Fiction Review Editor in order to meet the review section goal of at least 5 fiction reviews per journal issue (20 per year)

To apply for the position of Fiction Reviews Editor, please send a short statement (200-300 words) that covers why you are interested in the position and your qualifications, as well as your CV to the SFRA Review Editor, Sean Guynes, by January 15, 2020 at guynesse@msu.edu. Please be sure to indicate whether your institution/department will be willing to support the cost of mailing books for review.
Call for Assistant Fiction Reviews Editor

THE SFRA Review is seeking an Assistant Fiction Reviews Editor. The ideal candidate will have a passion for and familiarity with sf. Because this position requires the solicitation of review copies and mailing of those copies to reviewers, we request that only folks with a department willing to pay the mailing costs apply. Prior editing experience is not essential, but it is desirable. Applicants should be SFRA members.

Responsibilities will include:

• Assisting the Fiction Reviews Editor in compiling a list of reviewable fiction items and soliciting review copies from publishers.
• Aiding the Fiction Reviews Editor in regularly soliciting content and expanding the contributors list
• Assisting the Fiction Reviews Editor with preparing final edits of reviews to be delivered to the Editor

To apply for the position of Assistant Fiction Reviews Editor, please send a short statement (200-300 words) that covers why you are interested in the position and your qualifications, as well as your CV to the SFRA Review Editor, Sean Guynes, by January 15, 2020 at guynesse@msu.edu. Please be sure to indicate whether your department will be willing to support the cost of mailing books for review.

* Selection process for Fiction Reviews Editor and Assistant Fiction Reviews Editor positions: The Editor and Managing Editor will choose the top three candidates (or two, depending on the size of the applicant pool) for each position and pass these to the editorial team, who as a whole will vote to decide on the Reviews Editors based on the senior editors’ selections and comments on candidates’ fit. The purpose of this particular process is to ensure the least amount of bias in selecting new Reviews Editors for SFRA Review.
FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

From the President

Keren Omry

WELL, I do believe that this is my last SFRA Review column! After four-a-year as President for the past three years, plus another two years as VP, I confess I will miss this. As I write, the election for the next SFRA President and Secretary is taking place and within a few weeks we will know who will be taking over the positions. I wish the best of luck for whoever wins and reiterate the warmest thanks to all the candidates who ran.

This election is also a first since it includes a ballot not just for EC positions but a vote for Award names. The chips are yet to fall but this has been a fascinating debate to watch. The energy with which members have stepped up to address a matter both political and charged, and the creativity of suggestions, have been inspiring. Once the new (or old) name is determined we will put back in motion the project to redesign the trophy in a way that the winners will get to take something home beyond just the memory of winning.

As 2019 wraps up and my role in the Executive Committee comes to an end, I reflect back on some of the achievements we have accomplished over the past few years: we formalized the first SFRA code-of-conduct, which is now part of every conference program; we have developed and maintained the Support a New Scholar grants which offer two-year memberships to exceptional sff scholars; we revamped the EC positions, putting them on rotation and extending them to three-year posts to ensure continuity and institutional memory; we conducted an extensive survey of membership preferences and expectations of the Association and have incorporated its results in our practice; we initiated a country-representative program that increases our visibility regionally and internationally, and solidifies our ties with local sf groups around the world; we’ve published a conference hosting précis and bidding template to streamline and formalize the conference planning process, and much more. I am incredibly proud of these accomplishments though not a single one was achieved alone. Thank you to Sonja and Hugh for learning the ropes as quickly as you did. Thank you to Gerry and David for all their work of yore. Thank you to Jenni who’s been doing this for so long, she embodies institutional memory. Thank you to Pawel who totally stepped up to bat as new-old IPP. Thank you to Katherine for always having our backs. I feel so lucky and privileged to have served in this position and am pleased that I get to stay on for a little longer as the next Immediate Past President. In the meantime, I look forward to seeing y’all in Bloomington, Indiana this summer! Nanu nanu, and goodbye for now.
CHECK out the grant deadlines at the SFRA website, as the deadlines are upon us. The New Scholar Grant deadline is October 30, 2019. Attention graduate students who presented a paper at the SFRA 2019 conference in Hawaii, the Student Paper Award Deadline is mid-November. Be on the lookout for an e-mail that will be sent soon.

I’m already anticipating the conference of 2020 that will take place at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN, July 8-11, 2020. Such a beautiful place is my alma mater with fantastic restaurants as well! Good times will be had! The 2020 Conference Travel Grant application is due in April 2020.

Those of you who have responded to the call for SFRA Country Representatives, they are now listed on the website under “Country Reps.” Remember this initiative is designed to acknowledge the important contributions of our international members, as well as to encourage support for the study of science fiction in other countries and also to help these scholars network with each other. Responsibilities would include acting as an informational liaison between the SFRA and the country’s science fiction scholarly community through the promotion of events (including on the SFRA listserv, Facebook page, and Twitter), new membership outreach, and otherwise helping to connect in the spirit of international communication and collaboration. It is possible for a country to have more than one liaison, so if you are interested, please contact me at fritzsc9@msu.edu. We hope to integrate some of this information on the SFRA website as well to help with the visibility of scholarly science fiction work in other countries. It is never too late to become such a representative. Also don’t forget to pass on information to me if you want me to post an event or cfp for you on Facebook and Twitter. I’m always open to other suggestions and ideas as to how we can help to promote the work of our colleagues in the SFRA.
FEATURES

FEATURE ARTICLE

Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* and SF Allegories of Contemporary Society

Yael Maurer
Tel Aviv University

This essay reads Neill Blomkamp's 2013 film *Elysium*, which offers a disturbing vision of a futuristic society, as an allegory of the present. The film's director, Neill Blomkamp stated in an interview for *The Telegraph*: "*Elysium* isn't science fiction. It's now." Like many sf films that offer a futuristic setting which is at the same time eerily familiar, in *Elysium* we find a future society ruled by greedy corporate powers, which is clearly both an allegory for and a strong critique of contemporary society. The film imagines a dystopian future where people on a post-apocalyptic Earth suffer greatly and the only redemptive possibility is found on the spaceship *Elysium*, a veritable heaven for the privileged rich. Set in 2154, the film follows the story of Max Da Costa (Matt Damon), an ex-convict turned manual laborer at the oppressive Armadyne Corp who builds sophisticated weaponry and robots used to police the people on ravaged Earth and serve the inhabitants of Elysium. Following a workplace accident in which he is forced into entering a contaminated space and receives a full dose of radiation, he is given five days to live; the desperate Max bargains with smuggler Spider (Wagner Moura) in the hope of getting to Elysium where all diseases are miraculously and instantly healed by "Med-Bays." In exchange for his ticket, Max agrees to undertake a mission to retrieve digital information that the smugglers can use to take control of Armadyne. Max's body is augmented: an exoskeleton is painfully grafted into his human body, and he is fitted with a device that will enable him to download the data directly to his brain.

In Blomkamp's film, the villainous figure of the South African sleeper agent C.M. Kruger (Sharlto Copley) harks back to Blomkamp's debut, *District 9*, which took place in an imagined, future South Africa. Kruger is a roaming bounty hunter for Armadyne, hired by the Secretary of Defense Delacourt (Jodie Foster) to hunt down Max and retrieve the data in his head. Kruger's mission echoes the villainous Delacourt's plan to take over Elysium by staging a coup on President Patel who opposes her violent "homeland security" treatment of the "illegal immigrants" who try to get to Elysium. Kruger stages a coup of his own as he fatally pierces Delacourt's neck with a shard of glass. In a previous scene, it is Kruger who is felled in slow motion by a grenade but is resurrected by his accomplices and returns to
wreak the final revenge on Delacourt. Thus, the ultimate evil is “resurrected” only to be killed by the dying Max in the final moments of the film.

The film thus stages technology’s healing powers alongside its destructive potential. Max’s cyborg body, rather than making him impervious to bodily harm, only accentuates his human frailties. Max’s bodily transformation enables him to save the young Mathilda (Emma Tremblay), the dying daughter of Max’s long lost childhood sweetheart, Frey (Alice Braga), a nurse who takes the injured Max into her house and heals him at an earlier point in the film. Max saves Mathilda by sacrificing his own life. But he also saves humanity. The data he carries in his brain contains the program that reboots Elysium’s computer core, opening its stringent borders and awarding everyone on Earth Elysium residency. This quick shock doctrine stop-gap measure, however, is not the “solution”. Elysium remains a closed system. The dystopian future/present remains essentially unchanged even after Max’s heroic actions.

The protagonist’s ultimate sacrifice in the name of love affirms the film’s belief in the human in the face of a dire future that closely resembles the here and now. Blomkamp’s allegory clearly evokes a Christian eschatology by imagining the end of days as a possible new beginning. Max’s death ushers in “the resurrection and the life”; he, like Christ, dies so they may live. But Blomkamp’s film also offers a very damning portrait of the here and now, as well as an imagined future salvation. This becomes clear from the very opening shot of the film, where, Suzie Gibson elucidates,

> The camera sweeps over vast landscapes of waste and urban sprawl; Nature has long disappeared; there is no greenery to be seen. High-rises are overcrowded and collapsing under the weight of too many bodies. Accompanying these grim images are the sounds of sirens – not seductive mythological creatures, but electronic, bodiless emergency alarms (78).

Following this striking visual demonstration of the ravaged Earth in the film’s imagined future, we have a written statement which encapsulates the film’s message. As Gibson notes, Superimposed over this bleak scene is the statement: ‘In the late 21st century Earth was diseased, polluted and vastly overpopulated.’ The film then cuts to a shot that captures the spherical shape of Earth from the vantage point of space. Another statement appears on screen informing us that ‘Earth’s wealthiest inhabitants fled the planet to preserve their way of life’. More fast-paced aerial shots then reveal another realm, one that is pristine, and bountiful in its plant life. The word ‘Elysium’ appears on the screen as we see more images
of this new, ideal world (78).

Viewers thus realize from the onset that the film is about current world problems such as widespread poverty, pollution, displacement and homelessness. Blomkamp sets the scene from the opening shot, evoking the disparity between the have and have nots, the 99% and the 1%, the rich and the poor, the disenfranchised and the overly pampered, “legal” citizens and “illegal” immigrants, a “heaven” far and out of reach, and a very close and very palatable “hell” for the people of Earth. However, the very first images we see on screen are of the protagonist Max as a young orphaned boy who is raised by nuns. A dialogue (in Spanish and English) ensues, encapsulating the film’s religious message; Max is told as a child that he was born to do something important. The opening scenes also show us the young Max with Frey, the girl he falls in love with as a child. The two children promise each other to stay together forever. The idea of a promised heaven is stressed in the short flashback scene where Frey is reading aloud to Max (who admits in a previous scene he cannot read), from a picture book about the wonders of Elysium.

The flashbacks are repeated at crucial moments in the film, culminating in Max’s dying moments as he relives the scene with the Nun. He has indeed “done something very important.” He was born to die and save the Earth. The modern-day Jesus figure is a former thief much like the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus. Redemption is a very real option in Blomkamp’s rewriting of the resurrection story as a technological fable. The allegory couldn’t be clearer. What Earth needs is a savior who will cure it of its diseased condition. The Med Bays on Elysium can cure and resurrect the dead. They are techno miracles, not a scientific vision of a future cure.

Gibson describes the film’s moral message thus: “Elysium puts forward an important morality tale concerning the inhumane treatment of people and inspires questions about the worldwide problems of poverty, homelessness, pollution and overpopulation” (84). It “highlights the inhumanity of current policies that see refugees, including children, locked up in detention centres” (85) and offers “a warning of sorts . . . encouraging us to change our ways” (85). The film’s ending may be termed a “happy ending” although the protagonist has to die to ensure collective happiness. The film is thus both a cautionary tale, warning its viewers of the dangers of continued inequality and oppression, and a wishful fantasy about the possibility of escape. When Max is fitted with the exoskeleton, Spider tells him he is giving him “a way out”. The film is a stark dramatization of this “way out”, suggesting that the diseased futuristic Earth is not so far from our own.

What then is this “way out”? Blomkamp does not attempt to provide a blueprint
for the future. His tale of salvation seems to be a dire call for action that is more like an angry prophet's anguished lament than a clearly cut political/social plan. The film's message then may be more theological than purely political. If Elysium is indeed a new form of paradise, then it should be one that belongs to all people, regardless of race, ethnicity or class. The enormous injustices that structure modern-day Western democracies like the US, the UK, and Australia are echoed in the film's imagining of a world where the rich exist in an insulated capsule, far away from the grim realities of the disenfranchised. Blomkamp's allegory dramatizes the ways in which we are all in some way insulated from the harsh realities of the immigrant crisis and the ways in which governments are intent on policing borders and enforcing policies of segregation and oppression in the name of homeland security, a term which is repeated in the course of the film. The evil Secretary of Defense Delacourt has a French-sounding name and the inhabitants of Elysium speak French. The disenfranchised on Earth speak Spanish and English. The crazed Kruger speaks a mélange of English and Afrikaans. In this modern day Babylon, where people speak in many tongues, and confusion is the only rule, only purity of belief can shatter injustice. Blomkamp's film provides us with a moral fable for our times. Salvation is reimagined as a global “reboot”: only by changing the “program,” can we change our world for the better. If we continue to follow the same corrupt and diseased “codes,” we are surely doomed. Blomkamp's film thus follows in the footsteps of a tradition of millennialism in sf cinema.

As Christopher Holliday notes, “popular cinema in the millennial period is well-versed in the terms of its own eschatological enquiry, studious in its appreciation of a global end of days and steadfast in stipulating that Earth must go out on a spectacular, often CG-assisted, high, rather than a careless whimper” (433). Blomkamp's film, however, as Anthony P. Pennino rightly notes, employs a different approach than Hollywood sf films that “deliver an anti-technological, if not essentially Luddite message” (86). The augmented human is the savior of the planet, rather than its destroyer. And the robots that police Elysium are not “bad” or “good”; once their programming is altered, they no longer protect the former regime but allow the rebels to take over.

Pennino further highlights the film's depiction of technology and human agency: “In Elysium, humanity is the author of its dystopian future, and thus . . . evokes Kranzberg's sixth law: technology is a very human activity” (87). Blomkamp's film imagines the possible savior of humanity as an augmented human, but the film's enduring images are the flashbacks where the young Max is taught the meaning of compassion and brotherly love from the nuns who bring him up and care for him. It is the human, rather than the technological,
that is at the center of the film.

This interest in humanity and the belief in the redemptive potential inherent in the fellowship of men are poignantly dramatized by the fable Mathilda, Frey’s dying daughter, tells Max: “There once was a meerkat who lived in the jungle. He was hungry, but he was small. So small. And the other big animals had all the food because they could reach the fruits; so he made friends with a hippopotamus to.” Max stops her story, saying: “It doesn’t end well for the meerkat.” Mathilda replies; “Yes, it does because he can stand on the hippopotamus’s back to get all the fruits he wants.” Max is not convinced and asks: “What’s in it for the hippopotamus?” which Mathilda simply answers: “The hippopotamus wants a friend.”

In a reversal of the kind of anti-immigration fable, like “The Scorpion and the Frog,” which shows that if you “carry someone on your back,” you are sure to pay a heavy price for your soft-hearted generosity, Blomkamp’s allegory turns the tables around and insists on the enduring power of selfless love to cure a diseased world. The film is a parable about friendship and the power of brotherly love as the only options which might save humanity from a dystopian present/future, ushering in a better and braver new world.

Works Cited
Editor’s Note: “The SF in Translation Universe” is a regular column appearing in the Features section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #325).

The SF in Translation Universe #6

Rachel Cordasco

WELCOME back to the SFT Universe! It was a jam-packed summer (SFT-wise) but, as usual, things have slowed down as we head toward the end of the year. Nonetheless, what we have ahead of us is enough to make the holidays quite bearable.

By now, many of you have read at least one of Liu Cixin’s Three-Body novels, and they are as mind-bustingly wonderful as everyone says they are. Capitalizing on the success of the trilogy, Tor Books has been releasing other (earlier) Liu novels, which may not be as dense with scientific imagery and speculation but are still imaginative and very entertaining. The latest Liu novel is called *Supernova Era* (translated from the Chinese by Joel Martinsen) and was originally written just after the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. Here Liu imagines what would happen if radiation from a distant supernova killed off everyone over the age of 13. A core group of highly-mature children take over management of the planet and what you would expect would happen does indeed happen. Crime, gluttony, depression, and many other problems plague what’s left of humanity, culminating in brutal and violent “war games” in Antarctica and a monumental “country-swap” between China and the US. As in Liu’s other novels, the ideas are the most interesting characters, and the breadth of his imagination is truly admirable.

In November, we are treated to three extremely different texts, which together demonstrate the vitality and diversity of speculative fiction here in the early twenty-first century. The first is a Swedish novel about terrorism and alternate realities that asks us to question our assumptions about tolerance and freedom (*They Will Drown in Their Mothers’ Tears* by Johannes Anyuru, translated by Saskia Vogel, Two Lines Press). The second is a several-hundred-page science fictional-philosophical meditation on literature, dreams, and Nabokov (*The Dreamed Part* by Rodrigo Fresan, translated from the Spanish by Will Vanderhyden, Open Letter Press).

And then there’s the third: this is not just any volume in the *Legend of the Galactic Heroes* series. It is the last! Personally, I have spent the past three years reading and writing about Yoshiki Tanaka’s grand story about the clash of empires, the contrast between two political systems, and the individuals who shape the course of human history and it’s been

December tantalizes us with the second publication (by Wakefield Press) of a Jean Ray collection. Ray, a turn-of-the-twentieth-century Belgian author known for his strange tales of horror and the macabre, has been called the "Belgian Poe" and even the "Flemish Jack London." In *Cruise of the Shadows: Haunted Stories of Land and Sea* (translated by Scott Nicolay), Ray delves into the conventions of the "ghost story" to tell us about, for instance, footsteps in an abandoned holiday resort, a nameless tavern on a seemingly-endless street, and the loneliness of individuals who find themselves in these eerie places. Thanks to Wakefield Press, Anglophone readers can finally read some of Ray's most horrifying and intoxicating tales.

Also coming out in December in paperback is the gorgeous *Sunspot Jungle: The Ever Expanding Universe of Fantasy and Science Fiction (Volume 1)*, edited by Bill Campbell, out from Rosarium Publishing. With stories by Basma Abdel Aziz (*The Queue*), Melanie Fazi, Tang Fei, Francesco Verso (*Nexhuman*), and several other non-Anglophone authors mixed in with Anglophone writers, this anthology will highlight the richness of SF in translation around the world.

Speaking of riches: already we have over seventy works of short SFT and the year isn't even over yet! In October, we had stories translated from the Spanish, Korean, and Chinese from *The Dark* and *Clarkesworld*. And while publishing in general slows down around the holidays, I doubt that the short story train will slow down one bit.

Thanks for reading, and I’d love to hear what you’re reading now and/or looking forward to: rachel@sfintranslation.com.

Until next time in the SFT Universe!
Editor’s Note: “Meet the Future” is a regular column appearing in the Features section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #326). It is an interview series conducted by the SFRA Review editor that highlights the work of up-and-coming SF scholars, typically graduate students, postdocs, and recent hires.

Meet the Future: An Interview with Skye Cervone

Skye Cervone
PhD Candidate, Comparative Studies
Florida Atlantic University

Hi, Skye, could you tell us a bit about yourself?

First of all, thank you for this opportunity. I think this is an important feature, and I’m excited to be part of it. I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Studies at FAU, where I have taught courses in composition, literature, and literary theory for the Department of English. I just defended my dissertation in October. Perhaps not surprisingly because of my current theoretical focus, my love for and interest in animals has been a defining part of my personality and identity for as long as I can remember. I also have a fairly large orchid collection.

How do you describe yourself professionally?

I’m a sf scholar, but I am interested in animal studies, biopolitics, feminism, and fantasy (which my MA thesis focused on). I consider myself a literature scholar, primarily, but I have done some work with film, and one of my dissertation chapter covers We3, a graphic novel. Much of my work has a strong social justice component (with the exception of my MA thesis).

Why does sf matter to you?

I’m not sure I have anything original or insightful to say here. Like so many others in our field, I am, of course, a fan. I love that I work in a field which both provides me with avenues for scholarly inquiry and is one which I enjoy. I’m excited by the possibilities that sf explores, the “what ifs and why nots.” I have always been so much more interested genres that are not constrained by what is—both science fiction and fantasy. The generative power of these genres is both more entertaining and has more potential for critical inquiry to me than fiction that attempts to faithfully depict the here and now. On a more practical level,
the literature of the fantastic is the best literature with which to criticize and analyze our relationships to animals. I’ve been particularly interested in depictions of animal subjectivity lately, and as other scholars have pointed out, sf is a wonderful genre in which to explore those possibilities.

**What brought you to sf studies?**

I also earned my MA at FAU, and one of the interesting things about the MA program at FAU is that you have to apply to a specific track there. I entered the Science Fiction and Fantasy track because I wanted to study what I love, and while I enjoyed working with sf, on animals, and on feminism, I focused on fantasy world building for my MA thesis. I took time off between finishing the MA and starting the Ph.D., but I remained connected to and active in my scholarship. The community of scholars working in genre and how welcoming the community is to junior scholars and graduate students helped reinforce the idea that this was a community to which I belonged. I think gravitating towards sf happened rather organically as I became focused on not just animal subjectivity but the ways in which biopolitical capitalism impacts both human and animal life.

**What project(s) are you working on now, and how did you get there? What question(s) really drive your work?**

As I mentioned, I recently defended my dissertation. One of the questions that informed my project centered around the seeming inability of many authors who are interested in animal rights and liberation to depict animals who benefitted from rights and liberation. Sf is obviously not constrained by what is, and so the idea that we have few examples of animal rights and animal liberation in the current moment didn’t seem like a reasonable justification for why so many sf authors didn’t illustrate something about which they were clearly passionate. It became increasingly clear to me that one of the major roadblocks to animal liberation in these texts was capitalism. In my dissertation, I argue that capitalism has the ability to and does shape the ways in which humans classify, respond to, and value animal life, their relationships to animals, and their relationships to one another. Because life is viewed primarily through its value to the market, animal subjectivity and agency present such an attack on the moral reasoning behind biopolitical capitalism that their recognition has the potential to disrupt the entire system. I have another project in the works, but I think it’s a bit too early to talk about it.
What do you envision for the future of sf studies and sf scholars? What do you want to see us accomplish?

I think the future of the field is to continue recovering, discovering, and amplifying the works of historically marginalized voices. The field has been exhibiting a strong commitment to social justice, and it makes me proud to be a small part of that. One thing I would really like to see, however, is scholars of the fantastic—sf, fantasy, horror—partake in more cross-field communication. I think sometimes we can get a bit too isolated. Scholars of the fantastic are doing a lot of exciting work, and I think many of us could benefit from engaging with these distinct but related scholarly traditions.

If you could write a dream book, or teach a dream course, what would it/they be?

I would love to design and teach a course around the ideas from my dissertation that crossed genre categories and engaged how conversations regarding non-human animal subjectivity changed (or didn’t) based on generic norms and constraints, how to erase those boundaries, and how cross-genre communication amongst scholars could benefit the study of genre literature as a larger category.

Thank you! Your labor and thoughts are valued and appreciated.
FIVE years after the publication of Jeff VanderMeer’s widely acclaimed *Southern Reach Trilogy* (Annihilation, Authority, Acceptance, 2014) and following the adaptation of the first book into a feature length Hollywood film (dir. Alex Garland, 2018), Area X continues to seduce and confound those who encounter it. The trilogy has now been translated into dozens of languages, and in addition to a number of works of fiction forthcoming, including his anticipated next novel *Dead Astronauts* (with a publication date of December, 2019), VanderMeer’s influence particularly after Area X seems to be spreading well outside of his books, with projects also contracted and underway for television and the big screen.

This cluster of five contributions, curated at the invitation of *Science Fiction Research Association Review*, is a project that reflects on the cultural, historical, political, and philosophical life of the trilogy since its publication and contemplates what kind of staying power the novels continue to have, and in which registers, into the future. It also, then, continues to probe the genre, aesthetics, politics, ethics of the Weird, a category that, as
many in this cluster will allude to, always seems to resist categorization; a process of coming to unknow rather than one that arrives at an understanding. But these short pieces also seem to collectively recognize the inadequacy of leaving our interpretation with weirdness there, for, as a number of the authors here point out, to romanticize the weirdness of becoming-other can too quickly become a dangerous escapist fantasy. Even though the writers here acknowledge the allure and seduction of Area X, their reflections decidedly choose not acquiesce to a politics (environmental or otherwise) of acceptance or non-complicity. It is, perhaps, five years of distance from the trilogy and now in a radically different global, increasingly authoritarian and right-wing political climate, that I would argue marks in these reflections a shift in the study of VanderMeer and in scholarship on the Weird.

At the end of *Annihilation*, the biologist makes a decision: “I am not going home,” she writes. I’ve always been fascinated with this decision of hers, not because I think I would do it differently, but because it can be read as a response to so many things: her finding pleasure or joy in what she is becoming, her sense that she has nothing left on the outside with her husband gone, or her knowing that there really is no longer an outside, at least not for much longer. A decision like the biologist’s, what we might call after Donna Haraway “staying with the trouble,” is one many have already had to face, those who already or have long lived, for example, in impossible landscapes ravaged by extractivism or contaminated by toxic waste, spaces haunted by related colonial legacies of genocide, those in which communities and livelihoods have already been altered or are under imminent threat by the effects of climate change. The *Southern Reach Trilogy* is a story that begins with a woman who decides to enter and indeed stay in the ruins of the Anthropocene, to see what she will become. Not everyone is able to make such a choice, but the trilogy continues to ignite discussion and speculation about what might become of humanity, and at what cost.
IT is strange to think that five years could have forced such dramatic change in our cultural, political, and academic climate. But what bubbled below the surface of things in 2014 has exploded into what feels like political cataclysm by 2019. Hope seems somewhat childish now. Grab the ones you love and hold them close. We’re all going down. Jeff VanderMeer’s *Area X* trilogy (2014) also hinges its affective power on a kind of slow apocalyptic inevitability, albeit one shaped much more by beauty and wonder than political assault. His is an aesthetic undoing, a beautiful dissolution of self and structure. Is there such thing as a utopian apocalypse? If so, it is surely not the one that appears on the horizon now, the slow burn of perpetual violence and man-made climate change fueled by the headlong screeching plunge of capitalism’s final attempts to sustain itself on a fast-emptying tank. VanderMeer’s novels, by contrast, offer readers a gentle, planetary euthanasia that is marked by some horror, yes, but also by fascination and wonder. Death by absorption. By transformation. Perhaps he saw the coming need for this particularly healing fantasy.

These novels, and their 2018 film adaptation in Alex Garland’s *Annihilation*, sit at an essential conjunction in the present of an impulse toward aestheticism and the theoretical compulsion to negate, elide, or destroy the human. Rather than the prototypical apocalypse narrative that emphasizes the stories of survivors, the Southern Reach trilogy envisions a pre-apocalyptic scenario that promises to be both beautiful and complete: there will be nothing human left to observe this final, marvelous transformation. If theories of the Anthropocene suggest that one consider extinction as a concrete possibility, *Area X* appears to present an ideal version of that eventual destruction: a disinterested intrusion from the outside that renders humanity blameless. The alien force of Area X promises to return the entire planet to an idyllic prelapsarian past, wiping away the sins of “the human” in a kind of deus ex natura. Humanity will be sacrificed for the sake of reversing its trespasses. The process of this dissolution seems wonderous and enchanting as revealed through the words of the Biologist, who imagines her eventual destruction as a “melt[ing] into the landscape” (128). Depersonalized and dehumanized, this end of the world is also very much depoliticized: it swallows all of history along with all its guilt. After this ecological euthanasia, there will be no trace left of humanity’s worst crimes. Would that we could all become leviathan or tree-
forms, rather than face up to the violence and traumas of history.

By depoliticizing the story’s coming apocalypse, VanderMeer’s trilogy draws critical attention to the dangers of both aestheticism and “the nonhuman” as solutions to contemporary crises, both in the culture of late capitalism and within emergent critical theory in the humanities, especially in vital materialisms that romanticize human-nonhuman entanglements. Were it not for the horror that accompanies the beautiful dissolution in these texts, they might too easily be read as complicit with escapist, annihilative fantasies. But, importantly, Area X and Annihilation are full of deliberate lies and misrepresentations, tricks and deceptions that belie this interpretation. The beauty of the place, of the language, is a façade to which VanderMeer persistently draws attention, because nothing is as it seems in this place. Technological instruments cannot function properly. Microscopes don’t show what they should. The Biologist reveals, partway through her narrative, that she is unreliable: she has lied to the reader about her purpose, her identity, as has the Psychologist, and as do others. Time lies, instruments lie, perceptions lie about what “really” exists in Area X.

Perhaps this is not a beautiful place. Perhaps it is a horror, dressed in idyllic landscape. Perhaps erasing “the human,” involves producing the same violent suffering that it attempts to evade by disappearing at the moment of its political and historical reckoning. VanderMeer never shows his readers the screaming chaos as Area X’s border approaches; the trauma of crossing the threshold into its annihilative space is redacted.

When, in the final pages of the third book, Ghost Bird finally encounters the Crawler deep within the tower/tunnel, she thinks of its infectious script, “Each word a world, a world bleeding through from some other place, a conduit and an entry point [...]. Each sentence a merciless healing, a ruthless rebuilding that could not be denied” (555). The words that the Crawler writes on the walls deceive: they promise meaning, intention, purpose, in their lyric composition (Where lies the strangling fruit...), but they offer none. They are material inscriptions, and their medium of inscription acts—it reproduces whatever entity Area X is through some kind of infection or transmission—but the words themselves have no occult purpose, and they signify no great truth. These failures of language to signify, failures of mediation and translation and even perception, are essential to the story of Area X. Both the crawler’s script and VanderMeer’s romantic language seem to be deManian self-deconstructing texts: their words are aesthetically compelling, but their aestheticism only draws attention to their inability to capture reality or meaning. They reveal their own lie, and the gaping void of meaning behind them becomes the source of both horror and critique: fantasies of beautiful dissolution and annihilation will not make the processes
of extinction any less violent or painful. Behind what you perceive is not an answer, but absolute indifference: the inhuman.

Rather than a “merciless healing,” Garland’s film plays out vital materiality through the metaphor of disease, particularly cancer. Here, Area X is “the shimmer,” and it functions as a pathology, malignant and tumorous. The film opens with the biologist Lena showing her class an image of dividing cervical cancer cells. She tells her students about “the rhythm of the dividing pair,” which, she says, produced all life on earth—a clear foreshadowing of Area X’s refracted, divided cells that will reproduce and transform all landscape and life within it. Much later, inside the lighthouse womb, an alien cervix opens and absorbs Lena’s blood, like semen, to reproduce her. The alien reads her, even as she tries and fails to make sense of it, and creates a divided pair: one original, one copy, perhaps slightly modified. “I don’t know what it wants. Or if it wants,” Lena says. The entity is machinic and indifferent, reading and transducing, copying and refracting and creating without intention. It is indifferent, animate materiality, like cancer.

In moving from text to screen, it would be impossible to capture VanderMeer’s emphasis on language and its unreliability, but the adaptation still manages to convey the lie of aesthetics in other ways. The most notable of these occurs in what is perhaps the best scene of the film, during the “bear” attack in the abandoned house. This bear, if it is a bear (its shape is distorted, its skull partially exposed), has already killed Cassie Shepard, and it enters the house screaming with her voice, her final words trapped in the uncomprehending animal’s throat. The emptiness behind that bear’s imitated words, the stolen “Help me!” that was ripped from the throat of another and repeated as accidental deception, is the most terrifying moment of the film. Those words are the auditory equivalent of the crawler’s meaningless script that is bound to endless repetition. The bear’s scream is both material inscription and empty signifier. It is a meaningless lie, and behind it there is only the indifference of Area X. The gap between words and lack of meaning reveals the contingent and subjective, the accidental, nature of the landscape’s beauty. This place is not what it seems.

Garland’s film will probably not live longer, in terms of cultural staying power, than the novels, but it does amplify their message in a way that deserves acknowledgement. So much of the Southern Reach Trilogy is about (failed) mediation, failed translation, that it would be ironic not to recognize what those themes look like when transferred to another medium. What gets lost in translation, modified and morphed, broken on repetition from novel to screen, can only drive home its points. Area X lulls and comforts with its beautiful
ecology and its romantic language; its form hypnotizes and compels, even as its content horrifies, or even worse, suggests a horror that cannot even be conveyed through language, visuals, or sound.

If anything, the desire for “escape” seems even more pressing in 2019 than it did five years ago, though it also seems less and less possible. There is nowhere to go. There is no second planet, no place on earth untouched by the evils of capitalism or environmental catastrophe or human-historical violence. And even if there were, how aware we are now of the selfishness of such a choice to escape or erase one’s guilt. Would we instead have intervention from the stars to wipe our sins clean? Would we choose the lie of a beautiful slow death, melting into landscapes, blood turning to leaves, growing a thousand eyes to watch the world as a monster who could no longer be considered a self? Would we choose this, knowing we could also end up as a terrified scream on repeat in the mouth of a not-quite-bear?

Works Cited


I have had numerous opportunities to suggest Jeff VanderMeer’s fiction to people both within and without academia, and when people ask where they should start there is really only one answer: *Annihilation*. Yes, the Ambergris books are very much worth reading, as are the Veniss texts. Yes, there is a lot of great short fiction. *Borne* is amazing, as is *The Strange Bird*. But the *Southern Reach Trilogy* stands apart from the rest, especially its first volume *Annihilation*, which I often refer to as “perfect” when discussing the novel.

On one hand, this perfection is easy to describe: *Annihilation* is both very simple and very complex, short and easy to read yet capable of provoking complex thoughts and conversations. In just under 200 pages, VanderMeer imagines a world both immense and claustrophobic, aesthetically terrifying and strangely beautiful. When people read it, they often feel the creepiness and get what he’s doing without needing to go any further. If they want to go further, *Annihilation* gives them opportunity to consider genre, catastrophic climate change, the relationship of the monstrous to the human, the nature of writing, the limitations of science, the majesty and horror of nature, and so on. For these reasons, *Annihilation* may be one of the best pedagogical texts I have ever had the chance to offer to students, alongside, for example, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. As with *Beloved*, *Annihilation* makes its themes and concerns available on its surface to inexperienced readers even as it rewards the careful attention and deeper reading practices deployed by more advanced ones. Its points are both obvious and subtle, clear and occult: amenable to a single read or manifold encounters. For this reason, I recommend it to anyone who asks me about what to read next—whether they’re undergrad or grad students, fans of science fiction and horror or connoisseurs of “serious” literature—without fear that they might get stuck in it because of its length or uncompromising difficulty.

On the other hand, there is a certain ineffability to *Annihilation*’s perfection. We might consider this ineffability through one of its greatest creations, the biologist, whose love for her husband is genuine despite her lack of need for him or any other human companionship, which is revealed to be her defining characteristic. Her experience of “the brightness” and her encounter with the Crawler may effect her obvious transformation into monstrous things, both Ghost Bird and the massive thing we briefly glimpse near the
end of *Acceptance*. However, this odd affective juxtaposition suggests the irreducibility of her weirdness before she ever enters Area X. Moreover, it mirrors the affect the reader encounters in Area X and thereby ramifies the weirdness the text seeks to manifest. Like the wailing creature the eleventh expedition hears—“so utterly human and inhuman, that, for a second time since entering Area X, I considered the supernatural”—or the Crawler itself—containing the face of the lighthouse keeper who stares out at the biologist in “ecstasy”—the biologist stands at the border of a conventional human world and some other, weirder realm (VanderMeer 139, 186). The human world values spousal love to the point of requiring humans, especially women, to lose themselves in it and simultaneously forbids a liquidation of the self that leaves such values behind. In the other, weirder realm such values no longer manifest or matter. The biologist, the wailing creature, the Crawler/lighthouse keeper: these entities (I hesitate to call them characters in the conventional, modern sense of the term): each has been, is, or will be something inhuman even as each retains some inscrutable, weird connection with the human.

Importantly, *Annihilation* does not offer anyone the power to choose. The border already exists everywhere and the transformation is always already taking place. At the same time, it does not understand this lack of choice as a lack of power: what disempowers one world empowers another. These entities do not wish to return to what they were even as they intuit all they have lost. There is terror in *Annihilation*, but there is something hopeful in annihilation as well. And it’s this affect, so off-putting when spelled out as such and yet so welcoming to the reader of *Annihilation*, that bespeaks the novel’s ineffable perfection. It does not so much offer a perfect representation of an historical moment as it offers an affect uniquely suited to such a moment, one in which the world as we know seems to be slipping away, requiring us to come to new understandings of what we are or should be and what our values in this new circumstance might look like.

In the space remaining to me here I want to approach this issue by way of John Clute’s writings on horror, first with regard to what Clute calls “affect horror” and the problems thereof, and second by way of what he calls “revel,” the climactic moment in the ideal horror narrative. With regard to affect horror, Clute tells us that “No other genre [but horror] has ever been defined in terms of the affect it generates in the reader.” For all the difficulties scholars and other readers have defining science fiction and fantasy, this difficulty rarely results from a generalization about how or what these genres make readers feel. Both genres may create wonder in the reader, but we have no problem understanding a text as science fiction or fantasy if it fails to do so. But a certain understanding of horror insists that a
story that fails to produce some type of fear, or one that does not seek to do so at any rate, must surely fall outside of the genre. For Clute, however, it’s foolish to say that any story that produces a feeling of fear or horror must be included within the genre. Readers of fantasy may feel fear for characters in dire straits and readers of thrillers may feel fear in tense moments that nonetheless exclude conventions (such as the monster or black magic) often associated with horror. As such, to take horror seriously is to define it according to something other than affect. Clute writes, “Horror (in this [affective] understanding) is a kind of afflatus, a wind from anywhere” (Clute 9). In short, when we understand horror in terms of affect, when we simply place what scares us into this generic category, we condemn it being utterly subjective, without any specificity or particularity beyond the whims of its readership.

Clute’s analysis of affect horror is more nuanced than these two short quotes and my summary suggest. It’s nonetheless clear that Clute does not believe that horror can or should be defined by the feelings it produces in its readers. Rather, Clute favors definitions of horror, fantasy, and science fiction that feature accounts of their narrative structures and their development out of eighteenth-century understandings of science and history. However, it’s here that the “wind from anywhere” criticism—that anything can be horror if it scares us—falls flat, namely because affect itself, and therefore the affect called horror, has historical origins. What scares us cannot be understood to be universal. *Castle of Otranto* is unlikely to produce any type of fear in 2019 readers, unless it be a fear of reading a text written in such an antiquated fashion. Unless they are white men living under assumptions about the objectivity of science, readers of *Frankenstein* or *At the Mountains of Madness* are unlikely to understand precisely why the protagonists of these novels are so horrified at their inventions and discoveries, inventions and discoveries that each demonstrate the extent to which they are not the centers of their worlds or the masters of their destinies in the ways they previously believed. In short, the affects these horror stories produce only work for certain subjects at certain historical moments. Moreover, I would argue that these texts do not represent affects already present in the world that might be freely taken up or cast aside by subjects who choose their own paths through history. Rather, they identify new affects that subjects bound by their historical circumstances might consider adopting in order to better understand the precise ways in which they are bound. Yes, defining horror in terms of affect may blur the boundaries between genres conventionally understood to be distinct, but doing so allows us to understand the work that horror does at its moment of production. *Annihilation* may very well not work as horror for every subject reading it.
today, but I would argue that the affect it produces—one that in some way acknowledges what we have been even as it insists that we need to be something else, a kind of hopeful terror—is necessary at this juncture in history.

The discourse on modernity and historical consciousness tells us that the past and those who dwell there are fundamentally different than the present, that as the world changes we necessarily and productively lose what we were before. And yet modernity seems to always understand itself as some final step insofar as it involves itself with institutions and systems, such as democracy and capitalism, that can and will withstand any assault from the human world or the natural on—hence the term “postmodern” and all similar terms that can only understand the present in relation to this final step. The Anthropocene and the rise of contemporary nationalisms and populisms force us to recognize that modernity is at best an historical moment that too shall pass and at worst an aberration within a long history of barbarism when circumstances made it possible for the world to even contemplate equality for all of those who live within it. Of course, this contemplation was very often in bad faith and has spectacularly failed in nearly every respect, but that the very conversation even took place suggests a set of material conditions that had not existed before and will inevitably come to an end. While *Annihilation* does not tell us precisely what we must become in order to navigate the future, it insists, by way of an affect it produces appropriate to this moment, *that* we must become.

Of his concept of revel, Clute writes, “As a noun it describes a formal event bound in time and place, an event in which the field of the world is reversed […]]. As a verb, Revel refers to the actions which create and animate such an event, actions of telling which catch the revelation on the wing; it also points to the subversive nature of story itself: because, as it is being told, every story about the world threatens to transport us out of our previous understandings of the world” (Clute 117). Whether as an event or an action, revel involves the end of something and the beginning of something else. At this moment, or because of this action, the subject must take a side: remain what it was and suffer under a new regime in which it has no place or become what it is not yet and suffer for all it will have lost in the hope that it might prosper (or at least survive) under conditions it cannot know before it inhabits them. It cannot know these conditions because the far side of revel cannot be narrated, cannot be told, cannot be “storied”—not in terms comprehensible to those on this side of the divide and beholden to the forms of thought that produce and maintain that material condition. The *Southern Reach Trilogy* tries to offer such narration at times, by way of the psychologist’s thoughts as she dies, the biologist’s journal, and the lighthouse keeper’s
reveries. But none of these words can give to readers what these subjects experience. If we
are honest, we must admit that we cannot understand what they go through even if we
understand that they go through something. Rather, the trilogy, and especially *Annihilation*,
seek to produce an affect, a peculiar kind of horror specific to this moment. If there is
historicity to the novel it has nothing to do with what it shows us and everything to do
with how it makes us feel, with an affect that may not be universal now but is nonetheless
impossible under any other material condition.

**Works Cited**

Not Your Artist Friend: Turning the Tables on the Nonhuman Turn

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I remember clearly my first encounter with the idea of nonhuman art production. As an inadvertent first-year student of Art History, it caught me wholly unaware, and I can recall the sense of excitement, the thrill of seeing my field as a prospective art scholar be fundamentally questioned, its scope expanded beyond all expectation.

The encounter came through an article by John Onians titled “Neuroarthistory: Making More Sense of Art,” in which the author proposes that understanding the neural apparatus of artmakers and viewers “adds a new set of insights into the unconscious mental formation of both” (283). Aiming to demonstrate the universal applicability of such an approach, Onians presents the following case:

A captive infant bottlenose dolphin sees her trainer on the other side of the aquarium glass puffing smoke clouds from a cigarette. The dolphin swims to her mother, briefly suckles milk, and then returns to the trainer to release a cloud of milk into the water, exactly replicating the trainer’s exhalation of smoke into the air. (271-272)

Onians explains that, even without inducement, the dolphin’s mirror neurons are geared to help her learn complex behaviour by mimicking others, which she is rewarded for by the release in the brain of chemicals such as dopamine. That she does this by ingeniously using a different medium and support than those in the original is presented as a reason for claiming that the dolphin created an artwork.

The discussion on nonhuman art production continued with other examples, including for instance the awe-inspiring durational performances of Australian Bowerbirds,
which as observed by David Attenborough in the series BBC Earth work tirelessly for months on end to build spectacular nests with beckoning gardens that serve to lure females for mating. Especially the use of blue—the least commonly occurring colour in their habitats (though decreasingly so given the prevalence of plastics)—works wonders to persuade the females, providing them with proof of the male’s foraging capacities and meticulous attention to detail. Here, it’s the species’ aesthetic sensibility—on the level of both creation and judgment—that has led many to argue that their work is artistic.

While most of my co-students, expecting to just be normal and study regular art history, were not amused about having to learn about something so weird as nonhuman artmaking, a handful of us were enthralled, if not a bit sceptical, that the basic premises underlying our understanding of art were being brought into question. Since then, the “nonhuman turn”1 and the short-lived spectacle of Object-Oriented Ontology (aka OOO)—the art/philosophical theory that through its blog-based existence and its sanctioning of wild speculation about the sentience of non-living matter so effectively exploited “the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students”—have nurtured a sustained interest in the idea of nonhuman art (Ray Brassier, qtd. in Erdem).

I could not have foreseen just how heavily the notion of nonhuman art would come to permeate the artistic landscape of today, and my unease with it has grown proportionately. There’s something utterly perverse and anthropocentrically arrogant about describing the appearance, behaviour and traces of nonhuman beings/entities/phenomena as art. And if I see one more water basin in a gallery “miraculously” exhibiting the motion of otherwise invisible sound waves, I think I’m going to scream. Or the appropriation of behavioural patterns in slime mould for audience-participation performances (see, for example, the work of Heather Barnett), or mushroom spores tattooed with geometrical patterns that
then—lo and behold the startling agency of nature—grow to form non-geometrical shapes.

In its portrayal of Area X as a place teeming and pulsating with life, and of the expeditioners’ idle struggle to cognitively and/or affectively access or even register the phenomena they encounter, Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* fully captures the utter inadequacy of the current trend of describing nonhuman agency as artistic. It also shows why taking distance from it is no small matter, striking at the heart of our incapacity to begin to respond in any consequential way to the enormity of the impending ecological catastrophe (as some call it, adopting a human perspective if we consider the collapse will be primarily human); In short, a failure to develop an *ecological consciousness*, as I hope to explain in what follows.

Matter, both in the weird ecology of Area X and the planet we inhabit, be it sentient or not, is intensively expressive, which of course is very different to saying it’s *artistic*. A crystal expresses its qualities because its molecular properties are manifest in its form, much like a hurricane or other extreme weather event expresses the conditions that birthed it – in its volume, path, moisture level, temperature, and every other behavioural factor detailing the source code of the highly complex environmental circumstances that caused its emergence, incremental growth and death.

We are able to read and interpret some of these observable data and consequently to appreciate them, scientifically, affectively, aesthetically. But in their vast complexity, these are hyperobjects that to a large extent lie beyond our comprehensive or even perceptual capacities. A first reductive step is then the gross underestimation of the expressive qualities of matter, which in Area X appear magnified to the point of terror: “a kind of ongoing horror show of such beauty and biodiversity that one could not fully take it all in.” (VanderMeer 45).

A second and far more disheartening step is the feeble human attempt at imposing order on nonhuman agents by designating them as producers of art, which as a human construct is equivalent to claiming we can bring them within reach, thereby heavily underplaying how deeply depleted we really are of any potential for understanding… There is not hardly enough deferential regard in this projective gesture for the terrific forces at play in our environment; not hardly enough consideration for the extreme extent to which we cannot possibly colonize and own it with the narrow gaze of our nomenclatures.

This projective and proprietary gesture is not only entirely absent in Area X, it’s effectively capsized to enact the inverse: nonhuman agency infiltrates into and irrupts within human subjects, disquieting and unsettling them by compromising their very sense of
being (human), literally blowing their minds, “like the petals of a monstrous flower that shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear” (VanderMeer 194). (This phrase appears repeatedly throughout the trilogy and forms part of a larger passage written in living matter on the walls of the “topographical anomaly,” composed by the alien organism inhabiting its depths.).

Vandermeer in fact explicit addresses the tendency to conceive of nonhuman agency as artistic in a passage in which the main character contemplates thinking of “a brightness [as] a kind of symphony,” then reels in, lamenting about “Having to reach for such banal answers because of a lack of imagination, because people couldn't even put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an own or a whale or a bumblebee” (733). Even the most pointed attempts at bringing phenomena within the scope of readability—let alone comprehension—are compromised by a misrecognition of the very terms of intelligibility, “I leaned in closer, like a fool … someone tricked into thinking that words should be read” (VanderMeer 27).

Art, however ambiguous and polysemic within our own frame of reference, remains but a scant recourse in negotiating that un-intelligibility. An environmental consciousness that takes the force of nonhuman agency today seriously demands a far greater leap: one that desists from relentlessly reaching outward in evermore inventive ways, and that takes distance from the tireless reliance on the idea that surely a greater effort will bear fruit, the conviction that if we just try a little harder we can succeed in understanding anything. Rather, it urges the inverse: a retractive movement that acknowledges a definite failure of comprehension, yielding to the reality that “Our instruments are useless, our methodology broken,” that our invasive propensity is exhausted, and that now it's human life that's being “invaded, infected, remade” (VanderMeer 194, 624). Not without fear, an ecological consciousness that is of any consequence today must take seriously the possibility not only that nonhuman agency exists in forms that cannot be subsumed into our conceptual apparatus, but that it can occur “through processes so invisible to human beings that the sudden visibility of it would be an irreparable shock to the system” (VanderMeer 761).

In this light, the extraordinary pettiness of describing the dolphin's deviceful playful-learning behaviour or bowerbirds' marvellous constructions as artistic, let alone the tragic pretension of thinking we could possibly hope to act anywhere near as collaboratively as superorganisms like slime mould, are beyond ridiculous. It's disconcerting and alarming that even those of us with the best intentions cannot forgo positioning ourselves at the centre of it all by recurring to self-congratulatory, allegedly non-anthropocentric gestures that are ultimately nothing other than projections of our own inventions onto nonhumans,
including our most elevated notion: art. Continuing on this path, we will forever be confined to creating more flat and sterile substantiations of what we consider to be an ecological consciousness, too bound to our preformed categories, too filtered by the reductive sieve of our senses and brains—much like Lowry’s replica of Area X and its stale movie-set feel: “inert and pathetic” (VanderMeer, 659).

Within my encounters over roughly the past decade with the development of nonhuman artistic production as a trending topic in the practice and discourse of contemporary art, I feel the moods and attitudes of the Southern Reach Trilogy mark an important turning point. I hope its legacy will be as infectious and virulent as Area X itself, and that its spores can disperse and replicate to become at least as influential in the field of art as the preceding tendencies I have described. This is not to suggest such a development will resolve anything; only that it will induce a reboot that might provoke a much-needed shift in artistic approaches to nonhuman agency: one that can attend with greater vigour to the fact that “If [we] don’t have real answers, it is because we still don’t know what questions to ask” (VanderMeer 194).

Film still portraying the border around Area X. Annihilation, dir. Alex Garland, 2018.

Diacritically opposed to Onians’ dolphin—the integrity of its existence doubly invaded, first by its lifelong captivity in the name of human entertainment and second in the human attempt to explicate its behaviour on distinctly human terms—stands the
dolphin encountered by the biologist in the “pristine wilderness” of Area X. “Rolling slightly to the side,” it stares at her “with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye . . . It was painfully human” (VanderMeer 99). This is not a human eye inserted into the animal, as we slowly learn, but a once-human, now engulfed, infected, and remade by the aquatic mammal’s genetic code gone haywire, forever fated to exist as a remnant trace within the dolphin’s overpowering being.

Notes
1. The 2012 conference The Nonhuman Turn, hosted by the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, marks the first historical claim to this development, followed by the publication in 2015 of Richard Grusin’s volume of collected essays.

Works Cited


“This End of Everything”: The *Southern Reach Trilogy* and the Already Ended World

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IN the five years since its publication, Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014) has gone on to become a seminal text in the Weird fiction renaissance of the twenty-first century, a both a nationwide bestseller and as the source material for a critically acclaimed film. Part of this popularity is self-evident; the trilogy is arguably VanderMeer working at the height of his literary gifts. But the trilogy’s acceptance by a mainstream audience outside of genre circles can also be interpreted as part of a general sea change culturally speaking. In recent years, we have experienced a rapid increase in events and calamities which might have previously seemed “unthinkable”—from 9/11 to the increasing urgency of climate change. This, in turn, has necessitated the development of newer conceptual frameworks for thinking through them. For instance, Amitav Ghosh has suggested that the realist novel may simply not be up to the task of addressing phenomena on the scale of global warming. As he puts it: “to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house [of “literary” fiction]—those generic outhouses that… have now come to be called ‘fantasy’, ‘horror’, and ‘science fiction’” (Ghosh 24).

As Benjamin Robertson has argued in his monograph on VanderMeer’s fiction, as a signifier Area X refuses to be reducible to any one referent. This irreducibility is one of the novels’ most compelling conceits—the fact that Area X actively resists the understanding of not only the characters but also the reader him or herself. However, if Area X resists semiotic ties to any particular referent, it does call to mind a particular type of phenomenon—namely, Timothy Morton’s concept of the *hyperobject*. As Morton defines the term: “hyperobjects are things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 1). VanderMeer himself has acknowledged the linkage. In the essay, “Haunting the Anthropocene” (2016), he remarks that Morton’s concept “has become central to thinking about storytelling in the modern era… The word therefore is a very important signifier for any fiction writer wishing to engage with the fragmented and diffuse issues related to the Anthropocene” (“Haunting”).

Perhaps this is where the New Weird of authors such as VanderMeer, China Mieville, and Steph Swainston most clearly departs from the older (haute) Weird tradition.
Weird often conceptualizes this as rupture or intrusion, even if the threat itself is ancient, the horror lies in our sudden realization of its existence. By contrast, the strange phenomena of the New Weird frequently has an air of the familiar. For example, the various non-human creatures of Mieville’s New Crobuzon are not conceived as foreign invaders, but fellow citizens in their own right—complete with their own customs, traditions, languages, and social mores. They are not strangers to teeming metropolis of the stories’ setting, they’ve been there all along.

Similarly, at the start of *Annihilation*, the first book in the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, the phenomena which creates Area X has been in place for thirty years—enough time for two generations to grow to adulthood. People have more or less gotten used to its presence, even if they are not entirely aware of its exact nature. Perhaps one of the most unsettling things about the series is its acknowledgement of how easily we adjust to even the direst of circumstances if it happens incrementally. As Morton notes: “The end of the world has already occurred” marked by a “logarithmic increase in the actions of humans as a geophysical force.” Moreover, “the end of the world is associated with the Anthropocene, its global warming and subsequent drastic climate change, whose precise scope remains uncertain while its reality is verified beyond question. […] There has been a decrease in appropriate levels of concern” (Morton 7). Area X, with its slowly but steadily expanding border, effectively conveys the existential threat of climate change in a way that feels tangible for the reader. We may not be able to truly perceive the totality of our gradual destruction of the environment, as well as the dire consequences it may ultimately hold in store for us, but we can viscerally comprehend the idea of nature pushing back to essentially erase us from existence. Likewise, the imagery of a desolate and abandoned landscape, filled with eerie reminders of the people who inhabited the region before the border appeared, is also simultaneously suggestive of the fact that the Anthropocene, like all eras, will eventually come to an end.

If *Annihilation* finds the mundanity hidden within the weird, then *Authority* highlights the inherent weirdness hidden within the mundane. Like *Annihilation*, *Authority* deploys certain alienation effects to estrange us from its characters—focalizing the narrative through the perspective of government bureaucrat John Rodriguez, who self-identifies as Control, who has been tasked with taking over the Southern Reach in the wake of the previous director’s failure to return from Area X. Control’s self-selected moniker not only serves as our first indication of the hypnosis he has been subjected to at the agency’s Central offices, it also reduces him to an abstraction in a manner not unlike the women of the twelfth
expedition. In the same way, the biologist and her team were essentially reduced to their specialties within the group, so Control is essentialized to his defining characteristic—his desperate need to believe that he is in control of his surroundings and those with whom he interacts. This need manifests in a tendency towards constant mind games and a generalized paranoia about the intentions of others, particularly his acting director. For instance, after a previous encounter in which Grace evinced an inclination towards insubordinate behavior, Control reasserts his dominance by paying an unexpected visit to her office to throw her off balance. We are treated to the following explanation of his actions: “Control had wanted to impose himself on Grace’s territory, to show her that he was comfortable there” (235), an amusingly petty power play which Siobhan Carroll associates with “the history of imperialism” (Carroll 79). Control plays similar psychological games with other members of the Southern Reach staff, essentially taking on the role of a micromanaging Machiavelli.

There is a certain irony then, in the fact that a character who is so named and so inclined in disposition, is essentially bereft of agency for the major of the second novel. Not only is Control being remotely manipulated via hypnosis by his superiors at Central but he is undermined at every turn by Grace, his assistant director and immediate subordinate. The tale of how Control acquired his nickname is also insightful. It is bestowed upon him by his grandfather, Jack Severance, a legend in the intelligence community, whose own name suggests a backhanded reference to Ian Fleming’s James Bond. “When he was eight or nine, they’d gone up to the summer cottage by the lake for the first time—‘our own private spy club,’ his mother had called it. Just him, his mother, and Grandpa. There was an old TV in the corner, opposite the tattered couch. Grandpa would make him move the antenna to get better reception. ‘Just a little to the left, Control,’ he’d say. […] And so he’d gotten his nickname, not knowing his grandfather had stolen it from spy jargon. […] When he grew up, he took ‘Control’ for his own. He could still feel the sting of condescension in the word by then, but would never ask Grandpa if he’d meant it that way, or some other way” (139). This nickname, informed by both his desire for his grandfather’s approval and deep-seated insecurity, is both a burden and the shield by which he protects himself from the world. Moreover, when Control attempts to enact the type of spy movie fantasies suggested by his pedigree, by charming a young woman on an early undercover assignment, it backfires horribly—ending with said woman killed by her militia affiliated boyfriend and Control himself permanently sidelined from fieldwork. More than just a subtle jab at the Bond franchise, there is a critique of certain callous ways of performing masculinity that are native to such fantasies as well as the fact that Control has been more or less groomed for
such behavior since childhood. In light of the interrogation of masculinity that has gone on in recent years, this theme seems surprisingly prescient.

Control’s handler and immediate superior at Central, James Lowry, sole survivor of the legendarily disastrous first expedition into Area X can be read as a similar deconstruction of a familiar male archetype. We first encounter him as an abstraction as well; namely, as the mysterious “Voice” on the phone who periodically calls to reinforce Control’s conditioning and pump him for information on the Southern Reach. Control somewhat humorously conceives of him as “a megalodon or other leviathan, situated in a think tank filled with salt water in some black-op basement so secret and labyrinthine that no one now remembered its purpose even as they continued to reenact its rituals” (165). The image has an absurdity to it, but it also carries a sense of a primordial menace to it. Strikingly, it uses the iconography of the traditional Weird tale (the leviathan lurking within the depths, being sustained and appeased by arcane rituals as it awaits its turn to emerge and menace civilization) and swerves by associating it with a government bureaucrat. There is the suggestion that the monster at the end of this book is not located in the Outside, as posited by many writers of the haute Weird but within the social superstructures we ourselves have constructed in order to protect ourselves.

We finally meet the man behind the megalodon in Acceptance, when Gloria (Control’s predecessor as director of the Southern Reach) is summoned to Lowry’s office at Central for a debrief following her unauthorized expedition beyond the border. She describes him thus: “The mane of golden hair now silver, grown long. The determined, solid head on a thick neck, the landmark features upon a face that had served him well: craggy good looks, people say, like an astronaut or an old-fashioned movie star” (441). This description and his own status as an early explorer of Area X aligns Lowry with an archetype of rugged masculinity particularly celebrated in the early and mid-twentieth century and practically hagiographed by Tom Wolfe in The Right Stuff. Yet this is revealed to be merely a veneer disguising the rot that is the true Lowry. Petty, vain, both obsessed with and abusive of the institution power he possesses, Lowry runs Central as his own private fealty—a status quo he maintains through intimidation and the unethical deployment of hypnosis. More than just a government functionary, Lowry has a particular investment in the Southern Reach’s expeditions into Area X. As Gloria informs us:

Lowry has had a replica of Area X’s lighthouse built and a replica of the expedition base camp, and even a hole in the ground meant to approximate the little known about the ‘topographical anomaly’ [...] But, in truth, standing there with Lowry,
looking out across his domain through a long plate of tinted glass, you feel more as if you’re staring at a movie set: a collection of objects that without the animation of Lowry’s paranoia and fear, his projection of a story upon them, are inert and pathetic. No, not even a movie set, you realize. More like a seaside carnival in the winter, in the off-season, when even the beach is a poem about loneliness (440).

In a sense, Lowry’s model of Area X in microcosm reflects a pathological need to control or master his surroundings, to exert his will upon the place which scarred him emotionally. And for all the atrocities and abuses which happen on his watch, it is also rendered as something pitiable. This is not to say that either VanderMeer or Gloria let him off the hook for his actions. As Gloria opines:

Is Lowry a monster? He is monstrous in your eyes, because you know that by the time his hold on Central, the parts of Central he wants to make laugh and dance the way he wants them to laugh and dance... by the time this hold, the doubling and mirroring, has waned as most reigns of terror do, the signs of his hand, his will, will have irrevocably fallen across so many places. His ghost will haunt so much for years to come, imprint upon so many minds, that if the details about the man known as Lowry are suddenly purged from all the systems, those systems will still reconstruct his image from the very force and power of his impact (564).

Lowry’s influence, the institutional power he wields, becomes another insidious hyperobject—too spread out across time and space to be effectively perceived by the people it will inevitably harm.² It is not entirely unlike the Gulf Oil Spill, which VanderMeer credits with inspiring his writing of the trilogy.³ Such a vision seems unfortunately quite timely for the contemporary reader living in the wake of Donald Trump’s disastrous tenure as president, despite the election being just two years away at the time of the novel’s publication.

Late in the third book, during her last meeting with Lowry at Central before setting off on the expedition which would claim her life, Gloria remarks that she feels as though she is “watching a war between Central and Area X”. Moreover, “[i]n some fundamental way, you feel, they have been in conflict for far longer than thirty years—for ages and ages, centuries in secret. Central the ultimate void to counteract Area X: impersonal, antiseptic, labyrinthine, and unknowable” (516). The musing has a certain underlying logic to it. After all, “‘man’ vs nature” has been identified as one of the five essential plots in narrative storytelling. If we take such narratives as emblematic of humankind’s longstanding need to bring order to perceived chaos by exerting mastery over nature and bending it to our
collective will, then the conflict between Central and Area X is just the latest beachhead in a conflict which has gone on for millennia.

Riffing on this thought, one can make the case for the trilogy as a whole as having a somewhat Hegelian structure, with the aggressive “abdifference” of Area X’s nature as thesis in the first book, and the sterile artifice of Southern Reach’s bureaucracy as its antithesis in the second. Acceptance, then, becomes synthesis which reconciles the two after a fashion. In her analysis of the novels, Alison Sperling argues that “the trilogy is… not a simple morality tale; though terrifying, it does not condemn humanity but instead demands a complete overhaul of its terms” (Sperling 250). Sperling connects the bodily transformations undergone by visitors to Area X to Stacy Alaimo’s notion of “trans-corporeality,” a theoretical state of “interconnectedness, interchanges, and transits between the human and the more-than-human world” (qtd in Sperling 245). We perhaps see this best reflected in the fates of the protagonists from the previous two novels.

For Control, whose entire arc as a character has been to struggle with his fundamental non-agency in the face of larger than life forces, he finally hits a wall during his travels through Area X. Breaking down at the revelation that he and his party members may no longer be on Earth anymore, he laments “this fucking ugly place, this place that isn’t really even where its supposed to be, this fucking place that just keeps killing people and doesn’t fucking even give you the chance to fight back because it’s going to win anyway…” (Area X 491). For Control, confronting the limitations of his own agency, the impossibility of “winning” is a profoundly shattering experience. His story concludes with him accompanying Ghost Bird, the imperfect doppelganger/clone of the biologist, into the tower for one final confrontation with the being known as the Crawler. In the confrontation, he undergoes a transformation in which he becomes something other than human. In our last moments with him, we are told that: “Now ‘Control’ fell away again. […] He sniffed the air, felt under his paws the burning heat, the intensity. This was all that was left to him, and he would not now die on the steps; he would not now suffer that final defeat. John Rodriguez elongated down the final stairs, jumped into the light” (573). Yet, unlike the pitiful moaning creature whose cries disturbed the biologist expedition, there is a sense of exultation in John’s becoming. At long last, he is free to relinquish the Control persona which has been his armor since childhood. There is the subtle implication here, in the description of his having “elongated down the final stairs” of the long time cat owner as having possibly taken on a feline form—a fitting fate, for as anyone who has spent time with them know, they are a species who answer to no one.

For the biologist, it involves a transformation that far more alarming and grotesque,
at least on the surface. And yet we are told upon her arrival:

Nothing monstrous existed here—only beauty, only the glory of good design, of intricate planning, from the lungs that allowed this creature to live on land or at sea, to the huge gill slits hinted at along the sides, shut tightly now, but which would open to breathe deeply of seawater when the biologist once again headed for the ocean. All of those eyes, all of those temporary tidal pools, the pockmarks and the ridges, the thick, sturdy quality of the skin. An animal, an organism that had never existed before or that might belong to an alien ecology. That could transition not just from land to water but from one remote place to another, with no need for a door or border. (494)

While the transformation is admittedly disturbing to human aesthetic sensibilities, there would seem to be some advantages to the tradeoff. The biologist, “in all her glory and monstrosity”, has become a uniquely adaptable organism. For a woman who never truly felt alone amidst the anthropocentric artifice of cities, such a transformation could be considered a gift rather than a curse. In a sense, such transformations could be considered a type of bioforming, an attempt by Area X at reconstructing human beings into something better capable of existing in a kind of balance with nature than we have currently managed so far.

So what are we to make of the ending to the trilogy, in which Grace and Ghost Bird, make their way back to the border site for Area X, desperately hoping that there is still a border to cross? It is interesting, and perhaps fitting, that VanderMeer leaves the reader on a note that is somewhat ambiguous but not entirely bereft of hope. It is not unlike Bong Joon-ho’s film Snowpiercer (2013), which similarly leaves the viewer in a state of uncertainty as to whether its surviving characters make it to the abandoned airplane fuselage, and by extension, escape the metaphor for late capitalism represented by the eponymous train. Likewise, the reader of the Southern Reach trilogy is left wondering if Ghost Bird’s intervention with the Crawler has come in time or whether the expansion of Area X’s borders has already consumed the rest of the world. A similar uncertainty hovers over the issue of global warming—whether our attempts to halt or slow its progress have been timely enough or are even adequate to the task.

Notes
1. Critics such as David Tompkins and Kaisa Kortekallio have also made this linkage in
previous analyses of the Southern Reach trilogy.

2. Joshua Rothman has similarly discussed the Southern Reach’s bureaucracy as a hyperobject in his New Yorker article “The Weird Thoreau.”

3. VanderMeer mentions the Gulf Oil spill as a source of inspiration in the essay “Haunting in the Anthropocene.”

4. I refer here Benjamin Robertson’s coinage in his discussion of Area X’s “radical difference does not afford a collapse in which terms previously distinguished by abstract borders find one another and merge… an uncontainable space that is nothing but bordering without a border” (Robertson 116-17).

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Area X, Tangible Bodies, and the Impossibility of Individuation

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BY the time Jeff VanderMeer published the Southern Reach Trilogy in 2014, I already knew his work. His stand-alone piece from the Ambergris universe, Finch, is one of my favorite books, with its islands of fungal fruiting bodies and a feeling of noir that surrounded me while I read it. Finch is weird: it is a detective fiction taking place in a city inundated with fungi and ruled by humanoid-fungus Gray Caps spreading their spores everywhere and thereby transforming humans. The novel is fleshy, smelly, and oozy – alienating but attractive. While reading as an academic looking for tropes, abstractions, and conceptual tools - a professional habit that risks ruining the act of reading books or watching films - my concepts could not keep up with the language and the universe of the book. I noticed an exciting, non-Cartesian understanding of the body that was an amalgamation, a symbiosis, a thought that refused to be pinned down with the academic tools available to me then. Finch was published in 2009 and I was reading it in 2014; Haraway had not yet published Staying with the Trouble and Malatino’s Queer Embodiment was probably being written. The only thing I could do was to feel weird. VanderMeer’s book promised me a new thought, a liberating one, yet I did not have the tools to utter it yet.

Now, when Annihilation came out in 2014, my joy was immense. My encounter with Finch had already opened me up to new ways of thinking about contamination, borders, and bodies, and I was ready for more. I read the book in six hours and by the time I finished it, I knew I immediately wanted to write about it. I was not alone. After its publication, the Southern Reach Trilogy composed of Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance entered academia fast. It first made its appearance in academic conferences where papers unpacked the space that Area X offered, with its Crawler that writes the world in fruiting bodies, with its biologist and its monstrous double, with its permeable borders emanating all over the world, imagining an out-there that is already in-here, with its breathing nature that rules with its own rules. The trilogy touched both old lines of thought like border and animal studies as well as genre studies, and newly popular ones, like posthumanism and ecocriticism. Area X is rich in concepts and we, academics, were consuming it fast. We just could not decide—echoing Rancière—with which sauce we should be eating it.

Major scholarship on trilogy invested in questions of posthumanism and
ecocriticism: In Area X that VanderMeer offers, the relationship of the subject acting on an outside object called nature is no longer tenable hence it asks for another way to think about such relationality which Brian Onishi explores via Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action. This ontological realm leads to ethical questions as well: Prendergast imagines non-human ethics while Kaisa Kortekallio explores non-human affects and feelings. Gry Ulstein’s posthumanist article on Anthropocene monsters in the Weird genre epitomizes the two salient areas that many scholars examine regarding Area X: Anthropocene and the New Weird. In fact, Collateral has recently published two clusters with four articles each on the Weird and the Anthropocene specifically dedicated to the Southern Reach Trilogy. Alison Sperling explores the relation between the Weird and the queer via corporeality. Five years later its initial publication, Area X is still very prominent with Benjamin Robertson’s book being named as the “first book” written on it, and more were expected to follow. At this moment, I want to suggest three concepts that are as of yet unexplored or underexplored regarding Area X and VanderMeer’s work more broadly.

First, VanderMeer brings us back to the body, and this is very difficult to do as the last thing that Western canonized theory as taught in the institutionalized academia wants to do is to go back to the body. Western thought, and with it the man of reason, privileges mind over body, reason over putrefying and everchanging flesh, conceptual thoughts over desiring, voluptuous appetites. We can find the roots of this obliteration of the body in the Cartesian dichotomy of body/mind, yet Genevieve Lloyd reminds us that Cartesian res cogitanz is always already a cisgender male haunting the disembodied thoughts of reason with his a priori assumption of gender. We can see this in the ascetic principles of abstinence and control over the body in the Epicureans and Stoics, which Foucault highlights in the third volume of The History of Sexuality (59); here, the body becomes the source of self-knowledge’s lack. We can see this in the political theories of the 1970s, where identity politics become important as long as we do not talk about the tangibility of the skin, the flesh, the ooze of those bodies involved in it. There are of course pockets of thought in critical theory where the body becomes a legitimate epistemic object: queer theory, feminist studies, disability studies, and some lines of postcolonial thought explore the body in meticulous, tangible and affective ways. Yet, these fields let us talk about bodies as long as their authority is marked, and their marginalization is accepted. Hence, to think of the body tout court is not common. VanderMeer forces us to think about the body not as a place of authority, not as a desiring machine, but as palpable materiality with concrete bifurcations. Take, for example, the biologist and their transformation:
The suggestion of a flat, broad head plunging directly into torso. The suggestion, far to the east, already overshooting the lighthouse, of a vast curve and curl of the mouth, and the flanks carved by dark ridges like a whale’s, and the dried seaweed, the kelp, that clung there, and the overwhelming ocean smell that came with it. The green-and-white stars of barnacles on its back in the hundreds of miniature craters, of tidal pools from time spent motionless in deep water, time lost inside that enormous brain. The scars of conflict with other monster’s pale and dull against the biologist’s skin. (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 195)

Now that the biologist has perfectly become one with Area X, they are no longer in a humanoid shape. Hence we may read this passage as an encounter with a monster, a liminal “living being of a negastive value” (28) as Canguilhem suggests, who is dwelling at the gates of difference as Cohen tell us, bringin us to the category of crisis (7). This way, even if we cannot name this biologist now, we can still understand that they are a monster and taxinmoze them as such. Yet here, the body is not a simple depiction to be categorized; it is the very site on which the transformations and the events take place. Hence a reading of monstrosity which would do away with what this body performs and which would immediately name this becoming biologist as such, is not enough to account for the body. Everywhere in the trilogy, we witness bodies becoming: Saul, the lighthouse keeper, becomes Area X through being touched by a splinter on his skin. The biologist inhales spores for her initiation. Here, the body can be read as a primary object of contamination, yet it is not objectified as such. It is not just a utility, an individual thing through which something else in the form of a self is being infected. Rather, the body is the individuating, ever-changing event that sets other events in motion. The body of the biologist is both a place and a space; it has an east with a “vast curve and curl of the mouth” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 195). Its gargantuan shape is made for us to touch with “flanks carved by dark ridges” and smells (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 195). This tangibility, this texture, is not something simply to be observed by the characters in the novel or by the reader, as we are asked to come back to the body with something other than intelligence.

This brings us to the second point: What are we going to use if we are not using our comprehension to interact with Area X? We can think about and around this question with one of the saddest characters in the novel, Whitby, who tries very hard to understand Area X via his reason. A perfect specimen of the scientific man, Whitby constantly attempts
to subsume Area X and everything with it under the rule of reason until he, just like Descartes, begins doubting his own senses, which culminates in his visit to Area X and his transformation into someone who does not make sense anymore.

The following exchange takes place in one notable meeting: “I don’t think we’re looking at a plant,’ Whitby says, tentative, at one status meeting, risking his new relationship with the science division, which he has embraced as a kind of sanctuary. “Then why are we seeing a plant, Whitby?” (VanderMeer, Acceptance 218) Whitby embodies the struggle of reason where he desperately tries to solve the riddle of Area X. Whitby encounters a monster: a plant-looking not-plant that defies an either/or logic and the principle of the excluded middle, it is a blasphemy to try to use logic to open the secrets that Area X hides.

Whitby’s gesture is that of classical individuation. He tries to taxonomize Area X as such and categorize it as a being. It does not really matter whether this being is a monster, an alien, or something else. For Whitby, it needs to be solved and named. Yet, he fails in this endeavor as Area X is not a being but a becoming, and it becomes with the people who interact with it. Here, we can see one of the most tangible ways to think about individuation as a process rather than an intact, undivided body. Whitby’s frustrations can be relieved if we turn to Gilbert Simondon, who proposes to think of an individual that is not the basis of experience but instead as a movement that does not result in any kind of final product. Simondon proposes a constant becoming where the individual is a phase of deployment. In his L’individu et sa genèse psycho-biologique, he asserts, “Individual is not a being but it is an act and being is individual as the agent of this act of individuation through which it manifests itself and exists…it is a transductive relation of an activity, the result and the agent at the same time, the consistency and the coherence of this activity through which it is being constituted and it constitutes” (my translation, Simondon 186). In other words, Whitby does not encounter a plant; he interacts with a phase of planting in which he becomes one of the transductive elements, one of the parts of this becoming. To try to account for this encounter in the language of being can only result in non-sense, as Whitby’s science colleague reminds him. Hence, a language based on static concepts of being will always fail us when we attempt to comprehend Area X. VanderMeer invites us to use other affects that are not limited to understanding.

Which brings us to the third point that I would like to make about Area X: VanderMeer does not speak the narcissistic language of anthropocentrism, as Cixin Liu suggests in his defense of SF (22). With becoming constantly bringing us back to the body, Area X asks us to reconsider our language and its relation to our thinking. Indeed, the moment we leave
being a Whitby or VanderMeer-approved adjective “Smeagol of the Southern Reach,” then we are also risking making sense, as the object before us cannot be reduced to the mere language and is asking to be experienced rather than read and be done with (VanderMeer, *ElectricLit*). We have to reconsider how to talk about the body, the being, the individual, the relations. This is the lesson Control learns during his own transformation at the end of *Acceptance*: “nothing about language, about communication, could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X. That anything approaching a similarity would be some subset of Area X functioning at its most primitive level. A blade of grass. A blue heron. A velvet ant” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 311).

Five years later, there are still many sauces with which to eat Jeff VanderMeer’s trilogy, as it remains fertile ground for critical posthuman studies, ecocritical thought, and genre and border studies. Area X can give us a tool to question our own assumptions regarding the project of sense-making, as well as tangible ways to think of transformation and becoming and thought of the body that is not limited to area studies. What is liberating and joyful for me is this very act of falling short of explication, where I am pushed to either think otherwise and with other people, like Simondon, or, when I cannot account for what I read, to be comfortable with the sensation of the weird that requires me accepting that understanding is just one of the affects among many.¹

**Notes**

1. This is Ulus Baker’s statement as recorded by one his students. In response to his students’ complaint about not understanding a film that was being studied, rather than trying to explicate to help the student comprehend the film, Baker said “understanding is just one of the affects among many,” and moved forward with his lecture.

**Works Cited**


SYMPOSIUM: AREA X: FIVE YEARS LATER


Robertson, Benjamin J. *None of This Is Normal: Rhe Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*. U of Minnesota P, 2018.


Symposium Contributor Bios

Alison Sperling received her Ph.D. in literature and cultural theory at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2017 and is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry Berlin. She writes about 20th and 21st century American literature including weird and science fiction, queer and feminist theory, and nonhumans in the Anthropocene, and is working on her first book manuscript, *Weird Modernisms*.

Bethany Doane received her Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University in English and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in August 2019. Her research focuses on contemporary literature and film, theories of gender and race, media studies, and critical theory. She is currently working on her first book project, *Weird Reading: Race, Gender, and the Inhuman in Contemporary Horror*, which emphasizes the political and methodological affordances of horror fiction in the weird tradition as it addresses critical concepts such as the inhuman, biopolitics, and the Anthropocene.

Benjamin J. Robertson is assistant professor of English at the University of Colorado, Boulder and author of *None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*.

Isabel de Sena is a Berlin-based independent curator working at the intersection of feminist technoscience and art, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Curatorial Practice at Reading University and Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Her current research explores the potential of science fictional narratives for “reprogramming the present” through the projects “M/others and Future Humans” (Multispecies Salon & Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology) and “WE WILL HAVE BEEN” (New Alphabet School, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin). Isabel has recently contributed as a curator to projects at FACT (Liverpool), diffrakt (Berlin), Martin-Gropius-Bau (Berlin) and AxS Residency (L.A.), as an author to *Technofeminist Practices in the 21st Century* (Minor Compositions, 2019) and *Jokebook* (nGbK Verlag, 2015), and as a speaker to New Suns: A Feminist Literary Festival (Barbican Centre London, 2019), “OPEN SCORES: How to program the Commons” (panke.gallery Berlin, 2019), transmediale Berlin (2019) and “Producing Futures: Post-Cyber-Feminisms” (Migros Museum Zurich, 2019). Isabel is currently lecturer at NODE Center for Curatorial Studies (Berlin) and guest lecturer since 2016 at California Institute of the Arts.
W. Andrew Shephard is an Assistant Professor of African American Literature in the University of Utah’s English department. His research focuses on modes of genre fiction such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror, as they intersect with questions of race, gender, and sexuality, and the ways in which marginalized peoples utilize the conventions of genre to address concerns specific to their communities. He is the author of the chapter “Afrofuturism of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” published in the Cambridge History of Science Fiction (2019), and the article “All is Always Now’: Slavery, Retrocausality, and Recidivistic Progress in Samuel R. Delany’s Empire Star (1966),” published in CR: The New Centennial Review.

Elif Sendur received her Ph.D in English from Binghamton University in comparative literature in 2019 on the French cinema journal Cahiers du Cinema. Her research focuses on film history and theory, science fiction film and literature, body and queer studies, critical posthumanism, and disability studies, with secondary research that explores the placement and representation of monstrous, queer, and unruly bodies in literature, anime, and film, especially in the genre of science fiction and New Weird literature and media. She has recently published in a special issue of Studies in the Humanities on ecocriticism and disability studies. She has worked as a program coordinator and as health educator in Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project and she is dedicated to advocate for the equity and inclusion of marginalized communities. Sendur serves as H-Film editor and the Humanities and Social Sciences's board council and participates in SCMS (Society of Cinema and Media Studies) e-waste committee.
FACING THE FUTURE, FACING THE PAST

COLONIALISM, INDIGENENITY, & SCIENCE FICTION

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

NALO HOPKINSON

AUTHOR, BROWN GIRL IN THE RING, MIDNIGHT ROBBER, THE SALT ROADS; THE NEW MOON’S ARMS

SPECIAL GUEST

DR. GRACE L. DILLON

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR, INDIGENOUS NATIONS STUDIES PROGRAM

EDITOR, WALKING THE CLOUDS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS SCIENCE FICTION (2012)

SPECIAL PLENARY & FILM/MEDIA SESSIONS ON INDIGENOUS FUTURISMS

FEATURING NATIVE HAWAIIAN & OTHER INDIGENOUS SCHOLARS, FILMMAKERS, ILLUSTRATORS, ARCHIVISTS, COMIC-BOOK & AR/VR WRITERS, & DIGITAL ARTISTS, WITH DR. DILLON AS RESPONDENT

SESSIONS ON ECOCRITICISM, THE ANTHROPOCENE, AND MANY OTHER TOPICS!

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QUESTIONS?

SEE HTTP://WWW.SFRA.ORG/SFRA-ANNUAL-CONFERENCE OR EMAIL SFRAHONOLULU@GMAIL.COM.
SYMPOSIUM: PROCEEDINGS OF THE SFRA 2019 CONFERENCE

Introduction: Colonialism, Indigeneity, and SF

Sean Guynes
Editor, SFRA Review
Michigan State University

THE annual conference of the SFRA was held in Honolulu, Hawai‘i on the campus on Chaminade University between June 21 and June 24, 2019 and organized by John Rieder (co-chair), Ida Yoshinaga (co-chair), Justin Wyble, Steven Holmes, Cheryl Edelson, and Erin Cheslow.

It was a truly incredible conference, one of the best I’ve been to in my career, and was organized around the theme: "Facing the Future, Facing the Past: Colonialism, Indigeneity, and SF." In addition to keynotes by Nalo Hopkinson and Grace Dillon, the conference organizers provided unique opportunities to hear from indigenous Hawaiian artists, activists, and SF practitioners, ensuring that no panels were planned concurrent to these collaborative conversations and workshops. As this symposium collecting some proceedings from the conference suggests, there was an incredible array of papers given and enthusiastically heard between breaks for scrumptious local Hawaiian fare.

The following pages collect some dozen papers from the SFRA 2019 conference, giving you a glimpse into some of the most important ongoing conversations in SF studies and acting as a partial record of the conference experience. Nearly every paper touches on the problematics of empire and colonialism in the genre we have dedicated our scholarly careers to, and the range of texts discussed is astounding, from Jemisin and Atwood, to Roanhorse and Buckell, from the familiar (Star Trek) to texts that deserve greater attention.

As with past conference proceedings published as symposia in SFRA Review, the papers here have been slightly edited for readability in print and for citational accuracy, but otherwise differ very little from the form in which they were originally presented.
JINGI. Wallah. Aloha. I am grateful to be able to talk about my project on the beautiful island of the Kanaka Maoli peoples, whose old people I respect and admire for enduring their own apocalypse. My ancestors and community share similar experiences. I acknowledge their ancestral cultural wisdom in keeping this place as paradise, and thank them for hosting us here.

This paper discusses the process I’m undertaking for my Doctor of Arts degree, where 80% of my work is for my creative project, and 20% for an exegesis which maps the theoretical and critical considerations of my creative work. I’m going to discuss the creative project itself and the research questions that guide me, and then detail the research and writing methodology and methods I’m working with.

For this project I’m combining four of my research interests: Aboriginal sovereignty and survivance, the future of Bundjalung country and our community, speculative fiction, and creative writing. Like any Aboriginal person worth their salt, I’m invested in our sovereignty, and the ways we may reclaim and reassert our power from our cultural authority. I’m also very invested in my community and country, the Minjungbal-Nganduwul part of the Bundjalung nation where I grew up, and where I have belonged since I was young. In colonial terms, this is known as the Tweed Valley, which is just south of the Gold Coast and about halfway between Byron Bay and Brisbane, in what is now northeastern New South Wales. I also love speculative fiction [spec-fic] in all its wonderful iterations—particularly futurism for its possibilities and ways forward—and I very much love writing in creative modes.

These four interests converge to create a short story cycle of Goori-futurism stories. The stories are tied together thematically, in setting, in genre, and in form—yet they all explore different expressions of our sovereignty and survivance; they are all are set in
different versions of the future, in the Tweed, with various climate and population and political structures; all are different genres of spec-fic, depending on the story; and all short stories have different forms and structures.

The SSC is a form that lends itself to thematic exploration, without the need for an extended plot or narrative structure. In this, a SSC is an ideal vehicle to explore the opportunities and challenges that many versions of the future might present for Goori characters from Tweed. I have so far mapped out around twenty stories, all in varying stages of draft.

I've named this field Goori-futurism. The name and philosophy pays homage to the rich heritage of Afro-futurism, and more recently, Indigenous futurism, particularly Aotearoa-futurism, which has emerged from Maori and other Pasifika storytellers. Less a set of genre conventions, Goori-futurism is specific in people, place, and time, and draws from traditional Aboriginal story-telling modes and post-invasion histories, as well as many genres of speculative fiction. As spec-fic offers humanity wonderful opportunities to imagine the seemingly impossible, so I intend for Goori-futurism to open up the parameters for my community to explore ways that our sovereignty might become a reality.

Goori-futurism disavows the post/apocalyptic paradigm, and it is not part of the dystopian-utopian binary, nor is it pan-Indigenous. For colonised peoples, 'apocalyptic' and 'post-apocalyptic' are relative terms, often used to denote an experience of world-shattering that colonising cultures may have once found exotic, but may finally soon share with us, instead of them inflicting this on us. For the same reasons the stories aren't really utopian but not dystopian either, as it depends who is reading and what their standpoint is. As this field centres Goori peoples, it's also not a one mob, pan-Indigenous field.

There are many stories set in a future Australia, but the majority of these works have been written by non-Indigenous people, and most of these authors didn’t have the decency to write Aboriginal people into the future—bit rude of them. For those authors who have included us, they’ve tended to sketch us as incredibly outlandish, or else assimilated and subdued.

Fortunately, there’s a small but rapidly growing body of spec-fic written by Indigenous writers, in long- and short-form fiction, and other media, writing into many subgenres in the field. Within this body of Indigenous spec-fic there are a handful of stories that are explicitly futuristic. I’m focusing on the following eight works as background research.

Starting in 1990, we have *The Kadaitcha Sung* by Sam Watson; then 1991’s *Below the Line* by Eric Willmot; and 1998’s *Land of the Golden Clouds* by Archie Weller. After
this period, we have a lull until 2012 when women and non-binary authors start publishing futurism. First is Ambellin Kwaymullina’s three-book young adult Tribe series from 2012-2015; then The Swan Book by Alexis Wright in 2013; and Ellen van Neervan’s novella “Water,” from their 2014 short story collection Heat and Light. The TV series Cleverman showed from 2016-2017, and most recent is the 2017 novel Terra Nullius, by Claire G Coleman. Apart from The Kadaitcha Sung—which is set in multiple realities—all of these stories are explicitly futuristic, but I’ve included Kadaitcha anyway, as it’s the only one out of these that’s partly set in my community, in Pooningbah/Fingal Head.

These works are fantastic in their own ways; I very much admire the skills and creativity of these authors, and I respect their care in writing us into the genre. But insofar as aligning with my research interests, the field as a whole leaves much to be desired. Taken together, the field tends toward the dystopian, recreating the power structures of the past and present, and projecting them into the future. These stories mostly feature Aboriginal protagonists but not always, and certainly not always in a community context. Some survivance of our ways are explored, however there are not many examples of Aboriginal sovereignty.

So, in spite of Aboriginal peoples having lived through every major climate event in one of the harshest, most fragile places on earth, and despite surviving our own ongoing apocalypse through attempted genocide, according to the field our future is looking grim. Most non-Indigenous authors have committed genocide on us; many of those that have not made us extinct, have rendered us as racist or fetishised caricatures, or have otherwise assimilated us, which is a form of genocide anyway. Even many Aboriginal writers are guilty of this, writing us as oppressed or otherwise marginalised. Across the whole field, across cultural divides, there are very few representations of Aboriginal sovereignty in the future.

So the rationale for my project then becomes clear. What has not yet been articulated are future worlds where we have reasserted our sovereignty, and that centres our world-views, laws, values, and relationships.

To guide my creative practice into these goals, I have some thematic lines of questioning I am pursuing:

- Given the reassertion of sovereignty, what might our countries, communities and cultures look like?
- What could this look like for Goori people in Bundjalung country, in the future, given different climate and population concerns?
- What kinds of stories might emerge from these worlds?
To feel out the parameters of these questions, I’ve devised a research and writing methodology comprised of four frameworks:

- **Themes: Aboriginal Sovereignty & Survivance**
  - Research informs philosophy and theory of the stories
  - Writing situates stories in the world of ideas
- **Setting: Future Tweed**
  - Research informs climate considerations and social dynamics of the stories
  - Writing situates stories in the world of local knowledge production
- **Genre: Speculative Fiction**
  - Research informs aesthetics and conventions of the stories
  - Writing situates stories in the world of genre
- **Form: Short story**
  - Research informs technical aspects of the stories
  - Writing situates stories in the world of creative writing craft

The first two frames create the world-building, and the last two are concerned with craft aspects. I spent last year immersed in world-building -- writing about place, time, society, and culture—and this year, I’ve spent more time with genre and form, shaping my world-building into stories. In researching each frame, and when possible, I privilege the work of Aboriginal writers as good decolonial praxis. I then generate ideas and stories from the research.

To demonstrate how these frameworks inform the writing, I’ll use one of my stories as an example to guide you through the process. My story, “Buried Time,” was published in issue 234 of *Overland*. It will probably be part of the framing narrative of the SSC; in it Aboriginal people destroy shallow colonial time to reassert their sovereignty and live in deep time’s patterns.

This story started with an idea: of sovereignty over movement and work and life ways. This research was around the different conceptions of Indigenous time and colonial time. The writing was about the requirements, opportunities and challenges for reinstating deep time, and perhaps living in all-times.

For setting, I wrote about how Bundjalung country has been through time: deep time and colonial time, and how I envisioned a Future Tweed in truly post-colonial ways, that is - how we could live like our old people did, how country could be rested and lived with rather than subjugated. I drew on my local cultural and historical knowledge about how this used
to, and still might, work in the Tweed, and what would be involved, as well as the genocide and ecocide that came with the first clocks onto Bundjalung country. The writing that was produced was about seasonal movement, how community would have lived seasonally, and how colonial time stood in the way of this.

The genres of spec-fic I leant into in particular were surrealism, magic realism, and cli-fi, so for this frame I drew on stories in these genres, as well as stories about time, seasonal movement and practises, Dreaming stories of long ago times, stories that expressed long views of time and seasonal time, late capital and the end of capitalism, and near futurism. My writing became about deep time circling colonial time, which was expressed in rhythmic prose.

For the short story frame, I drew on Aboriginal orality and other forms of long narrative story. The form this story takes is that of a made-up Dreaming story, reminiscent of stories told to me by Elders. The story is told in the collective first person ‘we’ to collectivise the malaise of colonisation across the community and throughout generations. I went heavy on time metaphors and similes, and I characterise deep time as an old woman, who embodies the patterns and Laws of Dreaming, to show how long we’ve been here, and how recently colonial time came but how damaging it’s been.

At this point I have to apologise for leading you up the garden path, as none of this is as straightforward as I’ve led you to believe. All of my stories have began from multiple starting points and has been a much more esoteric process than this appears.

My goal for this project is to produce original, entertaining stories that imagine more liberating paradigms, that celebrate our ways of being, doing, and knowing. I want to showcase sovereign, self-determining Goori characters, and centre and celebrate their complex relationships inside and across thriving country, community and culture. I’m aiming for them to be educational and inspirational—maybe even a set of blueprints for the future, that rigorously delineate the field of Goori-futurism. I also want to continue my commitment to social justice as well as honoring my contract as an Aboriginal writer to provide nuanced and diverse fictional representation. This means conforming to the expectations of Australian futurism while also subverting and extending its conventions in light of critical decolonisation theory, and I aim to:

- disrupt the trajectory of climate apathy
- dismantle the tropes of non-Indigenous exceptionalism
- decolonise our fictional representation, and
- destroy the white supremacy of the future
This project is significant for a few reasons. As we’ve seen there is very little Aboriginal-written fiction that imagines our sovereignty in the future, and this is the first of its kind that centres my community and the Tweed.

More urgently, we’ve already survived one apocalypse—and we continue to live well, in our culture, through ongoing genocide and ecocide, under oppressive policies, and within a destructive and unsustainable economic system. We need to take inspiration from community stories, our political organising at a grassroots level, the strength and resilience of our old people, all which are structured on our beautiful world-view and philosophies.

Our cultural wisdom is sorely needed, just for ourselves, but for the world who will soon be facing their own version of apocalypse, as our old people did. We have millenia of expertise with living with climate change, with population stability and resource management, and in politics with power sharing and conflict resolution. We need to draw on our cultural wisdom to get out alive, and we need to share it with wider society.

We must imagine ourselves into a hopeful future and work toward the kind of future that we dream of, and it's a matter of ethics and cultural responsibility that our children see hope and strength in their futures.

And we need to model this with representation that centres and celebrates us: with three-dimensional, thriving characters, who live in healthy, creative, well-connected communities, who practise resilient, living cultures, all grounded in strong connections to country.

This project, in form and in intent, is about survivance, and in keeping with the theme of this conference, our future lies in our past too. For Indigenous peoples, our stories contain the keys to our ongoing survival. The answers are in our astonishingly long and peaceful history, in our cultural ways that lived gently yet deeply with each other and with country in complex systems of kinship, which determined relationships of respect, and responsibility. In closing, I grew up reading futurism whose authors had either assimilated or annihilated people who thought and related the way I do. I had never read any stories that centred us in our sovereign ways. I want to remedy this, so I’m writing the stories I would love to read—stories where we are not just background characters in a colonial narrative or lone heroes on a western journey, but as a community of heroes, just like our young people are already apart of, and deserve to see themselves reflected in.
Feeling Alternative Futures

Tamara E. Swift
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Day 1 | June 21, 2019 | 3:30pm
Future Studies

SPECULATIVE fiction allows us to not only imagine but feel alternative futures to the normative scenario of climate and economic collapse presented by those in power and control. It also helps us locate ourselves in the current reality. Where are we—is Earth a utopia, dystopia, or uchronia? I suggest we are living in a neoliberal corporate uchronia, which has created for humanity a dystopian human extinction event and an ecological collapse. The dystopia of the global neoliberal economy demands unlimited extraction, pollution, and destruction, in order to sustain a utopia for the rich of unbridled profits. What is uchronia? Claire Sagan coined the term “uchronia” in her article, “Capitalocentric Temporalities as Uchronia” (1). She describes uchronia as the desire for a “good time” (eu + chronos) that will never come (ou + chronos). This enticement of a good time, such as “trickle down” riches and unbridled consumerism, demand that the general population be good wage workers and consumers even as their livelihoods become more precarious. Meanwhile, the gulf between rich and working poor widens every day.

Sagan offers hope when she argues that the ubiquitous capitalist uchronia is still contingent despite its attempts to grab all of times: past, present, future, and 24/7. “This impossible temporal horizon occludes…the resulting ecological destructions and alienations…” (144). Which in turn attempts to “…reduce our imaginaries to capitalist economies’ demands, in an effort to subdue all time to a (re)productive, capitalist futurism” (144). I agree with her assessment that the neoliberal imaginary is in fact insidiously working as an unattainable (anti-)telos. We are trapped in this distorted illusion where advertising defines reality and where utopia is scoffed at by the capitalists as impossible. On the other hand, the toxic dystopia of the ecological catastrophe and melting polar ice caps is viewed as a great opportunity for more oil extraction and profits for the rich. What is real to capitalists is the ownership of “real property” or land, the bottom line, and how many resources can be extracted for profit. This is their fantasy made visible every day through resource depletion, pollution and poverty. Isabelle Stengers talks about “capitalist
sorcery,” which tries to capture all imagination and doesn’t fear critique. She says “Rather, it
nourishes itself on the destruction of that which appears retroactively as a dream, utopia, or
illusion, as that of which reality imposes the renunciation. It triumphs when the memory of
what has been destroyed is lost or makes people cackle or sigh” (110).

How do we dissipate the fog and demystify what separates us from truth? Who
is visioning alternative worlds? Science fiction demonstrates how we can use art and
imagination to create different worlds and reclaim alternative futures. Alexandra Rowland
says, “We tell stories to model ways of behavior so that we can live in communities together
and have civilization together as a cooperative thing...this is something that we can embody
and live up to in our day-to-day lives” (qtd. in Schneiderman 3). Science fiction pushes back
against a dystopian future with hopepunk and Indigenous SF by asserting that humanity
can define itself through storytelling in order to break out of the capitalist imaginary in
order to envision social and ecological justice.

Cognitive estrangement is another contribution of SF that can help us understand
how neoliberalism and capitalism try to distort our view of what is real. Darko Suvin
described cognitive estrangement in this way: “The approach to the imaginary locality, or
localized daydream, practiced by the genre of SF is a supposedly a factual one...The effect of
such factual reporting of fictions is one of confronting a set normative system” (117). While
Suvin is describing how SF uses cognitive estrangement as a literary device to confront
the normative system, I’m suggesting here that it is being used by neoliberalism to confine
human imagination to their normative system. For example, the use of factual reporting
of the fiction that climate change does not exist or that it’s too late to do anything. Also,
that food production is best centralized and controlled by agri-business which has already
poisoned vast areas and dictates eating only what they produce.

It is neoliberalism that has tried to destroy the normative communal human
social system that people adhered to worldwide for thousands of years and was rooted
in a sustainable interaction with nature to ensure food and survival. Indigenous peoples
are leading the way to restore a human normative system, which cares about land, water,
animal and plant rights. Kyle Whyte says: “Indigenous peoples are among the most active
environmentalists in the world, working through advocacy, educational programs, and
research. The emerging field of Indigenous Environmental Studies and Sciences (IESS) is
distinctive, investigating social resilience to environmental change through the research lens
of how moral relationships are organized in societies” (136). Here are some of these efforts:
Ecuador, the first country to recognize Rights of Nature in its Constitution; New Zealand,
The Whanganui River was given legal rights; India, the Ganges and Yamuna rivers were granted the same legal rights as human beings (the Indian court cited the New Zealand case as an example for according status to the two rivers considered sacred); Bolivia, declared the law of mother earth or the rights of our whole planet; and in Minnesota, the White Earth Band of Ojibwe asks: Can wild rice have its own legal rights?

Even Western settlers in the US are finally waking up and realizing they can’t trust the government to protect the environment; for example, in Toledo, Ohio, where residents voted to recognize personhood for Lake Erie. In Toledo, they now have standing in court to sue corporate polluters on behalf of the lake which has been vigorously opposed by a group linked to some of the largest corporations and lobbying groups on the planet (Davis-Cohen).

What is our current ecological truth? Nature doesn’t need people, but people need nature to survive and the climate catastrophe is accelerating faster than the political and social action to reverse it. We are in a human species extinction crisis that is being ignored by the powers that be. Where is the urgency? There is no planet B! Today it is the children who are speaking truth to power and raising the alarm over the climate crisis. Fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg ignited an international movement of youth and told the New Yorker magazine that the politics needed to prevent the climate catastrophe doesn’t exist today. She said that we need to change the system, as if we were in crisis, as if there were a war going on (qtd. in Gessen). There are also the 21 children joining the Juliana v. United States lawsuit. They say that the US federal government has known about the life-threatening dangers of climate change for over half a century but has encouraged a fossil fuel-driven energy system anyway, which they say is unjust and unconstitutional.

I believe it’s time for everyone to see the urgency to fight for the preservation of Earth’s ecology and humanity. Aiko Yamashiro put it this way: “…we have to cut the fence and put our hand through to feel what’s on the other side…Once we’ve experienced that freedom, that sovereignty, that pleasure and joy, in our own bodies, once we know what these things feel like, we will want them. We will crave them, demand them. We remember what we are fighting for” (2). I suggest that neoliberal capitalism and its utopia for the rich is the fence we must cut through. On the other side is taking back land to restore a sustainable ecological balance and save humanity. Hawaiian cultural resurgence and sustainable food production is one example of feeling what is on the other side. Grassroots communities engaged in resistance to settler colonialism and ecological catastrophe open the imagination to the indigenous and normative view of survivance, including multi-generational futurisms.
that care for humanity and the earth. I have been inspired by the work at the Ulupo heiau (sacred place) in Kailua, Hawaii, where Hika’Alani and the Kailua Hawaiian Civic Club are restoring Hawaiian cultural practices and food production while engaging and educating the community. Ulupo is where I feel alternative futures and remember that I am fighting for the decolonial restoration of Hawaiian land for cultural practices and food production. It’s time to make more land available for building inclusive villages that can produce their own food and provide affordable housing.

We must snap out of the neoliberal cognitive estrangement of consumerism and enclosures in order to embrace the commons, the fringe, the margins, the maroons, the underground, and the dispossessed. It’s time for an inversion of the capitalist imaginary, to seek the upside down, inside out, or turn around and find the time, space and agency to confront the cognitive estrangement that is our all-consuming capitalist reality in order to feel alternative futures. In this way we can restore a normative way of life including decolonized communal land, sustainability, and ecological survival. Visions of decolonization and restoration of food producing commons can be seen in Hawaii with traditional fish ponds and taro production; in Mississippi where cooperative communities buy abandoned properties and turn them over to a community land trust; in Detroit where multiple low income and rent-to-buy tiny homes are replacing abandoned single family grids; and internationally the Zapatista collectives in Mexico are a beacon of success.

The SF community will continue to imagine and create futures of social justice and sustainability. Joel Cunningham says that “speculative fiction has long concerned itself with breaking barriers and exploring issues of race, inequality, and injustice. The fantastical elements of genre, from alien beings to magical ones, allow writers to confront controversial issues in metaphor, granting them a subversive power that often goes unheralded”(1).

And let’s not forget Ursula Le Guin’s words: “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”

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Improving Hawaiian Science Education by Leveraging Science Fiction Conventions

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Day 1 | June 21, 2019 | 3:30pm
Pedagogy

GROWING from a quiet ripple into a surging tsunami over the past few decades, there is now considerable interest and investment across the U.S. in dramatically improving STEAM—Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, & Mathematics—education. This is particularly true in Hawai‘i. Hawaiian schools serve some of the most diverse and poverty-stricken communities in the U.S. At the same time, Hawaiian school children have some of the lowest science and mathematics achievement test scores in the country. Taken together, stakeholders across Hawai‘i have high hopes that successful STEAM education efforts can spur technology and economic growth engines to make Hawai‘i a thriving state. As one of many concentrated efforts to improve the quantity and quality of STEAM education efforts in Hawai‘i, the recently established Big Island’s HawaiiCon Science Fiction, Science, and Popular Culture Convention has made improving STEAM education for Hawaiian children one of its top programming priorities.

Scholarly science fiction fandom studies, including those works by Coppa, Jindra, and Obst, among many other scholars, have established that SF cons are inherently captivating events for many participants. There are hundreds of SF cons held each year, most often bringing together several hundred people, with some events attracting tens of thousands and others far less than one hundred. As testament to the popularity and fascinating characteristics of SF conventions, broadly speaking, these conventions have been explored in a number of video-media works including Trekkies, Trekkies 2, ConMan, and, perhaps most widely recognized, the full-scale production movie, Galaxy Quest. As another example, the enormous San Diego ComicCon Convention was frequently a subject of dialogue in the wildly popular television show, The Big Bang Theory.
Upon first glance, SF conventions are generally structured in one of two very different ways. The first broad structure is that of a fandom gathering convention—or fan con. The individual fans serve as the center of a fan con. In a fan con setting, there are more likely to be scheduled fan-run and fan-coordinated discussion panels, which often look more like the iconic fireside chats or watercooler discussions. Traditionally, these are events where people can share common interests around specific fandom realms, test one’s knowledge level of trivia against others, and annually re-meet up to enjoy long term friendships. In these settings, self-taught and often passionate fans debate which characters have the best story arcs or make profound predictions of what could happen to story lines in future events. Cons often organize costume/cosplay contests where fans remake their own versions of SF character outfits. Late- or all-night gaming sessions, such as the role-playing fantasy game *Dungeons & Dragons*, is commonplace at these cons because the cons serve as a gathering place for like-minded individuals who often consider it “a safe space to let one’s freak flag fly.” At such fan-centric cons, there might or might not be any Hollywood celebrities, best-selling authors, or fantasy game makers present, but when they are attending guests, these individuals are not usually the focus of the con. Hundreds of these events—often small—occur each year, many with decades-long histories. Some illustrative examples among hundreds are Baltimore’s *ShoreLeave*, Lake Geneva’s *GaryCon*, and San Diego’s *ComicFest* (not to be confused with San Diego’s much larger *ComicCon*, initially created by the same founding fans and artists).

The second broad SF convention structure is that of an exposition—or expo. Such events are usually also called cons, but are very different in focus, structure, and available activities. Expo events are focused not on relationships between fans, but instead have implicit purpose of building a commercial relationship between a fan and a commercial entity. These events focus on providing opportunities for fans to get autographs from and photographs with famous Hollywood celebrities, best-selling authors, comic book artists, well-known cosplayers, and fantasy game makers. At the same time, discussion panels—not often composed of amateur fans—among the most well-known professional guest stars are hosted by the event to provide attendees with a few behind the scenes insights and with many advertisements for what new commercial adventures are soon to be available. In every way, the highlight of an expo is the commercial exposition or vendor exhibit hall, filled with commercial vendors selling a wide assortment of fan-based items. Scheduled events at expos are more often centered around announcing or providing sneak previews for upcoming movie, television, video game, or book releases. At an expo event, attendees
are likely to allocate far more time perusing the exhibition hall than they do to any other scheduled events. In a similar fashion, whereas attendees in a small fan-based con might attend twelve or more scheduled sessions, fans at a commercial-based expo might attend only two or three scheduled events, if that many. Illustrative examples of such expo-like events are Houston’s *Anime Matsuri*, San Diego’s *ComicCon*, and Las Vegas’s *Star Trek Convention*.

It would be wholly unfair to imply that all conventions are either strictly only fan cons or commercial expos. In fact, many conventions feature a mix of the two structures. Similarly, it would be unfair to suggest that one structure is better or more preferred than another. Many fans enjoy both convention structures and travel long distances at considerable expense to attend multiple events of both kinds per year. And, likewise, many conventions provide a robust mix of both structures for their highly varied fan base. Atlanta’s *DragonCon* and Salt Lake City’s *FanX* are but two illustrative examples of large conventions that provide some of both types of experiences.

Turning our focus back to the Hawaiian Islands, HawaiiCon is a con-style convention with two distinguishing characteristics. HawaiiCon, like many similar conventions, demonstrably attracts science fiction fans, fantasy fans, comic book enthusiasts, creative cosplayers, anime followers, avid gamers, future-envisioning authors, cultural practitioners, amateur fan film producers, comic and fantasy artists, authors, screen writers and Hollywood’s science fiction producers, voice actors, and movie/television stars, along with vendors, musicians, teachers, students, scientists, and scholars of popular culture science fiction studies. However, one way that HawaiiCon is distinctly different is that HawaiiCon draws attendees and celebrities interested in an unusually broad swatch of popular culture fandoms. This is primarily because HawaiiCon is held on the remote Big Island of Hawaii, with a population of barely more than 100,000 people. With such a small population to draw from, any singularly-focused convention structure—or singularly focused fandom event—would fail due to its small attendance draw.

A second distinguishingly unique characteristic is that HawaiiCon is laser-focused on bringing unusual resources to the residents of the Big Island. HawaiiCon is at its core a non-profit charity event supporting education across the Islands. HawaiiCon brings well-known actors, artists, actors, cosplayers, and gamers to the Big Island and puts them in direct contact with con attendees. In addition to the more typical con events of question and answer sessions and autograph and photograph sessions, HawaiiCon can opt to eat dinner with guest stars, go snorkeling with guest stars, attend workshops with the stars,
and play games with guest stars. In other words, the barriers between the celebrities and the attendees is intentionally lowered so as to provide more interactions and, as much as possible, relationship-building.

As a result of this intentional structure, two perhaps surprising issues are worth highlighting. The first issue is that not all celebrities are enthusiastically interested in being a guest at HawaiiCon. For celebrities that are focused on using cons as a major source of income—selling autographs or earning large appearance fees—and disappearing into the seclusion of their hotel room as soon as their shift is over, HawaiiCon is obviously not a good match. For such individuals, with no judgement implied one way or the other, a trip to Cleveland where one can earn $20,000 over a weekend is far more attractive than a weekend in Hawai‘i where one earns very little and is subjected to far more fan interaction than is typical. In contrast, for those celebrities who deeply enjoy building relationships with fans by interacting with them, HawaiiCon is the perfect opportunity to do so, and in a stunningly beautiful tropical setting on one of the most remote places on Earth. The bottom line is that some celebrities have personalities that are an excellent match for HawaiiCon whereas others simply are not. In truth, determining which celebrity is which is often quite complicated.

The second issue worth highlighting is that although “science” as a discipline plays a loud role in HawaiiCon’s “Science Fiction” program—there is wonderous science research going on in Hawai‘i ranging from the world’s largest telescopes high atop Mauna Kea through the rainforests near the coast to the bottom of the ocean—HawaiiCon is also focused on the “arts.” Whereas once HawaiiCon was emphasizing STEM education, HawaiiCon has recently added the letter “A” expanding STEM to STEAM, and the arts are an integral part of HawaiiCon programming. HawaiiCon includes K-12 student-focused programming that revolves around acting workshops, art portfolio reviews, as well as contests for short story writing, short film production, and costuming. These aspects across the integrated STEAM spectrum of topics supporting education are unified by including an internally run, co-located, professional teaching conference for K-12 teachers—the PSTC Pacific-basin STEAM Teaching Conference. In addition to attending the wealth of programming across HawaiiCon, participating teacher-attendees are provided with teacher-specific sessions by master educators on how to better include and teach STEAM topics using science fiction in their classrooms.

At the same time, HawaiiCon hosts a co-located and fully integrated sub-conference for academic scholars, the Science Fictions, Popular Cultures Academic Conference, and
publishes peer-reviewed proceedings each year. The conference brings together scholars from across the academy to critically analyze the intersections between science fiction and popular culture and often includes faculty from literature, history, philosophy, education, and science fields who rarely get to interact with one another (viz., Slater & Cole). Perhaps more interestingly, the scholars in attendance not only give traditional academic talks, but those that are interested also contribute to fan panel discussions and can participate fully as attendees in the HawaiiCon-experience.

HawaiiCon is certainly unique among fan-con and expo conventions. As it turns out, having a unified focus on education results in both necessarily lowered barriers between celebrities and attendees and influences events that focus more on learning and sharing rather than commercialization. In the end, this particular focus allows HawaiiCon to extend the reach and lifetime of the convention's impact and provide much needed support and memorable learning activities to the Hawaiian community.

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Indigenous Futurisms in Tobias Buckell’s Xenowealth Series

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Day 2 | June 22, 2019 | 10:30 a.m.
Caribbean SF and Nalo Hopkinson

I WANT to begin with a quote by Indigenous Nations Studies Professor, Grace Dillon, who we are pleased to have with us these few days. Her closing remarks in the Introduction to Extrapolation, vol. 57, no. 1-2 entitled “Futurisms, Bimaashi Biidaas Mose, Flying and Walking towards You” are as follows:

The response to Indigenous Futurisms calls to our shared humanity as peoples of the Earth. The movement’s popularity grows from an emerging sense that Western science has lost something vital by isolating itself from spiritual origins in a quest to achieve objectivity. When we look for sciences that model the inextricable union of the metaphysical and the measurable, Indigenous Futurisms offer new ways of reading our own ancient natures. (6)

This resonates with me for several reasons. Firstly, the phrase “our shared humanity” points to the immediate and personal connection this genre encourages between non-indigenous and indigenous peoples. As someone born in the Caribbean island chain of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, indigenous people, also known as native or first peoples of our islands in the lesser Antilles, make up 2% of the general population. Both Black (Garifuna) and yellow Caribs (Calinago) live predominantly to the north of St. Vincent. Descendants live throughout the island, including the Grenadines and have preserved customs for generations. Additionally, our sole national hero is a yellow Carib by the name of Chatoyer. This genre provides a space for my countrymen to insert their voice in sf discourse through storytelling. Her comments also resonate with me as a student of science fiction where the imaginative and the objective overlap. With this understanding, I have always subscribed to the idea that we have indeed lost something vital by isolating science from spiritual origins particularly in fiction.

It would be remiss of me to go further without providing a working definition for Indigenous Futurisms. The neologism is attributed to Professor Dillon and exemplified
in the anthology she has edited called *Walking the Clouds*. Indigenous Futurisms can be understood as a school of thought that involves the use of several forms of media such as fictional literature, movies and visual arts to centre the first or native or aboriginal inhabitants of civilizations within contemporary and futuristic contexts. This can include imagining plots where indigenous people can see themselves featured concurrently with environments fuelled by advanced technology. Like Afrofuturism, Indigenous Futurism tends to focus on specific, native people groups with histories of trauma, disenfranchisement and disempowerment, traditionally associated with narratives toward extinction and/or apocalyptic futures. And the genre or theoretical lens allows them to revise these narratives and instead imagine themselves as central to futuristic portrayals.

The novels I have selected to illustrate Indigenous Futurism from a Caribbean perspective are *Crystal Rain*, *Ragamuffin* and *Sly Mongoose* from Tobias Buckell's *Xenowealth* series. He is a West Indian of Grenadian descent. Throughout his novels Buckell demonstrates a keen understanding of the history and culture of the aboriginal peoples of the Caribbean alongside the descendants of Africans, Asians and Europeans in an amalgamation aptly described by Jamaican poet Geoffrey Philps as a “calabash”. A calabash is a large gourd like fruit which is hollowed to form bowls in the West Indies, often to hold a mixture of different types of food. Buckell combines the indigenous histories of the island and continental nations of the region with the surrounding Meso American territories. The main people groups highlighted by Buckell in his steampunk and soap opera novels include Amerindians and Aztecs. The aim of this paper is to highlight implications of Buckell’s focus on indigenous futurism in a Caribbean context.

The first element of Indigenous Futurism implied is that there should be a level plain between indigenous presences and other presences. One of the main problems that Indigenous Futurism hopes to resolve is the erasure of and disregard for natives in science fiction stories. This partially stems from the prevailing perception that indigenous peoples are largely historical and have been rendered extinct as a result of the past conquests of the West. In Buckell’s *Crystal Rain*, natives possess a vital role in the worldbuilding of the terraformed planet Nanagada. On this planet, people have been relocated from Earth generations ago after having been attacked by aliens. More specifically, many of the inhabitants of the planet are from the Caribbean. Importantly, in Buckell’s creation myth of how Nanegada’s civilization came to be, it is repeatedly mentioned that those who fled and re-established homes on the new planet consisted of “all sorts of people” (37). The ancestors, referred to as “ole fathers” consisted of:
pale looking man like Frenchi and Bridish come. And there was Afrikan. And there was Indian. Carib. Chinee. All of them had join up for the long, long voyage. All color of skin leave. Year and year and year them travel till they had discover this sweet world we live on, just like all the original island on Earth. Here were some cool wind and easy sun. (*Crystal Rain* 37-38)

This story composes the origin mythos of the people of Nanegada and is passed down through generations orally and taught to the children at school emphasising the centrality of storytelling to the indigenous and African peoples of the Caribbean.

Caribs or Kalinago, native to the Caribbean islands Dominica and St. Vincent, were part of this expedition through space, firmly situating these indigenous people in the future. Further, the Kalinago are not portrayed as savages who have succumbed as victims to imperialism. Rather they are recognized equally with Europeans, Asians and Africans as navigators, discoverers and settlers in the story; as forefathers of Nanagadan society. There is no reversal of roles, between known historical oppressors and oppressed but equity is introduced where all old-fathers had “massive power” which enable them to find “worm's holes” in the sky, wiggle down to the planet to “land here and begin a new life free from oppression” (38). Despite oppressed pasts, all find their way through mutual effort to liberated futures. The joint struggle of this culmination of races is also a reminder that the main war humanity fights should not be to claim dominion over one another but to conquer the external forces that threaten human survival.

Secondly, considering Indigenous Futurism, it is implied that history is an efficacious route to access technology. The other main group of indigenous people throughout the stories is the Aztecas. The Aztecas’ culture is “borrowed from a lost culture on distant Earth” (*Sly Mongoose* 14) based on the ancient Aztec civilization. According to archaeologists Geoffrey Conrad and Arthur Demarest, within the last five hundred years along with the Incas, the Aztecs were one of two great powers of the Americas. Often, discourse on the Aztecs is reserved for fora involving pre-Columbian and post-classic conquest history. Yet in *Crystal Rain*, the people group is used as an anachronistic tool to develop and discover technology.

On Nanagada, hundreds of years prior to *Crystal Rain*, during the war, an electromagnetic Pulse caused everything with a microchip in it to die (*Crystal Rain* 132). As a result, much of the technology developed among Nanagadans is from the Victorian era. Meanwhile, the Aztecas retain their traditional weapons such as atlatl and spears mentioned throughout the novel (239) and affirmed by scholars such as Ross Hassig
namely “bows and arrows, darts and atlatls (spear-throwers), spears, slings, swords, and clubs” (75). Nevertheless, the Aztecas are also responsible for constructing more developed machinery such as Azteca airships (Crystal Rain 7) and sail powered ships (237). Their innovation takes the Nanagadans by surprise. The Nanagadans observe that while the two peoples cohabited, to their knowledge, the Aztecas never made a ship (237). The ship which brings the Nanagadans to this realization, carries ammunition and is outfitted with cultural representation on the sails of “Chalchihuitlicue the Jade Skirt Goddess, she who was the water” (239) demonstrating Azteca ownership. Contrary to popular belief, technology and indigenous people are inextricably linked. In Sly Mongoose when one character complains that lives were weighed against “fuel and technology,” Pepper points out that “civilizations live and die by power and technology” (215). In this novel, the Aztecas survive several years into the future, not only by fruitful alliances but by their ability to develop technology.

In addition to showcasing the Aztecas as innovators ahead of their time, Buckell presents the idea of looking to the past for answers to the future. The Nanegadan prime minister Dihana created preservationists “who scoured the city and the lands for insight into their past and the past’s technologies” (34). Because of the preservationists, better weaponry (35) and transport in the form of steam ships are created (119). Beyond knowing about an artefact, preservationists emphasise the necessity of knowing the mechanisms behind devices. They manage to locate machinery thought to have been destroyed by the Pulse and revive them (127). This spirited exploration reveal that preservationists have the joint function of being historians who discover the past and inventors who build the future. It is a fitting reminder that before colonialism, these indigenous peoples were inventing systems and building empires by their own scientific method. Separate from Western scientific method, this is best described as what Dillon refers to as ‘indigenous scientific literacies’ in “Indigenous Scientific Literacies in Nalo Hopkinson’s Ceremonial Worlds”.

The third implication is that there is a need for emphasising focus on the indigenous voice. This is exemplified in what Dillon refers to in her introduction as survivance. Survivance is often used in relation to the ability of Native Indians to carry out customs and traditions into the future including their autonomy to write stories about themselves beyond a past defined by conquest. It is a repudiation of a future determined by imperialism. According to Dillon, it is a concept which “asserts native presence and pushes back against the assumption that the only historical identity available to Indians in a post-Manifest destiny world is that of a victim” (2).

This principle is applicable beyond an American context. Native presences in the
postcolonial Caribbean must be seen beyond a historical identity of the victim. The prolific West Indian and Guyanese author, Wilson Harris prophetically demonstrates this idea in the decades old, well-known novel *Palace of the Peacock* where a young Arawak woman, Marielle, becomes subject to the colonial gaze when colonialist Donne attempts to ravage both her and the land belonging to Arawak settlements. While the conquistadors view the Arawaks as “harmless enough” (Loc. 518), Donne becomes the victim as he suffers a “plurality of living deaths” (Loc. 97) at Marielle’s hands. In one instance, she shoots him in the back and in another she conjures forces of nature in order to defend her land. In any representation, she receives power to fight back against a future of demise brought on by imperialism.

As John Rieder points out in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, “no informed reader can doubt that allusions to colonial history and situations are ubiquitous features of early science fiction motives and plots” (Loc. 150). This is perpetuated in much of mainstream sci-fi today in the form of the civilised coloniser vs. savage native dichotomy whether the native is represented by non-European peoples or aliens from space. Rieder mentions how in *War of the Worlds*, H.G. Wells transposes the coloniser and the colonised (Loc. 228) such that the colonised who is usually the object of observation is given the opportunity to tell the story. Rieder observes that this opportunity highlights the effects of “the framework of colonial relations . . . in a tellingly distorted way” (Loc. 229). It is easier to empathise with the native when readers can access his perspective, his thought processes, his tribulation, and his humanity.

Buckell employs a similar strategy in *Xenowealth*. Commonly, the servitude of the Aztecas to the tyrannical gods referred to by the Aztec term for god “teotl,” would be described by the archetypal assumption Rieder identifies as “savage, tribal, barbarous . . . superstitious” (Loc. 650). Instead, Buckell portrays them in a humane, sympathetic light. The history is not told of the teotl taking advantage of simpletons. Instead, Pepper likens their experience to something that can happen to anyone. He evokes this understanding by noting that the teotl “love using our weakness against us” (*Crystal Rain* 68). Further, while two of the protagonists John and Pepper are of European and African descent respectively, Oaxyctl, an Azteca, and his journey make up an important subplot of the story. Although his account written in third person narrative, we receive insight into Oaxyctl’s human life: his thoughts, fears, preferences, and memories (93).

Oaxyctl’s story is a rewriting of Aztec history. He grows up in a society where human sacrifices are common-place (*Crystal Rain* 233), rehashing what Conrad and Demarest
summarise as “living men dying to feed the sun” (2). The parallels remain the same where foreign conquerors make themselves gods among the people. However, in this instance the gods are actually alien creatures from outer space. Aside from the prophesied oppression of the Aztecas, Oaxycotl faces his own personal determinism. According to Azteca tradition, he was born under the sign of Ocelotl which meant that he “could only struggle towards a better life through fasting, sleep deprivation, and the application of his intelligence (Crystal Rain 91). Despite his unfortunate circumstances, Oaxycotl is described as a suspicious man who “never believed in gods” and “sneered at all mystical things” (92). This remains until he encounters physical manifestations of the teotl who threatens his life if he does not force codes for the location of an advanced ship out of John de Brun. The motif of the ocelotl sign hovers over Oaxycotl like a self-fulfilling prophecy as he is robbed of several opportunities to obtain the codes and he lives beneath the constant fear of “waiting for his death to come” (304). His conditioning of loyalty to the gods is so pervasive that when presented the opportunity to escape with John whom he eventually befriends, he puts John and Pepper’s lives at stake to appease the creature (god/teotl).

The novel gives insight into the Azteca’s thought process and how he revisits his doubts about the gods “differing with each other about what to do” and how unmoved John and Pepper were about his blasphemous suspicion (305). It is the first moment that Oaxycotl exacts an action of survivance instead of one of mere survival. He determines that “if he was going to die, there was something he was going to try first” (305). He uses his shotgun to subdue the teotl and consequently dismembers its body and scatters the pieces. This deed represents a retelling of the invasion of the Aztec empire where conquistadors who posed as gods successfully enslaved and eliminated the Aztecs. In this retelling, the Aztec rewrites his inevitable death and triumphs over the monolithic polity which should have destroyed him. Although his own future is not guaranteed because he is abandoned out in the northern tundra, the novel documents how the narrative has been turned on its head where the native eradicates the source of his conquest instead of the other way around. After this “death didn’t scare him. Nothing scared him anymore” (305). He felt “free” and “relieved” (305).

I wanted to also discuss the spiritual aspect of the indigenous peoples in the novels and how their myths and belief systems act prophetically within futuristic contexts, but the scope of this paper will not permit it. While they emerge from oppressed histories, the indigenous people of the novel are not subjected to the finality of victimhood, rather they assume autonomous roles such as founding fathers, innovators, and conquerors exhibited
as the bedrock of society. Buckell also suggests that in order to adequately prepare for the future we must excavate the past. He recognises the potential, necessity, and centrality of belief systems but without being dictated by power politics and the looming shadow of conquest and colonialism. While his futures convey that colonialism is inevitable particularly considering sci-fi tradition, the native peoples are not portrayed as muted objects for observation but are able to give perspective to and in some instances change the narrative. Sly Mongoose represents the longevity and evolution of these belief systems among indigenous peoples within the future thereby exercising survivance. Although Buckell's novels are not specifically categorised as Indigenous Futurist novels, they demonstrate elements that align with the school of thought.

Works Cited
“Not One, But Two”: Recognizing the Potentiality of Caribbean Multiplicity through Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

**Mailyn Abreu Toribio**
Florida Atlantic University

Day 2 | June 22, 2019 | 10:30am
Caribbean SF and Nalo Hopkinson

IN *Midnight Robber*, Nalo Hopkinson explores a society's reaction to a different planet after our Earth is no longer habitable, emphasizing violence and using the jarring techniques of the grotesque, by comparing the abuse of the human body with the abuse of nature. She also portrays this future as a space in which the inhabitants are doomed to repeat history. The Caribbean culture is mixed with “Taino Carib and Arawak; African; Asian; Indian; even the Euro, though some wasn’t too happy to acknowledge that there bloodline” (Hopkinson 19). An awareness of the collective memory of previously colonized nations needs to be established, as that is the only way to avoid repetition. As a representation of the colonizer and the colonized, the bodies Hopkinson creates denote a need for change, as humanity everyday moves closer towards cultural ambiguity and hyper technological societies. Hopkinson's use of traditional science fiction themes, coupled with folklore and magical realism allow her to problematize the choices of postcolonial subjects once they are given a chance to rule their own space.

The grotesque in this novel is seen more specifically through Carnival, as it is presented in its traditional form at the beginning of the novel and continued in unconventional ways. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, “Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (10). When readers meet Antonio he has just discovered that his wife has cheated on him, and as the town prepares to celebrate Carnival, he prepares to exact his vengeance, highlighting the change that is to come. Infidelity, murder, as well as cultural continuity and a utopian capacity to “speak truth to power” mark Toussaint's celebrations, fueling change through violent action. The celebration itself is described in grotesque terms: “bodies smeared with mud; men’s bodies in women’s underwear; women wearing men’s shirt-jacs and boxers; naked bodies. They pressed against the car, pressed against one another, ground and wound their hips in the ecstatic license of Carnival” (Hopkinson 55). The chaos, role switching, and
sexualization that comes with Carnival suggest at once beauty, vulgarity, and multiplicity, productively celebrating the tearing down of established hierarchies. Carnival serves as a mirror image of the inner workings of the past on the current society in Toussaint. Tan-Tan is a small child at this point and is obsessed with the famous trickster hero called the Midnight Robber. She takes on the mantle of that character by becoming the female version of the Robber Queen.

We see grotesque aspects not only in Toussaint, but also on New Half-Way Tree, where we encounter even more scenes of death and also rape not just of the human body, but of the natural environment around them. New Half-Way Tree itself is essentially a “lawless” place, which has not been colonized like Toussaint. Upon arriving Tan-Tan meets one of these species: “Douen! Nursie had told Tan-Tan douen stories. Douens were children who'd died before their naming ceremonies” (Hopkinson 93). Tan-Tan uses the stories she learned from her Nursie to give an identity to Chichibud, the indigenous alien she meets. Antonio kidnapped Tan-Tan and brought her to this mirror planet, bringing with them their potential for destruction. Here, Tan-Tan experiences abuse that leads her to continue embodying the persona of her childhood hero. She splits from herself after the first instance of rape, which happened after her ninth birthday party, creating a dual identity. This is the only way that she can cope with the rape and subsequent impregnation that she suffers at the hands of her father, and the murder that she has to commit in order to change her circumstances. Zobel states “Tricksters are agents of destruction and creation who offer a psychological release to listeners, onlookers, storytellers and masquerade players” (211). Tan-Tan becomes an agent of the grotesque through her impersonation of the popular Carnival trickster as a way to escape her trauma. In her reclamation of agency, she begins to redefine her abused body as well as the identity of the Robber Queen, no longer allowing both to be negative identities. As seen “in grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people” (Bakhtin 19). Tan-Tan begins to accept her body as a source of potential change, a positive force that can bring justice to New Half-Way Tree. Since Tan-Tan is able to redeem her abused body and her persona the Robber Queen, it is clear that the grotesque, through eliciting disgust and empathy at once, works to redeem humanity through catharsis. Human’s estranged relationship with nature can similarity be reestablished through this literary technique.

Hopkinson tackles the issues of the history of colonization by comparing the abuse of the human body with the abuse of the land, which was also a key tenet used to subjugate
both female bodies and feminized nature. When the Marryshow Corporation ship first landed on Toussaint, it brought all the history and religions of these cultures along with the people. Everything in this future is controlled by artificial intelligence. Granny Nanny becomes a godly figure, one who monitors everything and everyone at all times. Uppinder Mehan discusses the relationship with science and members of a postcolonial history of abuse and trauma; that relationship exacerbates their socio-political positioning in the world. Mehan also discusses how technology replaces the spiritual in cyberpunk literature: “In cyberpunk literature the spiritual is found in cyberspace. Here beings whose primary mode of existence is computer code take on personality and agency” (8). The religious aspects of Yoruba religion, a traditional African religion that is the basis for much of what we now call Vodou or Santeria, are embedded in this new planet. Rather than it being used in a traditionally mystic form, it is in the form of nanobites, shifting the original history and beliefs. This is discussed by Paromita Mukherjee: “The setting of Midnight Robber is in Planet Toussaint, a space beyond the Caribbean, and beyond the Earth. Hopkinson rejects the white dominated scientific terms, and embraces certain terms from the Caribbean folklore and combines them with the elements of science fiction.” Granny Nanny is programmed to know about traditional Afro-Caribbean folklore and beliefs, but also carries the history of colonization. Humans now worship a god that is post-human but still mirrors the original traditions. This implies that this community may take up the position of the white (Euro) colonialists from Earth. The humans who colonized Toussaint have had the opportunity to build a home that rejected the destruction that had previously occurred to their ancestors, but Hopkinson points out that the Caribbean is still tainted by a history of violence that needs to be addressed.

As descendants of the Caribbean, Tan-Tan and her community’s actions are influenced in this future narrative by their designation as oppressed and oppressor. One can see through Carnival that many themes of the grotesque are still valued, which in some cases can be closely connected to violence. Although representing freedom, Jour Ouvert is an example, as citizens are permitted to exert violence on each other in a duel. Although it is a practice that still occurs today, in the novel it ends up representing actual rather than representational violence. They are not allowed to kill, but they can greatly incapacitate each other. This tradition presents a society that doesn’t want to let go of the past because of all the crimes that had been done to them and all the erasure of history that has previously occurred. This creates a space for violence to thrive, as Antonio takes advantage of the event by cheating and murdering Quashee. Granny Nanny tries to avoid this by stopping
premeditated crimes but ultimately by preserving violent parts of the culture, Granny Nanny allows violence and crime to exist.

Toussaint represents a space which is trying to be seen as a utopia, where people have equality and where if they commit any crimes they are exiled to Toussaint’s mirror planet, New Half Way Tree. At the beginning of the novel Tan-Tan’s Nursie, through the use of Granny Nanny, tells young Tan-Tan, about how Toussaint used to be a primitive land. She also recounts how humans destroyed the native species in order to create a “safe space” for humans to live: “It told her about the animals that used to live on Toussaint before human people came and made it their own… ‘the indigenous fauna: the mako jumbie-them, the douen…Don’t frighten young Mistress. It ain’t have no more mako jumbie on Toussaint no more. You safe” (Hopkinson 32-33). It seems that the human race, if continuing in certain types of exclusionary Western modes of thinking, is always going to be afraid of the other, and in a world in which color is not a mode of oppression, humans found a way to oppress nature to the point where it changed the whole environment of the planet. Hopkinson warns her readers about a history that can very easily repeat itself even centuries into the future, because humans inherently need the past in order to conceive a future. Caribbean traditions aren’t inherently violent, but there is a need to acknowledge the violence within certain actions in order to avoid destructive methods to continue. After the colonization of Toussaint, the douen became extinct, which mirrors how many indigenous communities of people, plants and animals became extinct shortly after the colonization of the Caribbean. They play the part of both colonizer and colonized in a body of culture that is now supposed to be unified, pointing out the turmoil inherent in that duality. Caribbean people kill the native population of species and continue to expand. On the mirror planet, New Half Way Tree, the douen and the mako jumbie are still alive, and when Tan-Tan ends up exiled in that planet, she begins to realize that the history of her people hasn't portrayed these creatures accurately. After Antonio and Tan-Tan cross the dimensional portal and reach the human village, Tan-Tan notices how humans are treating the douens. They treat them like children, using them for their labor. The douen were referring to humans as master and boss. Granny Nanny had previously taught Tan-Tan that everyone was equal, and initially Tan-Tan considers Chichibud as such. In Toussaint the douen were killed off because they didn't fit the colonizers’ description of human.

Modern science was a method of improvement and the people who came to Toussaint as well as the exiles in New Half Way Tree see technological advancement as such, ignoring the potentiality for destruction. Scientific innovation used under that mindset led
the exiles to erect towns, clear forests, and build what they saw as true a civilization. While traveling through the dimensional portal that will take her to New Half Way Tree, Tan-Tan experiences veils of transformation: “Tan-Tan felt as though her tailbone could elongate into a tail, long and bald like a manicou rat’s. Her cries of distress came out like hyena giggles. The tail-tip twitched. She could feel how unfamiliar muscles would move the unfamiliar limb” (Hopkinson 73-75). Tan-Tan in this scene grows parts that are animalistic, showing how technology reveals that the line between animal and human is miniscule and easily crossed. Hopkinson through this scene gives the reader a hint of how this line will continue to be blurred in the novel. The actions of the colonizers of Toussaint followed Baconian methods of development and those methods were brought to New Half Way Tree by the exiles. The colonization of the environment is personified by Tan-Tan, as she experiences sexual abuse by her father mirroring the patriarchal abuse of a feminized nature. She finally cries out “He was forever trying to plant me, like I was his soil to harvest” (Hopkinson 260).

By being exiled, Antonio needs to reclaim authority over his surroundings. Since there are little to no laws or technological advancements in this wild planet, he follows the path of obtaining control by dominating feminine nature. Ashley Dawson states “As Bacon's account of scientific inquisition suggests, the scientific method took this reign of terror as one of its core metaphors, generating a model of patriarchal mastery over a passive feminized nature that sets the terms for subsequent notions of progress through domination of the natural world” (51). By raping and impregnating his daughter Antonio reclaims his male agency, while at the same time he participates in the rape of the land by cutting down trees and using the douen as slaves.

After Tan-Tan murders her father, she escapes the village with the help of Chichibud and Benta. Although Chichibud knows about the terrible violence that had been exerted on Tan-Tan for years by her father he teaches Tan-Tan that if violence is exerted one must work to remedy it somehow. Chichibud presents this belief to Tan-Tan through a sort of spell, which allows him to really make an impact: “When you take one life, you must give back two. Tan-Tan bowed her head and accepted the obeah that Chichibud had just put on it” (Hopkinson 174). The douen, near the middle of the novel, are forced to move from their homes because Janisette, Tan-Tan’s stepmother, finds her living with the douens Chichibud, Benta, and their daughter Abifeta. Janisette comes ready to destroy the tree home of the douen. She is fueled by vengeance after Tan-Tan murders Antonio. They see themselves as holding more power because they have cars and modern weapons, and this power clearly leads to even more corruption and indifference towards nature. After the community is forced to
move, they erase all traces of their lives there by cutting down the tree in which they had lived. This destruction of nature is quickly remedied, as they do not just leave destruction behind. They perform a ritual that heals the scorched land, showing their dedication to the preservation of nature. The fact that the douen show so much respect for the tree which had housed and fed them shows the beauty of nature and the need for redemption in regards to the environment. This appreciation of nature is juxtaposed by the connection to technology, specifically the car built by Gladys and Michael: “A car! Big and loud and smelly; body made of rusting sheets of iron held together with rivets; and large lumpy wheels made from tree sap or something. The car’s exhaust pipe was pumping out one set of black smoke, clouds of it rolling up into the clean air” (Hopkinson 261). This description paints an ugly picture of technology, which infers that the things that the human population are building are not safe for nature or the native inhabitants of the planet.

Technology is an important aspect of Hopkinson’s science fiction narrative, as it is also portrayed ambiguously. Having technology in the novel can be either extremely positive or negative. The distinction lies in having technology that employs mysticism from Afro-Caribbean folklore or has a connection to the natural world rather than embracing unchecked industrialization. The positives and negatives are visible when looking at technological use in Toussaint and New Half Way Tree. In Toussaint, Granny Nanny is a technological program but has the voice of someone who was considered a magic worker in traditional Afro-Caribbean folklore. Hopkinson explains that, “the ‘artificial intelligence that safeguards all the people in a planetary system becomes Granny Nanny [as well as Anansi, the Ghanaian trickster figure], named after the revolutionary... who won independent rule in Jamaica for the Maroons who had run away from slavery” (Mukherjee). It is disappointing to see how in Granny Nanny’s society, technology was used negatively, allowing for the development of Toussaint to destroy the native inhabitants, flora, and fauna. The AI is not able to bypass this part of her multiplicity, suggesting that the AI is not aware of the violent reality that it is participating in. It labels the douen, which are an intelligent alien species, as “other” and goes on to destroy them and their land. This is one of the negatives of technology, while Hopkinson makes use of the mystical background of the AI that is directly fueled by African folklore and magic to highlight the differences in the potentiality of this blend.

Frantz Fanon and other scholars who study methods of change believe that “violence is the midwife of history” (Globalectics 25), and if nature is seen as “mother” Earth, whose offspring includes all of nature, including humanity, we need to be aware of the violence that is inherent in creating change, retrieving lost histories, and engaging in new modes of
development. Violence is clearly portrayed in *Midnight Robber*, and that is why Hopkinson's novel is a perfect specimen to examine. Carnival is the string that then ties the violence and the grotesque together, and these three elements together redeem Caribbean history, while still criticizing its colonial past. The characters thus represent the turmoil carried by a colonized people, who for the most part have to live with the dual identity of being a product of both master and slave. Tan-Tan is torn by being both a part of nature and being apart from it. She represents the colonizing power of humanity as well as the power to return to nature. The novel also gives hope that technology and nature can work together, if integrated or rather programmed by a consciousness that understands the previous damage caused by humanity.

Hopkinson ends her novel with the birth of Tan-Tan's baby, who she names Tubman. We discover that the Nansi Web nanobites have transferred from Tan-Tan to the baby and this suggests that Granny Nanny will now have a hand in the future of New Half Way Tree. Although Tan-Tan has grown as a person by the end and has great love and respect for the douen, one does not know how having Granny Nanny around will affect the indigenous community. History could repeat itself again, causing the extinction of the douen community and much of the flora and fauna, or Granny Nanny could try a different method of development that values the “other” as much as the human. By looking at the intricacies of living in a postcolonial futurist world, and working to find the parts of Caribbean and other cultures of multiplicities that help to reestablish a healthy relationship with nature, we can begin to work out the best ways to deal with our environment.

**Works Cited**


Cultural Appropriation or Much-Needed Representation? On Rebecca Roanhorse’s Trail of Lightning

Elsa Ruth Klingensmith-Parnell
Oklahoma State University

Day 2 | Saturday, June 22, 2019 | 2:00pm
Rebecca Roanhorse

Land Acknowledgement

AS many have mentioned before me, we are here on Native Hawaiian land, and while the university is engaged in work that values and honors Native voices, this has not always been the case. I am aware of my role here as a settler/scholar, and I do not wish to detract from Native voices and work. My goal in this presentation is to engage with various scholars and critics in order to determine my own place as a white teacher of literature in regards to this novel.

Paper

TO begin this conversation, I think that it is important to define “cultural appropriation.” Dictionary.com defines this term as “Cultural appropriation is the act of adopting elements of an outside, often minority culture, including knowledge, practices, and symbols, without understanding or respecting the original culture and context.” In contrast, Urban Dictionary offers a different definition: “a Social Justice Warrior movement that is essentially segregation and extremely racist. SJWs claim that groups of people “own” their cultures and nobody is allowed to use it except for that race.” I present both of these because I think it’s important to understand that while we might understand a word or phrase to mean one thing, there are others out there who have a completely different interpretation. When we come together at conferences such as this one, and debate these topics, it might be safe to assume everyone has the same understanding, but when discussing this in the classroom, online, or with friends and family, this difference needs to be acknowledged.

Before moving to Roanhorse, I want to offer a brief example of the ways that accusations of cultural appropriation can be misunderstood. Earlier this year a group of Inuit singers called for a boycott of The Indigenous Music Awards after the nomination of a
Cree singer who uses Inuit throat-singing techniques. As Kelly Fraser, one of the musicians who called for a boycott, notes, “There’s no reason for anyone other than an Inuk musician to perform as an Inuit throat singer. We are here, we are alive and well, and we don’t need other people to mimic our songs” (qtd. in Wheeler).

The problem here is that throat singing was discouraged and essentially banned for many decades by Christian missionaries when they arrived in Inuit communities in the early 20th century, although the practice was continued. The history of violence that has become connected to this style of singing, the persecution that practitioners faced, makes it problematic when someone from another tribe is honored for using these techniques. Among those who know the background, or who take the time to learn the background, this distinction is understood as accepted as a valid complaint. However, to those outside the community, it can seem like unnecessary complications. For example, The Guardian ran an article on this topic with the headline: “One Indigenous Group Accuses Other of Cultural Appropriation in Award Row,” which shows the trivialization of the matter among a larger audience.

Notably, the same article quotes Daniel Heath Justice’s response to the situation, validating those calling for a boycott, saying: “We’re talking about continuity in spite of traumatic, sustained and systemic multi-generational assaults on every aspect of our beings – including our artistic practice” (qtd. in Cecco). But he also notes: “maybe our own frustration at the erasure of difference risks erasing certain crucial differences in itself. Not all cultural borrowing is a form of social violence: some of it is just cringe” (qtd. in Cecco). This is a key point in my understanding of cultural appropriation: cultural appropriation needs to be taken seriously, but there are different levels of appropriation.

I turn now to Trail of Lightning to examine the accusations brought against the text in order to determine the level of appropriation at hand. Before I move any further, it is important for me to make some biographical notes and other points of clarification. Rebecca Roanhorse’s mother was enrolled in the Ohkay-Ohwingeh tribe of North America, her father was an African American. She was adopted and raised in an Anglo household, but later reconnected with her birth mother and her Indigenous heritage. She married a man from the Navajo tribe, and lived with him on the reservation for several years. During this time she felt a connection to the community and became inspired to write about this heritage in Trail of Lightning. One final note: Navajo and Diné can be used interchangeably, with many individuals referring to themselves as one or the other or both. I will be using the words that the authors at hand have chosen, so both will come up often, but they mean
When Trail of Lightning first came out, it was hailed by scholars of both Native Literature and Science Fiction as a uniquely imaginative take on Indigenous SF. Roanhorse's elevator pitch for the novel was “Indigenous Mad Max: Fury Road” (Cunningham). She describes Maggie Hoskin's appearance on the cover as extremely intentional, “As far as the characters go, I knew that I didn’t want any of the typical trappings non-Natives associate with Native Americans. No feathers, no braids (Navajos don’t traditionally braid their hair, anyway), nothing pseudo-mystical” (qtd. in Cunningham). However, she also points out that she did want Maggie to be recognizably Navajo: as she says, “which is one of the reasons Maggie is wearing Ké Ntsaaí, which are traditional Navajo women’s moccasins” (qtd. in Cunningham).

Several non-native reviewers call the novel a breath of fresh air, saying things such as: “This is a fun, fast book, immensely readable and very enjoyable. It ends with tense emotion, and a cliffhanger for a sequel: I look forward to seeing how Roanhorse builds on this very promising debut. We can, I think, expect good things” (Bourke), and “This book is a lot of things, but what it’s not is a colonizer’s narrative. Non-Natives are present, but this isn’t their story or their framework. Refreshingly, everything about Trail of Lightning is Diné” (Brown). Overall, the initial reception of Trail of Lightning was good.

However, before very long, a group of writers known as the Diné Writers Collective came together and produced a statement regarding this text. The main points of this open letter are that Roanhorse is not Diné, and by writing this book she will be read by non-Native people as being “equivalent” to Diné. Not only this, but they also point out that important parts of the Diné spiritual beliefs have been inaccurately represented, such as Maggie’s weaponization of corn pollen (which is an important part of Navajo cultural tradition surrounding peace). Likewise, these writers contest that Trail of Lightning shows deities (such as Neizghani and Ma’ii) as little more than caricatures.

This group of writers points out that Roanhorse is Ohkay-Owingeh, and likely chose not to write about her own tribe because they have an official board that would condemn her inaccurate representations of her own tribe. Instead, she turned to the Navajo tribe because there is no such official censorship board. In conclusion, the Diné Writer’s Collective calls for readers of their statement to seek out and support Diné writers instead of Rebecca Roanhorse.

The impact of this open letter has been limited. While Roanhorse has not responded in any way, other reviewers of her work have taken notice. Debbie Reese, an enrolled member
of the Nambe Pueblo Tribe who runs a website that seeks to provide “critical perspectives and analysis of Indigenous peoples in children’s and young adult books” (AICL) through reviews of a variety of books, initially reviewed *Trail of Lightning* on Barnes and Noble’s website, commenting that she was very impressed by the book and so recommended it. A quote from this review: “Some non-Native writers include Coyote in their stories, in ways that turn him into a decoration or tokenize him. For that reason, you might think you know a little bit about Coyote, but you have never met this Coyote before, clad in a red velvet vest! There’s no hokey flute music accompanying his appearance. This guy will scare you” (“Splendid Mirror”).

Upon reading the open letter from the Navajo readers, and discussing the critiques with some individuals, Reese updated her recommendation. As she writes, when first hearing about the book: “I learned that Navajo people were working with her on the Navajo content. Because of that, I assumed that she did not have anything in the book that should not be disclosed” (“Concerns”). Despite removing her recommendation, Reese still emphasizes the benefits that can be found within this book: “In some ways, the representations Roanhorse offers to readers of this genre are terrific. In most books set in the future, Indigenous people are completely missing. Roanhorse centers this story in Native spaces and features Native people” (“Concerns”).

Since Navajo friends and colleagues of Reese told her that “Roanhorse crossed their lines of disclosure. If she had done this book using Pueblo religion, they said, she’d be called out for doing that” (“Concerns”). Because of this, Reese withdrew her recommendation of the novel, out of respect for the serious nature of the complaints against Roanhorse.

It is important to note that the authors represented within the Diné Writer’s Collective and who came together to write the open letter were not and are not part of any official tribally recognized board, and they have not been authorized in any official capacity. While the Ohkay-Ohwingeh tribe is relatively small, the size of the Navajo nation, as well as the distance between various groups makes any sort of unity nearly impossible. To quote an anonymous commenter on Debbie Reese’s updated review: “Because Navajo is such a vast, widespread, and diverse community leading to a multitude of opinions, values, reactions, even ‘traditions’ . . . Navajo may have the problem of no singular, authoritative response to this issue” (Anonymous).

Whether or not the Diné Writer’s Collective are authorized to make such judgement calls, they are definitely within their rights to publish complaints. It is also important to note that these writers were not the only ones to object to the book. Jennifer Rose Denetdale
published an article on the Navajo Times website, stating that Roanhorse’s depictions of the sacred alongside evil is dangerous, as it can be considered a “calling into being.” She continues, “an appreciation of the power of words to create community and connect one to the past has been a hallmark of Indigenous and Diné writing, but not one that Rebecca Roanhorse has honored.” Denetdale writes that kinship between various peoples and with the land are and should continue to be hallmarks of Indigenous writing, saying “as writers, we have drawn upon our creative imaginations to resist and refuse the violence done to us and to the land. In doing such work, we remember our ancestors’ will to live and offer our narratives as sources of empowerment.” Finally, Denetdale states, “If Trail of Lightning is meant to create Indigenous/Diné protagonists and storylines to empower readers and remind everyone to resist colonialism, it shouldn’t come at the expense of harming the very culture that it supposedly honors.”

On the other side, Diné writer Charlie Scott also wrote a Review of Trail of Lightning, which was published in Strange Horizons, in which Scott argues that the entirety of this book is Diné. He states: “There are specific cultural imageries deployed in this novel which only those who are familiar with Diné cosmology will understand and can relate to.” He particularly enjoyed the creativity and the spin that Roanhorse brought to the deities she depicts in this novel, arguing that through these variations, “Roanhorse challenges us to be critical of our own descriptions of the Diyin Dinéé.” Note that here Scott praises Roanhorse for one of the main critiques raised against her by the Diné Writer’s Collective.

So there have been a variety of responses to Trail of Lightning from the Native community, both within the Diné tribe and without. Turning to Rebecca Roanhorse herself, she has said, “I was reading these urban fantasies with female protagonists who were half-Native, but they were written by white authors, and their Nativeness often just manifested as some superpower, usually nature-based . . .. I wanted to base it in Navajo mythology. Why wouldn’t I? We have this rich tradition of stories and heroes and legends and gods and no one really knows, outside of Navajo circles, and that seemed like a shame” (“Legend to Fantasy”). This desire for representation is good, and that is one place where Trail of Lightning succeeds. Most reviewers agree that this novel is not one of colonization or exploitation on the part of the characters. Maggie and the majority of the characters present are Navajo and the Navajo way of life is not presented to the reader as an attraction; it is just the way of life.

With this initial desire, Roanhorse was not careless with her approach to creating this novel. She notes: “I had a friend who’s a fluent native speaker look over everything that I did. He’s also pretty traditional, and he and others looked at the stories I chose to tell.
Because I do pull in a lot of Navajo traditional stories, what you might call mythology, and I was very aware that some stories are not meant to be shared. I tried to choose Navajo stories that are already in the popular imagination. There are a lot of Navajo comic-book writers who are working with Hero Twins stories, and the story of Coyote and the Black God and things like that are already out there, so I wanted to make sure I was picking those stories that people could find, and I wasn’t the only one telling those stories” (qtd. in Lengel). As far as the individual characters and even the minor plots, she has tried to not disclose secret information, which is a good place to start; however, as the Diné Writers point, Roanhorse did not make enough of a distinction between her made-up sections and the places where she was borrowing straight from tradition, which leaves the Gods presented in the narrative on the same level as the humans, and demeans their importance.

In an interview before being called out by the Diné Writers Collective, Roanhorse said that she wanted to “represent the Navajo nation because of [her] experience on the reservation,” following up by saying she also “wanted it to be post-apocalyptic” and “fun” (Mah). Because of this, she emphasizes that yes, she wanted to be careful with the representation, but it is also important to remember that it’s equally an “all-out monster adventure” that is set “squarely within Navajo Cosmology” (Mah). She took stories that had already been made public in the works of Navajo writers: for example, the Hero Twins, Naayéé’neizghání (Slayer of Monsters) and Tóbájíshchíní (Born for Water), as well as Coyote. She adds “Also, this is a fantasy story. This is not a book you read to learn about Navajo culture, this is a book you read to learn about monster hunting. It’s based in the culture, but it’s certainly not. . . [trails off]” (Mah). (Note: this comment comes from a Q&A session after a reading that was recorded and uploaded to YouTube, and here Roanhorse trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished).

As far as I can find, Roanhorse has not acknowledged the letter from the Diné Writers Collective or any of these critiques that have been brought against her. Unlike other authors who listened to criticism and chose to revise and alter their texts, Roanhorse has continued without even acknowledging the problems, much less attempting to correct anything.

With these definitions, and within this context, I now come to the question at the heart of this conversation: is Trail of Lightning cultural appropriation or is it instead much-needed Navajo representation within a field where such characters, plots, and topics are not often found? More specifically, should I, especially as a non-indigenous scholar and teacher, avoid this book because of these critiques?

One important point for me, personally, is the way that the Diné Writers Collective
simply calls for readers to “do the research” and choose to read Navajo authors whose works do not misinform or mislead the reader, without naming anyone in particular. Having attempted to do this research, I have not found Navajo authors whose works relate to that of Roanhorse. They make it seem that she is surrounded by voices who are intentionally being ignored and disvalued, when the reality is that her work is filling a gap that others have not tackled. This does not mean that I will not continue to look for other Diné writers, but that I have not found any work as immersive and playfully imaginative within the YA SF genre as *Trail of Lightning* is.

Another question that has been on my mind, and connects to my opening example of the Indigenous Music Awards this year, is the impact that the very discussion of cultural appropriation has on the perception of our community. Does the discussion of cultural appropriation regarding this text hurt Indigenous writing? If one of the most mainstream works by an Indigenous author is thoroughly scrutinized and condemned, does this debate encourage other Indigenous writers to attempt to create accurate representations or does it stifle creativity? I believe that, while Roanhorse has clearly taken some mis-steps that should not be forgotten or overlooked, it is important to continue to encourage other Indigenous writers to create more books with similar settings and goals. While her success and the subsequent publishing of book two in the series shows that this is merely a hypothetical question, I believe that even if it were possible to enact a successful boycott of Roanhorse’s series, it would only hurt the creation and reception of other Indigenous authors.

As Rebecca Roanhorse writes in a scene from *Trail of Lightning*: “Words matter. . .the name you give things, it forms them when you speak. You must always be careful with your words” (75). In this passage, the character Neizgháání is specifically critiquing Maggie’s misuse of the term monster, and it seems to follow along with Denetdale’s critique. However, shortly after this moment Neizghani turns on Maggie and begins to call her a monster. The irony behind this seems intentional, as the plot hinges on Maggie’s ability to move forward from this identification, but there is no indication that Roanhorse understands the serious nature of her own words and the way she has blurred the lines between reality and make-believe through this novel, leaving it up to the individual reader to figure out what is actually part of the Navajo culture and tradition and what is SF imaginations.

In the end, I think that *Trail of Lightning* could be extremely useful in the classroom, but only if the necessary work is done to make students aware of the differences between Navajo tradition and what is presented within the novel. Without this extra work, the novel could indeed be very harmful to the Navajo nation, but with care and preparation,
I believe that this novel can begin necessary, more complex conversations about cultural appropriation and the importance of representation in the current era of publishing.

Works Cited
Lengel, Kerry. “Navajo Legends Come to Life in Rebecca Roanhorse’s Debut Novel 'Trail


“She was standing on the edge of a new world and so ready to jump”: Renovating the Black Technoscientific Genius Trope in Rivers Solomon’s *An Unkindness of Ghosts*

Alena Cicholewski
University of Oldenburg, Germany

Day 2 | June 22, 2019 | 2:00pm
Bioimperialism/Postcolonialism

AFRICAN-American author Rivers Solomon’s debut novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts* was first published in September 2017. It is set more than three hundred years in the future, in which humanity has left a devastated earth in search for a new homeland. Their spaceship the *HSS Matilda* however is organized like an antebellum South plantation with a ruling white elite exploiting and dehumanizing people of color. The readers follow protagonist Aster Gray—a black queer neuroatypical self-proclaimed witch doctor—as she tries to help the enslaved population of the ship as best as she can. On her way through the lowdeck slums of the *HSS Matilda*, Aster learns about the strategies of resistance that the enslaved employ which in turn inspires her to develop her own resistance tactics.

In this paper, I read the character of Aster as an updated incarnation of the black technoscientific genius trope of earlier Afrofuturist fiction and show how her activism against the oppressive system of white supremacy on the spaceship is rooted in her self-perception as a scientist. An autodidactic astrophysicist, botanist and chemist, Aster’s forms of resistance include the cultivation of medicinal herbs, the strategic placement of bombs and eventually continuing her late mother’s quest of redirecting the spaceship back towards earth. I argue that the act of reversing the direction in which the *HSS Matilda* is going becomes a metaphor for the disenfranchised subjects’ quest to reclaim control over their own future—thus intervening in what Kodwo Eshun has conceptualized as the “futures industry” (291).

In order to explain how Solomon’s novel revises the black technoscientific genius, let us first take a look at the history of the trope. According to Lisa Yaszek, Martin R. Delany’s novel *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859, 1861-1862) can be credited with creating the first fictional black technoscientific genius (Yaszek 2014, 17). In this alternate history novel, protagonist Henry Holland, renamed Henry Blake after his enslavement, escapes
from a southern plantation after his wife has been sold away from him. While trying to reclaim his wife, Blake uses his intelligence and technoscientific knowledge to unite the Afrodiasporic populations of the American Atlantic regions, both free and enslaved, in the struggle for freedom. This prototype of the black technoscientific genius—a young, male, heterosexual (often self-educated) scientist with the mission to save his community from racialized oppression—would become a popular motif in Afrodiasporic speculative fiction between 1880 and 1945 (Yaszek 2015: 60). African American inventor/scientist/engineer Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806) provided a real-life role model for those fictional genius characters (Yaszek 2014: 16). Banneker who is probably best known for building the first American wooden clock was also a self-educated astronomer, biologist, and mathematician and heavily involved in the abolitionist movement. The first fictional black technoscientific genius protagonists echo Banneker’s achievements of intellectual accomplishments and social commitment against the backdrop of a racially-prejudiced society. In those stories, the protagonist is often called into action after experiencing racialized violence and/or discrimination first-hand which in turn inspires him to become a force of societal change. In contrast to Anglo-American science fiction of the same era that featured similar scientist characters, early African American science fiction tended to be less interested in the national level, but rather extended its focus to worldwide developments and avoided the clear victory at the end of the novel in favor of more uncertain endings (Yaszek 2014: 17). The black technoscientific genius saw a renaissance in early 2000s Afrodiasporic science fiction. In contrast to its earlier incarnation, those new geniuses could be either male or female and combine established forms of technology with imaginary new and sometimes with African or Afrodiasporic inspired technoscience (Yaszek 2014: 22).

In Aster Gray, author Rivers Solomon takes up many of the aforementioned points while adding a distinctive contemporary 21st century perspective. Born into the enslaved population of HSS Matilda, Aster is raised by her aunt Melusine since her mother Lune mysteriously disappeared right after giving birth to Aster. When realizing that Aster is highly intelligent, Melusine uses her contacts to the ruling elite to arrange for her to become the apprentice of surgeon general Theo Smith, who is the illegitimate son of Melusine and a former Sovereign and well respected on the ship because of his medical expertise. Learning from Theo and through reference books, Aster becomes a skilled healer. Her neuroatypicality is portrayed as beneficial for her learning process as it allows her to fully focus on the materials at hand which she memorizes with a high attention to detail.

Although Aster is never explicitly referred to as neuroatypical on the diegetic level,
her behavior displays symptoms commonly associated with autism, such as difficulties with understanding other people's emotions or figures of speech, a strong reliance on routines or an avoidance of eye contact. While the author has labelled Aster as autistic in an interview, the diegetic world of the novel uses different expressions to describe Aster's condition, as the following quote illustrates: “You're a little off, aren't you?’ The woman grabbed Aster’s chin, turning her face so they were forced eye to eye. ‘You’re one of those who has to tune the world out and focus on one thing at a time. We have a word for that down here, women like you. Insisiwa. Inside one. It means you live inside your head and to step out of it hurts like a caning” (Solomon 23).

Most of the chapters employ third person narration while using Aster as the focalizer; interspersed are three chapters that incorporate the perspectives of three other characters through first person narration: Surgeon General Theo Smith allows the readers to catch a glimpse of the life on the wealthy upper decks, his enslaved mother Melusine Hopwood takes the readers along for a work day as a nanny on the upper decks and Aster’s (enslaved) friend Giselle Nwaku gives in to her destructive impulses. The chapters narrated from Aster’s point of view put the readers in her frame of mind by describing the environment in distanced, scientific terms. Through this, together with the third person narrative situation of Aster's chapters, the novel creates a certain emotional distance between the events described and both the readers and the protagonist. On the diegetic level, this emotional distance might be considered as something that helps Aster to cope with the huge amount of cruelties against the marginalized people on the spaceship that she witnesses and experiences every day. However, Aster’s difficulties in interpersonal communication also have disadvantages for her, as her problems with reading social clues often result in conflicts with overseers that could have been avoided otherwise.

Just like every other enslaved person on the ship, Aster is forced to work on the fields of Matilda, but afterwards she spends her time cultivating medicinal herbs and providing medical care for the enslaved who suffer from malnutrition, frostbite, and physical wounds inflicted by cruel overseers. Her status as a healthcare provider gives Aster certain privileges, such as a “pass” that allows her to move freely between the different decks of the ship. This relative freedom of movement on the one hand provides Aster with opportunities to learn from the diverse cultures present on Matilda, but on the other hand also shows her how the white ruling elite lives in luxury at the expense of the enslaved. In contrast to the dominant upper-deck society that adheres to a strict heteropatriarchal order, the inhabitants of the lower-decks tend to be more open for gender diversity, as—on some of the decks—children
are not assigned a gender at birth, but get to develop their own gender identity as they grow older. Despite this freedom, it should be noted that the ruling elite is keen on exploiting the reproductive potential of enslaved people with functional ovaries and uteruses. In order to avoid being forced to bear children who will subsequently be enslaved, Aster has persuaded Theo to perform a hysterectomy and a mastectomy on her which has incurred the wrath of Matilda's government officials. It is not only Aster’s physicality that complicates her gendering by the reader. While Aster uses the pronouns “she” and “her” and presents as female, she is just as comfortable disguising as a man should the need arise.

Aster moves from small everyday acts of resistance to inciting a revolution after Matilda’s government executes an innocent child. The child in question, Flick, was a patient of Aster’s whose leg had to be amputated due to frostbite. The execution is a direct reaction of Aster’s confrontation with a sadistic government official and used to punish her for her lack of submissiveness. Due to her freedom of movement, Aster manages to arm parts of the enslaved population and to coordinate a common course of action. While the uprising occurs, Aster prepares to leave Matilda. She has just deciphered her late mother Lune’s diary entries and learned that Lune has redirected the spaceship back to earth right after Aster’s birth. As Aster enters a space capsule where she discovers her mother’s remains, Aster chooses to lead the way back to earth, driven by her own scientific curiosity. The novel ends with Aster arriving on earth discovering that the formerly ruined planet has become habitable again—a hopeful ending that hints at Aster and her fellow marginalized ship mates’ opportunity to build a new, self-determined future for themselves.

How does this characterization of Aster relate to the characteristics of the black technoscientific genius? Aster is portrayed as a black, young, highly intelligent scientist with the mission to save her community from racialized oppression, but she is also female-presenting, genderqueer, bisexual, and neuroatypical. This puts her into an even more marginalized position than the classic black technoscientific genius character and certainly makes her more vulnerable to repression by the white heteropatriarchal elite of the spaceship, but also leads to members of precisely this elite to underestimate her abilities. The fact that the creation of a protagonist such as Aster occurs in the late 2010s can be related to changes in the public recognition of genderqueer people whose visibility has increased in recent years and to a rising amount of medial representations of neuroatypicality as an endearing quirk rather than a disability. Aster experiences racist physical, sexual and emotional violence throughout the novel, which inspires her small acts of resistance such as her secret cultivation of medicinal herbs. However, it is the public execution of her patient
Flick that is the final straw which motivates her to take the more extreme action of arming the enslaved people and coordinate an attack. Just like earlier Afro-diasporic science fiction, the focus of the novel is global rather than nationalist and its ending is open, but hopeful: Aster manages to get to earth in a space capsule and discovers that the planet is habitable again. The novel ends immediately after Aster’s arrival, so that the readers do not learn whether the revolution she incited on Matilda was successful or whether Aster and the surviving members of Matilda’s crew will be able to establish a fairer social order on their reclaimed home planet. In contrast to early Afrofuturist fiction, however, Aster is no solitary heroine who saves a helpless community on her own; the community of the enslaved plays a pivotal role in their own rescue: with the help of her friend Giselle, Aster deciphers her mother’s diary from which she learns that Matilda is headed back towards earth; with the help of her friend Mabel’s technical expertise, Aster manages to coordinate the attack on the ruling elite. In the end, Aster is less of a savior and more of a facilitator: her ability to move freely between the different decks of the spaceship allows Aster to build a network among the enslaved people which enables them to unite in their struggle for liberation.

I conclude that the character of Aster Gray maintains key elements of the black technoscientific genius trope, such as ethnicity, age, superior intelligence and social mission while simultaneously broadening its scope to allow for the inclusion of (gender)queerness and neuroatypicality. Although readers might expect that Aster’s positionality as female-presenting, neuroatypical person would lead her being even more oppressed than her male, neurotypical counterparts, the novel subverts that expectation by turning these supposed weaknesses into something that Aster can use to her advantage.

Works Cited
Ways of Knowing: Technology in African Science Fiction

Dustin Crowley
Rowan University

Day 2 | Saturday, June 22, 2019 | 4:00pm
Tade Thompson and Nnedi Okorafor

The history and genre of SF are interwoven at key junctures with the legacies of imperialism—in particular with regard to epistemes of discovery and colonization—and to the fetishizing of technoscientific capacities that enable and motivate them. In places like Africa, the same science and technology that have preoccupied SF have histories of being used for subjugation and exploitation; in turn, Africans themselves are often denied full participation in the technological modes of globalism even as the continent provides critical means to develop these technologies in the first place. It is unsurprising, then, that African SF would have complicated relationships with the technoscientific bases of the genre, at once challenging them as sources of historical trauma, and at the same time laying claim to them as sources of future resistance and development. In this paper, I’m focused primarily on technologies of knowledge production, which have become increasingly important to and enabling of contemporary modes of imperialist globalization—those technologies that enable, hinder, and alter knowledge, remembering, surveillance, discovery, communication—and in particular how knowing is controlled at the site of the body through various kinds of posthuman biopower/neuropolitics. In this regard, the works of Tade Thompson and Nnedi Okorafor offer a complexly paired critique, on the one hand reframing seemingly universal technothreats as in fact uneven, differential consequences within postcolonial contexts, and on the other hand embracing new modes of knowing as they’re confronted and expanded in relation with indigenous epistemologies, including juju and folkloric cosmologies.

In Thompson’s Wormwood Trilogy, the city of Rosewater springs up in rural Nigeria around a living alien dome that has settled there. After some initial confrontations, the citizens of Rosewater, broadly speaking, have settled into a seemingly benign, even beneficial relationship, as the dome periodically opens, healing acolytes who have made pilgrimages to have their bodies healed and transformed, reanimating the dead (albeit in a zombie-like state), and providing electricity for the city. More covertly, the dome is connected with the xenosphere, an invisible network of fungus-like neurotransmitters spread through Earth’s
entire atmosphere when the alien arrived; akin to the fungal neural networks linking an entire forest of trees through roots and soil, the xenosphere connects to everything and everyone, passing information through the system. It creates an almost metaphysical plane where thoughts and memories can be stored and accessed, including by “sensitives” like the protagonist of the first novel, Kaaro. With the ability essentially to read and manipulate minds, sensitives gain unparalleled access to their fellow humans, and also develop deep, intuitive, often unconscious connections with each other, including the ability to “live on” after death in the xenosphere and in each other’s minds.

The novels are keen to remind readers, however, that the xenosphere is not metaphysical at all, but an alien organic software network, with the purpose of covert data collection. Very much like the digital spaces that now pervade our lives and world, the xenosphere’s main power is information, the sort of intimate, intrusive Big Data that can be exploited, monetized, contested by various forces and institutions, often to the complete ignorance of those being harvested. In the novel, the xenosphere is tapped into by criminal factions, banks and corporations, and most notably, the Nigerian government itself, operating through a cryptic paramilitary intelligence organization called S45 that entraps and coerces sensitives like Kaaro to work for them. S45 in particular represents the threat of neuropolitics, biopower that surveils and commits violence at the site of both the body and the psyche.

Of course, as an alien technology, the xenosphere exceeds even S45’s control in ways they struggle to come to terms with through the course of the first novel. Its real purpose, along with the dome itself, is to prepare Earth for colonization by the alien race, called Homians. For decades, the “footholder” biotechnology has been gathering information and surreptitiously replacing human cells with ones fashioned from the xenoforms, slowly transforming human bodies into ones suitable for takeover by Homian consciousnesses now in data storage. The fact that human sensitives can access the xenosphere at all is accidental, though it ironically speeds the process—the very desire to know, connect, communicate, and control driven by various political, social, and economic interests in the novel just allows the invasion of a colonizing consciousness to penetrate deeper and faster. Once the first bodies are close to being fully prepped for colonization, almost all the sensitives are killed off by Molara, a sort of xenovirus that infects their minds and bodies through the xenosphere itself.

Many aspects of this alien encounter seem to recapitulate the history of European colonization in Africa and contemporary digital globalization, with new technologies and
modes of knowing carrying threats of being fundamentally disrupted, exploited, even replaced or enslaved. And while concerns about bodies becoming enmeshed in increasingly intrusive and controlling networks of surveillance and data collection are global in scope, Thompson makes clear that they play out differentially across geopolitical landscapes still marked precisely by the historical traumas of colonization and globalization themselves. Indeed, Nigerians have encountered alien invaders before, imperialisms that have created complex national and global postcolonial contexts through which to understand the possibilities and dangers of a new alien technological encounter. (Worth noting that few know about the biological takeover—S45, using that knowledge to consolidate power, and the US, which has “gone dark.”)

The relationships between the humans of Rosewater and the Homian footholders are complicated by their situatedness within Nigeria itself, particularly its aggressive and corrupt politics, embodied by S45. The mayor of Rosewater, wanting to create a more utopian society, pushes for independence from Nigeria, hopeful that the Wormwood dome would provide deterrence and protect the city from the predatory federal government. At the same time, however, Wormwood is being attacked by another rogue alien species, and needs the humans’ help to save itself from destruction. Embroiled in near-future postcolonial conditions of overlapping and conflicting power, nationally and globally, the citizens of Rosewater are forced into complicated and contingent negotiations with those powers and the technologies they employ. The new modes of knowing offered by the xenosphere tease subversion of power on one hand and radical vulnerability on the other. Continually positioned at the point of imperial desire, the future for Rosewater in the books remains uncertain. By the end of the second novel, they’ve repelled the attacking Nigerian forces and reached an agreement for the Homians to take over the “soulless” reanimate bodies, yet descriptions of the upcoming third novel suggest that doesn’t end the colonizing threat. They remain in a compromised position, with any hopes for a different outcome perhaps dependent on controlling means of knowing that can combine the new technologies with historical memory in an attempt to rewrite the colonial encounter.

Such a theme of (re)writing African peoples’ histories and futures also permeates Okorafor’s writing; especially in the paired novels The Book of Phoenix and Who Fears Death, legacies of slavery and racism are projected into futures where the protagonists are created in/through these violent contexts of exploitation. Both Phoenix and Onyesonwu are made to be tools of control and power, corruptions of scientific experimentation and prophetically-motivated rape respectively. Phoenix spends her accelerated life (she
is an adult at 2 years) entirely within the Big Eye research center in NY, where primarily kidnapped Africans are experimented on to develop transhuman cures and advancements, purportedly for all humankind but in reality at the behest of a handful of superwealthy who want immortality. While in captivity, Phoenix learns to love books and stories: “They gave me whatever I wanted to read. They gave me top secret books and documents because I requested them. […] To them, I wasn’t human enough to be a threat. I was their tool. I was nothing to worry about or fear. … The Big Eye didn’t think they needed to put a leash on me because my leash was in my DNA” (*Phoenix* 135–6) as an African woman, a descendent of slaves. At the same time, she has no context to understand or apply all that knowledge to her own situation: “I knew so much, but so little. You can have knowledge, but you are nothing without wisdom” (135). Only when she believes the man she loves has been killed does she use her power to turn her body into an incendiary bomb and destroy the research center, eventually escaping to Ghana.

It is in Ghana that she begins to learn something of her own identity and history, especially as her experience connects with the patterns of violence and oppression endured by so many others. She also learns new cultural frames through which to understand herself and the world, including learning about Ani, the goddess of earth: “All things come from the land, Ani. […] It’s best to start at the beginning. So not Allah. Not Krishna. Not God. Not Nature. Ani. […] Ani is the spirit of the earth. The spirit of flesh. When I look deep into my DNA, I see that I know her story” (*Phoenix* 219). So, when Big Eye tracks her down in Ghana and once again disrupts her life with violence and loss, she sets herself on a path to destroy the organization and, eventually, the whole earth. She now frames her own story this way:

> Thousands of years ago, when the world was nothing but sand and dry trees, Ani […] made the oceans, lakes, rivers, and ponds. Her lands breathed and then danced. Water is life. […] She turned over and slept. Behind her back, as she rested, human beings sprang from the sweetest parts of the rivers and the shallow portions of the lakes […] Human beings were aggressive, forever wanting to move forward, cutting, carving, changing the lands. At the apex of their genius, one group of humans […] built juju-working machines. They fought and invented amongst themselves. They took her creatures and changed them. They sought to make themselves just like Ani: immortal, all powerful manipulators of earth’s lands. When Ani was rested enough to produce sunshine, she turned over and was horrified by what she saw. She reared up, tall and impossible, furious. Then she reached into the stars and pulled a sun to
the land. I am that sun. I am Ani’s soldier. I do her will. Ani has asked me to wipe the slate clean. (219-220)

As Ani’s avenging angel, she scorches the planet with her Ani-given, Big-Eye manipulated fire. The *Book of Phoenix* itself, then, is her effort to tell her story, to make meaning of this tragic past for the future. “There is no book about me […] Well, not yet. No matter. I shall create it myself; it’s better that way. To tell my tale, I will use the old African tools of story: Spoken words. They are worthier of my trust and they’ll last longer. And during shadowy times, spoken words carry farther than words typed, imaged, or written” (*Phoenix* 6).

Yet in the present moment of the novel, hundreds of years after Phoenix desiccates the planet, her story is no longer spoken, but converted to technology. It exists only as a memory extracted from her DNA using Big Eye technology, stored on a device that’s eventually hidden in a cave along with all the other technology people believed brought them ruin. Her act of telling has been silenced, obfuscated by an official narrative that says one group of people, the Okeke, angered Ani with their technology and brought her wrath; as punishment, the Okeke are slaves to another group, the Nuru. The technology allows her story to be found by an old Okeke man, but also to be coopted and manipulated by him. He can’t bring himself to share her story in her own words—he was “a victim of his environment,” and “He’d lived for a long time understanding his ancestors as slaves,” so he rewrote her story as *The Great Book*, “abbreviated ideas, chopped stories in half, summarized pain and suffering and joy, and reinterpreted and omitted” (*Phoenix* 231), all informed by his belief that “The Okeke were a cursed people” (229). He “did not specifically set out to solidify the Okeke as slave and the Nuru as superior through powerful literature, but what is in one’s heart comes out in one’s stories. Even when he or she’s retelling someone else’s story” (230). In the end, the Great Book “reshaped what the people of the deserted lands knew and felt deep in their hearts. They were a wounded people, so those ideas were wounded, too. The old African man took the bones, blood, and quivering flesh of Phoenix’s book, digested its marrow and defecated a tale of his own. Then he and his oracle of a wife spread this shit far and wide” (232). Such is the situation in *Who Fears Death*, still more generations later, when the “Great Book deformed the lives of many until the one named Onyesonwu came and changed it again” (232).

The stunted and appropriated power of Phoenix’s story at the end of the novel suggests powerfully the stakes for narrative, knowing, memory—who controls it and by what means, including the way technology can be used to amplify, alter, or silence what (hi)stories are told, which ones get to shape our reality. And while the technologies of biopower in the
Wormwood trilogy and The Book of Phoenix seem threatening and grim in that regard, much of Okorafor's Africanfuturism is more optimistic about the capacity of knowledge and story to transcend such limits and dangers, to remain alive and elusive enough to be written and rewritten again, in part by marshalling posthuman technologies in ways that merge technoscientific and indigenous, cosmogonic ways of knowing. In many of her texts, bodies become a sort of biomedia capable of communicating across boundaries of space, time, species, and cultures, creating conditions in which old and new stories can be told and heard, stories that themselves exceed simplistic epistemologies. As a character in Phoenix asserts, hope remains for Phoenix's story to yet again be heard and rewritten because “the story […] was shaman, and the teller was more often than not medium” (231).

Okorafor's more confident embrace of technology is readily apparent in her novel that most closely parallels Thompson's tale, Lagoon. In it, aliens also come to Nigeria with the power to transform themselves to look human, to manipulate the physical world, to read minds, and to communicate by means beyond human grasp. Rather than an ambiguous colonial encounter, however, the aliens have come only to share the space and be genuinely helpful to Nigeria. They restore the health and vigor of the President and set the country on a path of renewal and greatness, trading their reliance on corruption and oil for a share of the alien technology. As the alien representative Ayodele says repeatedly, her people are technology and change, composed of tiny metallic balls that can reshape themselves into and communicate with anything—across all devices simultaneously, with matter itself, even with deities, it turns out. Indeed, the aliens bear a strong resemblance to and connection with the Nigerian deities they inadvertently awaken. Ayodele herself is described in ways that recall Mami Wata; another alien is seen dancing with Ijele, the Igbo god of the masquerade, and together they transport into a computer and disperse through the Web; Udele, the spider artist who serves as the narrator of Lagoon, notes that the aliens are storytellers like her; and at crucial moments, the aliens sacrifice themselves to bring back balance and become integrated into the very material existence of the people and city.

The novel ends at a point of hopeful possibility for Nigeria, with the promise of the new alien technology intertwined with reinvigorated relationships with indigenous deities and knowledge, all of which suggests Okorafor's conviction that such new technologies and ways of knowing are not solely disruptive, but an always already part of a cosmology that links past, present, and future. Her africanfuturist fiction depicts an African world that Wole Soyinka describes in Myth, Literature, and the African World, one that accommodates and prepossesses ancient and modern epistemologies together. Soyinka describes this
epistemology as “the continuing evolution of tribal wisdom through an acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge as its one reality, as signifying no more than reflections of the original coming-into-being of a manifestly complex reality” (53). As such, African cosmologies “deny the existence of impurities or ‘foreign’ matter in the gods’ digestive system. Experiences which, until the event, lie outside the tribe’s cognition are absorbed through the god’s agency, are converted into yet another piece of the social armoury in its struggle for existence, and enter the lore of the tribe” (54). In line with this understanding of the African world, Okorafor’s fiction portrays a sort of jujufuturism, where various types and modes of knowing are blended in communities and bodies, biomeadia that translates between human and nonhuman, earthly and alien, spiritual and material, technoscientific and folkloric, local and global.

It might be tempting to draw a contrast between the authors and their variously pessimistic and optimistic visions of how technologies of knowing bolster, elude, or threaten the lives of African peoples. But I would argue that these narratives complement each other as themselves ways of knowing; taken together, they narrate the complex, at times incoherent conditions of postcolonial Africa. Thompson and Okorafor collectively confront the common practice of producing and reiterating dichotomous and reductive knowledge about the continent and its relationships with technology. Instead, they participate together in an ongoing process of writing and rewriting the history and future of the continent cannot be contained by any one story.

Works Cited
A Samoan Socratic Seminar: Pederasty, Hypocrisy, and *Freelove*

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Day 2 | June 22, 2019 | 4:00pm
Indigenous Recoding

SIA Figiel’s 2016 novel, *Freelove*, is not a pleasant or comfortable read. Following the sexual adventures of a 17½ year-old girl, the novel is explicit in its descriptions of the many varied exploits of the novel’s point of view character, Inosia Alofafua Afatsi, or Sia for short, and her much older high school teacher, Mr. Ioane Viliamu. From a first read, it is quite evident that author pokes fun of the arbitrary nature of the Western age of consent, positioning her character as 17½ rather than 18 and making audiences question the importance of a number rather than emotional maturity, power balance, and mutual understanding. The author also criticizes the Christian church, symbolized through Sia’s irrational fear, not that she, a child, is sleeping with an adult and a teacher (a clear violation of power dynamics to any responsible adult reader), but that she is committing incest, sleeping with her “brother under god.” Further jokes against Western culture arise—the irony of Sia’s obsession with Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” does not go unnoticed as she, too, “makes it through the wilderness” and loses her virginity in the forest; and the constant mentions of *Star Trek* remind readers that colonial exploitation is not limited by the bounds of Earth. (And exploitations of Samoa certainly didn’t operate under *Star Trek*’s primary directive not to intervene.) Less discussed, however—and perhaps not immediately apparent—is Figiel’s use of hypocrisy. Not only is the book littered with self-contradictions, suggesting that even the most well-meaning attempts for *decolonization* can be littered with repressed forms of *self-colonization*, but the novel also mirrors the “praised” Western philosophy of Socrates in the Greek Symposium, suggesting that all that makes us uncomfortable within Figiel’s 216 pages are a regurgitation of all that Western culture praises as worthy when not committed by Brown bodies.

As a scholar of Greek history and mythology, I write this with a great interest in all that occurred around the Mediterranean Sea thousands of years ago. Scholarship, however, has been undeniably one sided; one need only point to the 2006 *Iliad* adaptation, *Troy*, in which all the heroes are white, Achille’s lover, Patroclus, is cast as his cousin and all mentions
of the gods are removed, to see that study on this homonormative and racially diverse and polytheistic society has been reinterpreted from a rather white-washed, Christian, and heteronormative perspective.

A quick Google search of the Socratic Seminar will produce class hand-outs, lesson plans, and a brief history of the structure’s foundation. What’s more difficult to find is an outline of what the Socratic Method actually looked like in a historical setting. It is commonly taught that Socrates valued critical thinking, questioning, and an assumption that the wisest men claim to know nothing. Less discussed was his habit of sleeping with his underaged students. Plato, however, provides a good—if not often ignored—picture or the truth in his collection of Socrates’ teachings, Plato On Love.

In Plato’s recording of the story, “Lysis,” Socrates comes across many “young men standing together” outside a gymnasium. One youth, Hippothales, greets Socrates by saying “There are quite a few besides ourselves—and they’re all good-looking… we spend most of our time discussing things, and we’d be glad to have you join in.” Socrates, rather than leave the underaged boys well enough alone, replies that he’d like to know “the name of the best-looking member” and goes inside the gymnasium (Plato 1). It should be noted here that the original meaning of the Greek prefix gymno, from which gymnasium was derived, was “naked, bare [or ] exposed” (“Gymno”). Pederasty, the ritual practice of grown men bedding underage boys—particularly with the goal of “teaching them” philosophy during sexual acts—was, in fact, so common in ancient Greek society that scholar William A. Percy was able to compose and entire book entitled: Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece, citing that “Most upper-class Greek males…in his early twenties, took a teen-aged youth, the eremenos or beloved, to bond with and train before going on at about age thirty to matrimony and fatherhood” (1). It is important to note that that this was an “upper-class” practice and therefore made one more worthy, important, or well-respected.

Years later, Sia Figiel enters the scene: a Samoan poet, novelist, and scholar, who—due to colonial and Western influences—was well-versed in Western standards of literature and philosophy well before she left Samoa and studied in Europe. She is also openly celebratory of Samoan achievements, expressing, through the young Sia of the novel, that, “Our people were not only very scientific and mathematical, they had a spiritual connection to their surroundings and read nature’s signs with striking precision” (39). This quote is uniquely important in that it is not merely a brag on the behalf of Samoan scholars, but a criticism of the commonly taught, Western perspective of knowledge; though the sciences of many Indigenous societies have rarely been taught, non-Western peoples have been responsible
for huge advances in the sciences. Re-centering these accomplishments is beyond the scope of this essay, but that is perhaps Figiel’s entire point: the center must be moved (Ellis).

In an article of that very name, “Moving the Centre: An Interview with Sia Figiel,” Figiel addresses the need to prioritize female Samoan voices but also to address the long-standing stereotypes of her people by anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, who described Samoan women as sexually promiscuous. This is the origin of the novel’s name, *Freelove*—a tongue-in-cheek response to Mead’s declaration that Samoan girls are sexually liberated to the point of promiscuity and a willingness to sleep with any white man who comes upon her shores. Rather than a direct call for empathy to humanize her Samoan subjects, however—as such an attempt has never quite stopped colonization, slavery, or ethno-genocide—Figiel has called upon a long-standing tradition of Oceanic writers to satirize the oppressor, as if to say, “If I can’t make you believe that I matter, I will show you how ridiculous you are.”

In the acknowledgements of *Freelove*’s 2016 edition, Figiel cites “Last Virgin in Paradise” as a direct influence to her novel’s creation. In response to what Samoan writer Albert Wendt calls the “literary straightjackets and myths” of colonial discourse in the Pacific, playwright Vilsoni Hereniko composed “Last Virgin in Paradise: a serious comedy” about a French man arriving in Tahiti to find a virgin bride to “subvert[s] the image of the South Seas Maiden in accordance with…Pacific…writers who use parodic appropriation, ironic inversion or overt rejection of this image” (Fresno-Calleja 171, 177). This is a long-standing tradition, with “Pacific Writers [engaging] in the collective task of articulating imaginative postcolonial responses to these representations in the hope of…declaring their bankruptcy” (173). Scholar Fresno-Calleja calls this “clowning” and cites that it began as ‘a form of anticolonial or counterhegemonic commentary [which] satirized…institutions and practices in order to demystify or resist them’” (177).

*Freelove* then enters the literary scene as a satire of all the West holds dear: *Star Trek*, Madonna, Socrates, and the thin, depended-upon line between childhood and adulthood. Young Sia’s obsession with *Star Trek* begins on the first line, a foreshadowing that is easy to overlook for readers not familiar with the pedophilia and *Star Trek* scandal, in which the Toronto Sex Crimes Unite found that, in just four years, more than 100 offenders of child exploitation identified as “hard-core Trekkie[s]”; and in 1997, avid *Star Trek* fans involved in the Heaven’s Gate mass suicides “ban[ned] all sexual thoughts and eight members had surgically castrated themselves” (Ladowsky). Further when Sia embarks on her journey—leaving the house, meeting her teacher, and engaging in sexual behavior—she dresses in a “Like a Virgin” Madonna t-shirt. Here, we see Hereniko’s “Last Virgin in Paradise”—the
promiscuous virgin the West wants to see, but subverted into their own image. Finally, Sia engages in her own Socratic Seminar.

There may be no gymnasiums present in *Freelove*, but the novel is nothing if not an indigenized version of Western influences. “What makes me sad sometimes,” writes Figiel, “Is how Samoans see current missionized ways of being as indigenous” (233). Mr. Ioage Viliamu, Sia’s teacher, does share important knowledge about “pre-colonial past[s]” as Figiel intended, and in this way, educates readers—both Samoan and foreigner—about Samoan traditions and mythologies, but his methods are inherently colonial. This can be compared to Socrates, who taught his pupils much about their own Greek mythologies and goods ways of living. Just as Sia describes Ioage as “a walking encyclopedia,” Socrates is described as the best orator and producer of knowledge of his time (Figiel 41, Plato). Ioage is described as “radiat[ing] as if he were a constellation at midnight;” Socrates’ student and lover, Alcibades states, “I had a glimpse of the fitures he keeps hidden within: they were so godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing—that I no longer had a choice—I just had to do whatever he told me” (Figiel 91, Plato 79). In *Freelove*, these lessons do not take place in a gymnasium, but as we now know the word’s origins, Sia and Ioage’s version—*naked, exposed, bare* in the woods—is hardly different. The core elements—sexual exploitation under the guise of education—remain the same.

But even in these moments of recreation, Figiel pokes fun at her point of reference. Mere sentences from Sia’s Socrates-like description of Ioage as bright and glowing, Ioage cuts across her to say, “I was talking about looks and appearances and how it’s irrelevant to Samoans when it comes to choosing partners. And yet how it’s the end all to Americans and their plastic cinematography” (Figiel 91). If he is to be believed, then Sia’s fascination with Ioage’s good looks are not of Samoan origin, but Western. Similarly, Ioage tells Sia that “romantic love is a purely American Hollywood illusion. Our people believed in something...that wasn’t just instant gratification” to which Sia replies, “Like us?” and so points out for herself that their relationship is not quite Samoan but Western: derived from Western standards of instant, sexual love (Figiel 89). More important, Mead’s entire basis of free love is not Samoan but a Western import and projection of repressed western sexuality upon Indigenous Pacific bodies.

The comparisons continue: Sia spends a majority of her time post-“seminar” pining for Ioage, just as Alcibades pines in a four-page long monologue about how overwhelming he finds Socrates’ love. Alcibades claims, “something much more painful than a snake has bitten me in my most sensitive part—I mean my heart, or my soul...which has been struck
and bitten by philosophy” while Sia says, poignantly to Iogne, “You have single-handedly colonized me and my senses. Monopolized my every move. Erased the memory of anyone who has ever sought my attention so that my first waking thought is to be suspended between your thoughts” (Figiel 208). If this sort of obsession worries the reader, it should; it mimics almost exactly Socrates’ description of how he wishes to, “to exert great influence over” his beloved, Alicbades, so “that I’m worth the world to you and that nobody is capable of providing you with the influence you crave, neither your guardian nor your relatives, nor anybody except me—with the god’s help, of course” (Plato 156). Ioage, similarly, draws Sia away from her family and teaches her about the Samoan gods—while ironically ignoring their female influence and family focus.

That Sia refers to Ioage as “colonizing” her senses should indicate already that Ioage, despite his Samoan heritage, plays the role of Western outsider, that he is positioned, as Figiel so feared, as the Indigenous scholar seeking de-colonization who becomes colonizer instead. But there are more hints of this internalized Western mimicry. Socrates suggests a lover will wish “for a boy who has lost his dearest, kindliest and godliest possessions—his mother and father and other close relatives.” He states that the lover will be “happy to see the boy deprived of them, since he would expect them either to block him from the sweet pleasure of the boy’s company or to criticize him severely for taking it” (Plato 103). Similarly, Sia of Freelove is fundamentally denied of her family’s presence, taken, quite literally from an errand for her mother, and exploited alone in the woods. In this way, the book misses a fundamental quality of Oceanic literature: mana wahine, or the power of women, particularly women united.

In the magazine Pacific Studies, Samoan artist Jewel Castro reflects on the women in her family, and the immense power she felt from watching them undergo traditional practices, particularly that of the malu or a ceremonial women’s tattoo. She states that she noticed a “blue-green mark just above [her mother’s] calves [which] was story-telling in the skin, not just on top of it” (127-128). In Figiel’s Freelove, Sia reflects that the colonial English language could not trace her genealogy and was not “in my blood the way I found on my mother’s tattooed thighs” (40). Ioage, however, attempts to get a traditional Samoan men’s tattoo but cannot stand what Castro describes as a “painful procedure” (128). This can be read as a symbolic distancing from his Samoan roots—one that is passed along from years of internalized colonial understanding, as Ioage is the son of a Christian pastor who does not believe in tattooing at all.

Before Sia leaves for college, she assures Ioage that “another Lolita will come…
and she’s going to be more lustrous, refulgent and brilliant” (176). Here, Sia references the famous novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, which is often misinterpreted as a love story, despite detailing a 55-year old pedophilic literature professor’s lust for a 12-year old girl. Nabokov’s novel, however, in its attempt to expose the pedophile, details the man’s point of view, never allowing the girl a voice; Figiel—even in her satire—at least centers the woman’s voice. This difference is crucial, as critics of *Lolita* constantly blame the girl in the situation, and the term “a Lolita” is used to describe a promiscuous youth; men are rarely—if ever—accused of being a “Humburt” (the novel’s main, pedophilic, male character). That her “brilliance” is revered over her looks seems, to me, a Greek reference, as the men gathered in the Symposium valued their man-to-boy relationships over those with women because they believed grown men engaging in sexual activity with underaged boys would birth “knowledge” rather than children.

There is perhaps a reason that Plato’s stories on love are less taught than Homer’s epics—if only because the ugly skeletons in the closet make idealization less practical or approved. Writing as someone with a great interest and deep appreciation for Greek mythology, I argue that this method does more to invalidate the Western past than to glorify it. The Christian god may be all knowing, all powerful, and all good, but what made has made the Greek gods a source of interest for thousands of years is their human-like imperfections. In the most optimistic reading of Figiel’s *Freelove*, we might boil her message down to a quite simple and understated point: no one is perfect. But as long as the West continues to point fingers at the Pacific and refuses to self-analyze, it should hardly be surprising that authors like Figiel hold up a mirror to reflect back colonial hypocrisy.

In the case of the Toronto Sex Crimes Unit, detectives attempted to explain the unusual amount of Trekkie sex offenders by “identify[ing] the pedophiles with the mutants and monsters and themselves with the crew of the Enterprise.” But as reporter Ellen Ladowsky notes, “The detectives probably have more in common with the pedophiles than they think because the pedophiles, too, are almost certainly identifying with the crew of the Enterprise” (“Pedophilia and *Star Trek*”). Everyone wants to see themselves as the hero. Romanticizing the past—whether it be in the shoes of the colonizer or the colonized—is hardly constructive, as such a view leaves no room for the future.

At the end of *Freelove*, young Sia gives up her child for adoption without the prior approval of the teacher who impregnated her. Perhaps we can read this as the book’s last lesson: a new entity has created that is neither purely the colonial force nor the colonized being. As said by Samantah Lichtenberg in “Experiencing Samoa Through Stories,” colonial
influence “did not erase indigenous belief, but rather altered it, gave it a new face” (13). This new entity—forever tainted, perhaps, by colonialism, but still fostered, nourished, and loved by the Indigenous body—may still operate with agency and does not owe this new being to the master. In this way, Figiel’s version of the student-teacher dynamic is quite different than the archaic Greek’s; rather than educate so as to make a copy of the teacher and a soldier for the state, Ioage has educated Sia into a being that can outsmart and escape him.

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Queering the Un-Queer: A Reading of Empire and Queerness in Seemingly Non-Feminist SF

Jacqueline Toland
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Day 3 | June 23, 2019 | 8:30am
Ursula K. Le Guin

RECOGNIZING queerness, empire, and feminist perspectives in works regardless of genre is essential for the ongoing conversation in the academy. Although modernity is rightfully leaning towards more progressive and diverse narratives, there is still something to learn from mining queerness and feminisms from the classics or finding something that’s lesser-known that can contribute to the current scholastic conversation. The works of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Cordwainer Smith’s “The Dead Lady of Clown Town” are classified or regarded as non-feminist sci-fi works for different reasons, but does this rationale still apply in current queer theory, queer methodologies, and feminist studies? This paper will explore this specific line of inquiry within these texts to illuminate and perhaps complicate our definition of what is considered queer, feminist, and non-feminist. The concepts of queerness, feminism, and empire will be explored in these pertinent SF works to ultimately clear and queer the conversation surrounding these works.

To queer something is to examine that entity from another angle; it is also a school of thought and a methodology utilized in various disciplines. Queerness does not necessarily have a feminist agenda, but it does have a connection to queer studies and LGBTQ+ schools of thought therefore it is not devoid of sexuality and gender, but a more amorphous distinction. Furthermore, Veronica Hollinger wrote in terms of SF and queer theory that “when the theoretical focus turns to issues of gender and sexuality, science fiction is a particularly useful discourse within which to represent, through the metaphors of narrative, the philosophical and political conceptualizations deployed within critical theory” (23). With this concept in mind, my argument will encompass various threads of critical theory to connect these two texts to the concept of empire as well as gender and sexuality studies.

Queer is an apt word to describe *The Left Hand of Darkness* on many levels. First, queerness in the identity sense inhabits the worlds of sexuality and gender, a topic of the book specifically highlighted in the whole of chapter seven. Furthermore, my argument
will work under the assumption that the “absence” or sublimation of perceived sexuality (since it is considered queer and alien) does not mean that sexuality is not a relevant theme or entity to discuss, in fact it is quite the opposite. For example, the two-gendered or ambigendered Gethenians and their kemmer cycles are indicative of Le Guin questioning assumptions about sex, rape, and sexuality in contrast to our own gender conventions. There is sex and gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but it specifically queers our perception of reproduction, rape, sex, and more due to how it has a specifically redefined system. In the work “Queer Methods,” authors Brim and Ghaziani define and question queerness as, “the origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than reify them in an allegedly generalizable variable-oriented paradigm, because these categories do not always align with lived experiences. Second, queer social research methods reject the fetishizing of the observable” (16). This differs from a feminist lens in that it may come from the same structure or feminist principles, but queerness has spread to create its own discipline that has its own set of rules and mores that challenge the norm much like Le Guin challenges the notions of sexuality through the Gethenian sexual system.

Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* is queer in nature because it utilizes queer thought and methodologies that promote and challenge the conception of the world we live in. The novel begins, “I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my home world that truth is a matter of the imagination” (Le Guin 1). As this quote suggests, sometimes the truth is not readily available, but takes a bit of imagination and digging to mine the truth and meaning. Furthermore, the perceived absence of sexuality or queerness in *The Left Hand of Darkness* does not necessarily denote a lack of its presence nor completely negates it from conversation. Furthermore, Le Guin herself alludes to this argument in the book when she states, “To oppose vulgarity is to inevitably be vulgar” (151). When one tries to avoid a topic, the topic is being discussed or alluded to anyway. Of course, in this quote Le Guin is describing an alien custom, but is that so alien a concept? SF and fantasy come from and deal with our reality i.e. Le Guin’s critical essay, “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” which states that all fantasy has a grain of truth. Therefore, we cannot dismiss the notion that Gethenian sexuality is absent or different from human sexuality and should not be read in that lens. Instead it *should* be considered a queer conception because it challenges gendered rhetoric and hegemony in a specific manner that calls to mind queer methodologies.

In a series of scenes in which the two main characters Estraven and Genly Ai work towards a mutual telepathic connection and then eventually successfully achieve one,
many scholars have read this intimate connection as a substitution for sex or consider it sexually motivated since both of the parties were in kemmer (or in heat because Estraven was in Kemmer and Genly Ai, a human, is permanently in kemmer), but that is not the only reading of this scene. This scene is inherently queer not only due to the pseudo-sex of two predominantly male presenting people, but it also relates back to my previous queer argument. Even though many scholars and the critical reception of *The Left Hand of Darkness* called for sex or a resolution between the two characters, Le Guin instead is leaving the queer intimacy open to interpretation, which is inherently queer. Furthermore, the sublimation of the reader's needs or desire for some sort of intimacy is queer because it is human and predictable to want closure or a specific resolution in a text.

Moreover, the fact that Le Guin depicted humans as permanently in kemmer is queer in conception as well. In Gethenian society, social mores dictate that those in kemmer permanently are considered “perverts” so therefore, humanity is perverted and not the aliens. This is an interesting reversal of a norm or a queer conception. Additionally, the fact that humans must consider this truth meta-textually (that their sexuality is queer in nature) produces its own meta-queerness. Furthermore, having a perverted human race urges the reader to question the human conception of sex and sexuality, which is queer.

While not an explicitly queer text, we can engage in a queering of “The Dead Lady of Clown Town” by recognizing the feminist tones and themes attributed to this work. In this short story, the perception of women in SF is queered through a feminist portrayal of several of Smith’s characters in the story. I want to note that linking Smith to feminist elements queers the perception of Smith himself, since he has been regarded in some circles as a tad misogynistic in his other works. Although I do not call the “The Dead Lady of Clown Town” a queer work, it does not negate the fact that the work queers expectations.

In Smith’s creation, the women or girl characters are particularly intriguing. Elaine is the first female person we encounter. Through her introduction we are taught the complicated nature of her existence, which is unwanted, unheard of, and undesirable. Smith writes, “Elaine was a mistake. Her birth, her life, her career were all mistakes. The ruby was wrong” (237). Elaine’s existence is an accident, which could be read as a non-feminist or not an empowering narrative, but there is more to this story beyond first surface impressions. Elaine is also a “witch” and carrying that gendered term that is laden with historical oppression is significant within the story and for us as the reader.

Elaine becomes a heroine that purposely and simultaneously exhibits and rejects some “feminine roles” in the conceptions of SF. In the text, Elaine is somewhat trapped in
her existence since she has a destiny laid out for her, yet she still utilizes agency in order to vie against the destiny set before her in small ways. For instance, she does not trust the Lady Panc Ashash and has considerable pushback against Charlie-is-my-darling while with the underpeople, which directly goes against her programming. Elaine states, “‘I haven’t got a lover,’ said Elaine. ‘I haven’t been authorized one, not till I have done my lifework yet. I’m not that kind of girl who would ask a subchief for the dreamies, not when I am entitled to the real thing’” (Smith 248). Elaine then questions and later rejects breaking her initial programming to defy the expectations of her society to ultimately help propel the revolution. This display of agency and dissident narrative to what is conventionally set before her is in fact feminist.

However, I agree with the reading that Elaine is forced into sex with Hunter and that it is unnecessary plot device and extremely “non-feminist.” On the other hand, without Hunter, Elaine would not have had the essential information to carry out the revolution. Despite the fact Elaine’s narrative is not wholly empowering or wholly unproblematic, Elaine’s consciousness is still a part of the trifecta that is Joan, Hunter, and Elaine to make human D’Joan (a Joan of Arc) with a message to carry a revolution; therefore, she is a pivotal character in the story that queers the perception of what is feminist and what is empowering.

Furthermore, Smith invents women characters like the S woman and Crawlie, who represent the more morally ambiguous or antagonist side of the spectrum. S woman and Crawlie are layered due to their intersectional identities as “underpeople” and women. Smith also places two drastically different women in power like Lady Arabella and Lady Goroke who are part of the main governing body of the corrupt society. Anchoring this story along with the revolutionary narrative is a strong and diverse picture of women and girls, which should be discussed thoroughly in academia with a specific queer or feminist lens. In terms of theory, Judith Butler comments on the distinction of feminist works and sex in her article “Against Proper Objects” when she states:

To the extent that the analogy “works” through reference to a term—“sex”—which commonly concerns both feminism and lesbian/gay studies, that commonality must be denied—through elision or through the semantic splitting and redistribution of its constitutive parts. Whereas “sex” in the elided sense attributed to feminism will mean only identity and attribute, “sex” in the explicit and lesbian/gay sense will include and supersede the feminist sense: identity, attribute, sensation, pleasures, acts, and practices. Thus “sex” in the sense deployed by lesbian and gay studies is
understood to include the putative feminist binary (female or male), but also to imply the second proper object of lesbian and gay studies: “sexuality.” (2)

With this in mind, Butler’s specific definition encompasses multiple disciplines yet is amorphously open to interpretation. This juxtaposing interpretation is in fact representative of the queerness of “The Dead Lady of Clown Town.” Through the conjunction and contrast of feminist and non-feminist angles within the story leaves us to interpret Cordwainer Smith’s purposely engendered (I use “engendered” because Smith does utilize the conceptions of gender and furthers feminist perspectives in specific characters throughout the story) work that ultimately queers our perception of a feminist author and narrative.

In “Race and Sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson’s Oeuvre; or, Queer Afrofuturism” Amandine Faucheux’s Queer Afrofuturism serves as an example of how to highlight the intersections of queerness with other theory and specifically how to queer a text that is multilayered with race and gender concepts. With this model in mind, the topic of empire ultimately clears and queers the two texts of Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness and Cordwainer Smith’s “Dead Lady of Clown Town” to reveal a specific narrative of colonialism and control.

In Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness the presence of empire is best discussed through the context of the Ekumen. This multi-world conception is a part of a series of works written by Le Guin that ultimately wishes to glean resources and information from other worlds and to join their consortium. The most interesting part of this is the fact that such a conglomerate only sends one representative at a time to the new world. This is Genly Ai’s mission with the Gethenians. It is very interesting to see the presence of one human representing such an immense consortium. If the society refuses said envoy they send another after a period of time. It seems as if the envoy is expendable in this context, but the fact that one human can represent nation, sovereignty, and engage in politics of a home world that does not want such a tie can represent the colonialist narrative. One giant body of superior technological means and information attempting to recruit another world or empire alludes to this colonization. The fact that Genly Ai represents such an immense body that just trades knowledge, but he suffers such dire consequences and goes through considerable trials with intrigue, dissidence, and later torture can represent the notion that colonialism, empire, and the majority versus the minority discourse is in fact rightfully problematic, yet there is this tenuous relationship considering who is the colonizer and who is colonized? This duality should be examined and queered by all angles in academia to ultimately contribute to the academy.
Textually speaking, Le Guin vies against the notion of colonialism and empire by extension through this particular passage:

Hate Orgoreyn? No, how should I? How does one hate a country, or love one? Tibe talks about it; I lack the trick of it. I know people, I know towns, farms, hills and rivers and rocks, I know how the sun at sunset in autumn falls on the side of a certain plowland in the hills; but what is the sense of giving boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's uncountry? Then it's not a good thing. Is it simply self-love? That's a good thing, but one mustn't make a virtue of it, or a profession...In so far as I love life, I love the hills of the domain of Estre, but that sort of love does not have a boundary-line of hate. And beyond that, I am ignorant, I hope. (212)

This quote is an example of dissidence against the conceptions of empire because when an empire comes to power it perpetuates a certain favorable narrative and here Le Guin systematically dismantles that thinking. This quote in fact queers the conceptions of nations, countries, and “uncountries” by questioning inherent power structures. The tension between the human conceptions such as country and empire versus nature itself sustains an anti-colonialist argument.

The colonialist world found in Smith’s “Dead Lady of Clown Town” is represented by the Instrumentality. The Instrumentality is a governing body or council that oversees the world’s population through iron-tight control, telepathy, and manipulation. This body traces its roots to colonialist thinking and conceptions of empire due to its need to assimilate and control. Even within this context, Elaine occurred in an “accident” that set a chain of events to propel a revolution. This preordained accident foretold by the Lady Panc Ashash is a commentary on colonialism. Despite the systematic control, the rhetoric, and delineation of classes of who or what is human and less than human with the animalistic underpeople, a radical accident occurred and it was through one single spark that created an event to lead to a revolution. Similarly, resisting colonialism requires one singular act, a spark to fuel the fire of a movement against something.

In conjunction with this idea, the fact that D’Joan’s revolution creates mass martyrs is problematic. Even with the revolutionaries’ deaths, there was not an immediate shift in thinking to completely allow human hybrids to live in society equally. Instead it took years and a new heir, Lord Jestocot, to later to bring systematic change. This can be read as a metaphor for colonialism because colonialism and its effects are lasting and ever present...
today. What is interesting about the revolution and mass martyrs is the fact that Smith was a pacifist himself. He purposely chose death for his revolutionaries, which seems like a detraction to his pacifist argument, but is not death a state of being surpassable or differently conceptualized in SF? Therefore, colonialist thinking is present in this work and queers the conversation found within “The Dead Lady of Clown Town”.

Ultimately, Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* should be considered a queer text within the academy due to its unique ability to challenge established human mores. Even though the author Cordwainer Smith might not be a self-proclaimed feminist, the absence of some feminist discourse and analysis does not equal that a work cannot have an empowering or layered narrative. Le Guin said it best when she wisely states, “It is a durable, ubiquitous, specious metaphor that one about veneer (or paint, or pliofilm, or whatever) hiding the nobler reality beneath. It can conceal a dozen fallacies at once…”(101) Even though Le Guin is discussing the conceptions of civilization in this quote, the same could be said about gender, feminist thinking, and queering a text. There is a surface reading, but we must look beneath, around, and behind something to thoroughly examine its contents because the conversation surrounding these topics are rapidly changing. To queer something could be considered the opposite of clearing, but the juxtaposition of queering and its inherent duality is not as delineated as we think, therefore, we must make room for new labels and conceptions of queerness, feminism, and coloniality in the academy.

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GENE Roddenberry’s vision for the original Star Trek series was something that would deliver social criticism and optimism. His vision had implanted in it an unexpected colonialism which, through feature films and television shows, evolved into postcolonialism by the time Star Trek: Deep Space 9 was launched in 1993. Through an examination of the original series, selected theatrical releases featuring the original crew, Star Trek: The Next Generation and Star Trek: Deep Space 9 this progression will clearly show how the ideologies that Roddenberry made the core of the series would power this evolution.

These Are the Cold War Voyages

IDEOLOGY was central to the show from the beginning. Instead of being a whitewashed crew, Roddenberry made a conscious decision to be inclusive. The captain of the Enterprise, the exploration starship which would whisk the crew to its weekly adventure, was still from the United States (though he was played by a Canadian), but the first officer was a devil-looking character held over from the original pilot, Mr. Spock, an alien from the planet Vulcan. The senior officers were rounded out by one other American (Dr. McCoy), a Scotsman (Chief Engineer Scott), a black African woman (Lt. Uhura), an Asian-American (Lt. Sulu) and, in an interesting twist for the late 1960s, a Russian (Ensign Chekov). It was this last character that perhaps offers the best clue into the mind of the series creator and his vision of where humanity was headed in the future. Instead of humanity going into some dystopian state, like Soylent Green, or nuclear annihilation like in The Planet of the Apes, Roddenberry saw humanity heading to a brighter place:

Star Trek was an attempt to say that humanity will reach maturity and wisdom on the day that it begins not just to tolerate but take a special delight in differences in ideas and differences in life forms. If we cannot learn to actually enjoy those small differences, to take a positive delight in those small differences between our own
kind, here on this planet, then we do not deserve to go out into space and meet the diversity that is almost certainly out there. (qtd. in Daum)

In a trend that would continue for decades to come, the captain would embody what the series was about. In the case of James T. Kirk, he was optimistic, bold, and a firm believer in gunboat diplomacy. He was what was necessary for both for a burgeoning Federation and for an America in turbulent times.

Within the larger structure of the Star Trek universe was the governmental bloc to which the crew of the Enterprise belonged: the United Federation of Planets. The Federation, as it is referred to in shorthand, was a utopian body wherein every member alien species was treated as an equal. This was Roddenberry’s equivalent of the United Nations, complete with humans standing in for Americans, leading the way as the primary staffers of the exploration-first Starfleet Command. Having the crew of the Enterprise represent such organizations allowed for them to always take the moral high ground in their encounters, whether it was dealing with genocide (S1, E13, “The Conscience of the King”) or in deadly encounters with rival alien powers (the Gorn of “Arena”, S1, E18). Starfleet also assisted with galactic colonialization, both in resupply runs or in their defense. Although the Federation is comprised of many alien worlds and species, the original series, save for a handful of episodes which include “Amok Time”, which was a trip to Spock’s home world of Vulcan, and “Journey to Babel,” where we are introduced to Tellarites and Andorians, featured human colonies, such as the Deneva colony in “Operation: Annihilate” and “This Side of Paradise.” No non-human colonies are shown. In fact, of the 78 original episodes, over half of them featured or mentioned colonies or military outposts.

Roddenberry needed a way to tell his stories while navigating the network censors of the day. Enter the theatre and film theories of Berthold Brecht, an early 20th century playwright and screenwriter who wrote profoundly anti-war works in the wake of Germany’s disastrous economic downturn following World War I. Fearing the physical harm that would come from writing against Germany’s massive war industry and those associated with it while living in Germany, he advanced a theory on performance that would keep him breathing: defamiliarization. He put forth that ideas that are critical of the mainstream could be safely delivered to the masses if the setting was not contemporized.

This is similar to what another theoretician, Louis Althusser, wrote about in relation to ideology. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser puts forth several thoughts on ideology and its control and commentary on the ideology. He warns of not being explicit in placing criticisms out in the open, saying that the best method is to
place them where the viewer can “discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world” (156) Married to Brecht’s practical application, Althusser’s writings become as effective as a Romulan Cloaking Device.

*Star Trek* was now ready to boldly open dialogues where no science fiction show had gone before. One famous case involving this show was the episode entitled “A Private Little War” (S2, E19), which had Captain Kirk and his government, the Federation, standing in for the United States, fighting a proxy war against the Klingons, standing in for the Soviet Union, on a backwater, technologically-undeveloped planet, standing in for Southeast Asia. Network censors accused Roddenberry of running an anti-Vietnam War episode in the middle of the conflict. Roddenberry countered in a voice very much borrowed from Althusser and Brecht that he was completely innocent, and that his program took place in deep space hundreds of years in the future during a time when the nations of the Earth lived in complete harmony. He was ultimately able to tell the story that he wanted to tell while saying “I am not ideological” to the network. Other notable episodes where the writers of the original *Star Trek* took a position of hidden ideological commentary were “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield” (S3, E15), which was a thinly-veiled story of the futility of racial hatred, and “Plato's Stepchildren” (S3, E10), which featured the first American prime-time interracial kiss. There was even a mirroring of the Cold War relationship in the show; the episode “Errand of Mercy” (S1, E26) featured a peace treaty enforced by an omnipotent alien race which ensured a cold war between the Federation and the Klingons. With every passing episode, Roddenberry and his writers were able to spread the gospel of the Federation through defamiliarization and hidden ideologies.

The East-West parallel of the Klingons and the Federation also continued into the theatrical releases that featured the original crew. An interesting viewpoint that these films take time to develop is the spread of the hidden colonialism of Roddenberry’s utopian vision of the perfect government through the eyes of the long-time adversaries of the Federation, the Klingons. Although the Klingons are a major government within the *Star Trek* universe, their fears of having their way of life erased by a fast-expanding, ideologically sunny Federation echoed the sentiments of those within the upper echelon of the Soviet government. A Washington Post article from January 30, 2000, quotes Vladimir Putin as observing: “Few people understand the magnitude of the catastrophe that happened late in the 1980s when the Communist Party had failed to modernize the Soviet Union” (Hoffman).

The pressure to change and modernize would eventually unravel the Soviet Bloc, and this pressure would manifest itself in the *Star Trek* world in one object: the Genesis Device.
The Genesis Device was the peak of technological duality: it was at once something that could create habitable, colonizable planets and strike fear into an arch rival. These fears are spelled out by Commander Krige in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* when he says that their violent actions are justified because they simply “act for the preservation of their race.”

This film was released towards the end of the Brezhnev era, and there was much apprehension as to which direction the Soviet Union should go. Colonial powers themselves have ebbed with time; New York was once New Amsterdam, after all. The Klingons had a fear of absorption too, and it did not go away as the final installation of the original crew’s movie adventure, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, was about the Klingons dealing with a Chernobyl-style disaster. This catastrophe eventually provided the impetus for the Federation-Klingon peace treaty that is achieved in the movie, but not without some strong internal discussions among some members of the Klingon High Council; some want a preemptive attack while others see peace as the only solution.

**A Gentler, Expanding Federation**

REPEATED binaries such as this play right into the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss, who codified the school of thought known as structuralism within the discipline of Cultural Studies. He hypothesized that there were similarities between all cultures, even what he termed the “savage and the civilized.” In his essay “The Structural Side of Myth,” Levi-Strauss puts forth the idea that parallels can be drawn between major myths and events throughout our collective history. When the series developed a spin off in the 1980s called *Star Trek: the Next Generation*, it included episodes dealing with such topics as dehumanization (“Measure of a Man”, *Star Trek: the Next Generation* S2, E9), gender and love (“The Outcast”, *ST;TNG* S5, E17) and torture (“Chain of Command”, *ST: TNG* S6, E10 and 11). All these stories brought about the *Star Trek* that, as far as ideology is concerned, would go boldly where no one had gone before and the ideologies of Roddenberry would be carried forth by the captain of the new Enterprise, Jean-Luc Picard, and a crew which now featured a Klingon, the heretofore antagonistic foil to the Federation. The staffing of the crew of a starship had changed since the days of Captain Kirk, as families were now on board and a new bridge officer was added: the ship’s counselor. While these topics may seem ho hum today, it must be remembered that this iteration of *Star Trek* aired primarily in the Reagan 1980s. As with the original series, Captain Picard embodied the facets of the human spirit that were to become the hallmarks of the series; he was sophisticated, a thinker and favored diplomacy over violence. He was what the Federation had grown into: an outwardly wise
and benevolent think-twice statesman. Perhaps bolstered by the rise of European socialism, the Federation had changed as well; it was now a more defined body, complete with an expanding government.

One notorious angle for the newer, gentler crew of the *Enterprise* was the proposed new antagonistic race they were to regularly encounter: the Ferengi. With the Klingons now in the fold, the Federation needed someone to but heads with in their ongoing quest to spread utopia. The Ferengi were a race short in stature, completely obsessed with the pursuit of wealth and pleasure who hailed from a swamp world and who, by ancient custom, declared that all of their women should be completely unclothed. These qualities, given the 1980s and the wild Wall Street practices of the time, make the Ferengi a good stand in for unbridled capitalism. Captain Picard rails against the financial practices of the 20th century when asked about money by the 21st century character Lily in the feature film *Star Trek: First Contact*, saying that “the acquisition of wealth is no longer the driving force in our lives. ...We work to better ourselves ...and the rest of humanity.”

The Ferengi were quickly relegated to role players within the *Star Trek* universe and by the time that *Deep Space 9* rolled around were more of a punchline than a sparring partner. It seemed that conquering the most ferocious villain race around through diplomacy and replacing them with munchkin versions of Gordon Gecko was not in the stars.

A Changing Federation for a Changing World

ONE other key component changed in the binary world of the real world and *Star Trek* towards the end of the run of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: the Cold War had been replaced by a shooting war. The First Gulf War, along with the breakup of the Soviet Union, had changed the sort of stories that would be identifiable to audiences. This shift allowed for the broader discussion of topics which had not been dealt with in previous Trek series. In this, the philosophy of Althusser regrading hidden ideologies has found the ideal delivery vehicle. *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* (DS9 from here on out) was not set on a starship on a mission of galactic exploration as previous *Trek* series were. It was instead set on a space station captured by the reptilian villains known as the Cardassians and orbiting a planet that had been occupied for decades by this rival power of the peace-loving Federation. The staff of this station would be a mix of Starfleet personnel and crew provided from the newly-independent planet named Bajor. Original showrunner Michael Piller states in an interview on the series DVD collection that this dynamic was perfect because of the differing viewpoints: "People who come from different places—honorable, noble people—
will naturally have conflicts.”

These conflicts are not contrived but are instead rooted in real-world parallels. Labor camps, disappearances, and a misused population led to something that was seen as the natural reaction of a native population to their colonial overlords. Frantz Fanon writes that:

Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation. Their first confrontation was colored by violence and their cohabitation—or rather the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer—continued at the point of a bayonet and under cannon fire. (8)

Bajor has won its independence after a half-century of occupation, but now the question remains: who will lead the provisional government now that the Cardassians are going home? Will it be the freedom fighters that drove them out? Will it be the religious Vedeks that helped the population keep its faith in the darkest hour? Will it be someone else?

The entire setup is reminiscent of the situation that many newly-independent nations found themselves in the post-colonial blossoming after World War II. Populations would win their freedom from one colonial power only to have another step in while the dust settles; whereas with the outgoing colonial power dominations was held by force, the new partner government held sway by means of treaties and agreements. Such was the situation in Kenya following its independence from Britain. This position is articulated very effectively by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in his essay entitled “Mau Mau is Coming Back” from the book *Barrel of a Pen*:

[T]he 10-year armed struggle against imperial colonial occupation of Kenya, to enable Kenyans to determine their economic, political and cultural life. For no people are free as long as their politics and culture are controlled by imperialism. It is therefore bitterly ironic to millions of Kenyans that as we talk here tonight, there are in Kenya three military presences—the British, Israeli and American. (8)

Thiong’o goes on to list the human rights violations being perpetrated in Kenya during this era, which parallels may of the circumstances for Brazilians during the governance of the military. The Federation might have come smiling and acting in a friendlier manner than the Cardassians, but there was no pretense about their intent: the Federation wants Bajor join its organization because, just like Kenya, it has a valuable strategic location, namely a wormhole that provides access to the other side of the galaxy. The first mention of a non-
aligned world applying for admission to the Federation is in the original series episode entitled “Journey to Babel” (S2, E10): a planet by the name of Coridon is looking to join up. What makes this an interesting matchup for the Bajoran situation is that Coridon is rich in a mineral called Dilithium, which is used to power the faster than light engines of starships. In both situations, then, strategic resources are in play.

The Federation has grown in size from around 75-member planets during the time of Captain Kirk to what Captain Picard states in the film *Star Trek: First Contact* as encompassing “over one hundred and fifty [worlds]...spread across eight thousand light years.” Not all have seen this expansion of the Federation as a benevolent entity that offers freedom to any that would take it; instead, some have seen a colonial theme being layered into the stories:

*Trek’s* colonialist ideology is conveyed in many ways. One significant component is the use of colonialist terms. Colonial discourse is made up of references to new worlds, frontiers, assimilation and resistance, among other things. Beyond the frontier of both historical European colonial expansion and that of the United Federation of Planets reside swarming hordes of homogenous, essential representations of aliens. Humanity always resides on the closest side of the frontier. Within *Trek*, even recently encountered Others are technologically advanced, they invariably lack key characteristics of humanity: compassion, understanding and civilization. Two examples are the alien Cardassians and Ferengi. (Brode and Brode, 80)

Conflicts over the decolonialization of Bajor allowed for some pointed ideological conversations in the era of a post-Soviet world. These topics are pure Althusser, though, for although they are in plain sight, they are obscured by the saga of a Starfleet crew striving to convince the Bajorans, both on Deep Space 9 and on the planet itself, that the Federation, something like an interstellar United Nations, is worth joining. Given that the Federation was a stand in for the First World, though, there is an inherent danger in offering political critiques in a television series that was being produced for large audiences within countries such as the United States and Great Britain. If we go back to Althusser’s essay, however, he says that the best method is to place them where the viewer can “discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world” (156).

The binary of the worlds allows for the discussion of topics like religion. The Federation is presented as an organization that, although it outwardly respects the notion of faith and religion, has evolved past the point of needing it. Captain Picard, the mouthpiece for the
philosophies of the evolved, twenty-fourth century Federation, calls religion the “dark ages of superstition and fear” (Star Trek: The Next Generation, “Who Watches the Watchers”, S3, E4). This episode has Captain Picard mirroring the philosophies of Roddenberry himself, who was himself an atheist. This sensibility is dropped on its head when in the pilot episode, “The Emissary,” the incoming Starfleet commander of the space station experiences a spiritual awakening and is proclaimed the Emissary, a prophetic position. The Bajoran people are portrayed as deeply spiritual and partially ruled-over by a strong religious faith. Although it is later revealed that their guiding entities are super-advanced aliens, there are many instances when matters of morals and faith are openly discussed and the Federation ends up running a thin line between enlightenment and intolerance.

These Are the New Voyages

It can be argued that each iteration of Star Trek was seen through the gaze of the captain; in this case with Benjamin Sisko, a brilliant man who was broken by the death of his wife in the most-costly battle that the Federation has ever engaged in (DS9, S1, E1). He was a warrior that once punched the omnipotent being known as Q but was also a single father. He was a man of opposites, which is perhaps what defines him best: he was a man searching for his ideological truth in a changing galaxy, the same way that the world was searching for a new set of ideological parameters following a decades-long cold war. This is how we should be handling the ideological change, then: the original series had Captain James T. Kirk, The Next Generation had Captain Picard and Deep Space 9 has Sisko. These three figures help guide the viewer through the years of ideologies from utopia to postcolonialism.

Works Cited

Fucking and Copulating: Narrative Authority and Systemic Oppression in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and N. K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*

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Day 3 | Sunday, June 23, 2019 | 2:30pm

N.K. Jemisin

IN this paper, I analyze the breeding programs that affect the two main characters of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and N. K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*, Offred and Syenite, and how their explanations of their moment of sex with, respectively, the Commander and Alabaster are handled. From this analysis, I argue that we must take into account narrative authority and systemic oppression within systemic oppression when seeking to improve oppressed people's lives and change our society.

With the recent political landscape within the United States and multimedia adaptations of the book (e.g., the award-winning Hulu show, an opera that opened in Boston, and a sequel coming in September 2019), *The Handmaid’s Tale* has seen a resurgence in popularity. The text provides readers with a world that has limited the rights and freedoms of women. When the Republic of Gilead rose to power in the aftermath of a terrorist attack that decimated more than half the ruling body of the United States government, the Republic utilized militaristic tactics to seize control of the nation and suspend the Constitution and the rule of law. While rebuilding the government, the leaders of Gilead answered the growing problem of pollutants, biowarfare, and radiation causing women to be infertile by developing an idea that mimicked the Old Testament’s use of a handmaid who was given to the patriarch of the family to lie with and bear the man’s seed in order for an infertile woman to have children through surrogacy.

Households of the upper classes in Gilead are strategically composed around this Abrahamic concept: a man is the patriarch of the house; his Wife is the matriarch; and a Handmaid is the woman meant to provide the womb so the infertile Wife can have a child. In the tale presented in the text, the Handmaid is named Offred, and she is literally the property of her Commander—of Fred. Throughout the day, she is given menial chores to keep her busy, but her main purpose is to participate in the Ceremony, so her eggs will

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hopefully be fertilized. Her life is kept simplistic so she can provide her body as an incubation chamber. In her own words, Handmaids “are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood 96).

Even though Handmaids are severely mistreated and meant only to fulfil a societal purpose, the text gives us a more nuanced view when taking Offred’s actual recollection of the Ceremony into account:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (Atwood 94)

At the beginning of this passage, Offred goes to great lengths to dehumanize and remove her own agential body, and thereby her agential authority, in the Ceremony. Instead of declaring it is her entire body the Commander is fucking, she clarifies it as just “the lower part of my body” (Atwood 94). By doing this, she removes her upper body and presence from the Ceremony. It is not her breast, mouth, or other sexually arousing part of her upper body that the Commander is invested in; he simply needs her for her reproductive organs—the lower part. In declaring this specific part of her body, Offred removes her agential presence from the action, thereby removing herself completely from the act. She is not in control, and she recognizes that.

Additionally, Offred is very particular in her diction. She goes to great lengths to describe how the Ceremony is not making love. Making love for Offred is something special—something that requires two people completely committing themselves to each other. Instead of making love, she uses a vulgarity to describe what is happening to her body. The use of fucking shows her feelings about what is happening to her. She is opposed to it. Because she must remove herself from the action, she holds disdain for it, marring the action with the harsh vulgarity.

As she continues to search for a term to describe to the listener what is happening, she uses the words copulating and rape. To copulate means “to couple, conjoin, link together” (OED. Offred makes it clear that she doesn’t see this moment between her and the Commander as one that forms a relationship between the two. It has to be fucking because it is the action that is happening—in Offred’s mind, to fuck is simple vaginal penetration.
nothing more, nothing less. Offred makes glaringly clear here with the disclosure that it is not copulating: she is not connected to this action at all. In addition, she tries to use the word *rape* to describe her situation, but quickly explains that it couldn’t be rape because she sees the action as something she’s consented to. She has chosen the path of the Handmaid and that choice leads her to believe it is not rape.

In the longer version of this paper, I walk the reader through the argument that the Ceremony *is* actually rape, even though Offred declares it not to be, because of the constrained choices that lead her to becoming a Handmaid. Due to time constraints, I will not go into that argument; however, it is key to note that considering it *fucking* over *copulating* and *rape* elucidates exactly what Offred is attempting to do in relating her story. Instead of just naming what is happening, Offred is trying to take control of the situation and have the authority to narrate her own tale. By using the specific word *fucking*, Offred is able to use her voice to declare what it is, thereby taking a measure of control over her experience. For her, naming what is happening grants her power in this situation—power over her own life and what is happening to her. The act of deliberately naming the action *fucking* grants Offred power over the action in her own retelling of it.

While *The Handmaid’s Tale* provides us with a way to see how a character gains power over an action through her use of narrative presence, *The Fifth Season* gives us the chance to see how a character in the same situation gains authority by removing herself and her breeding partner out of the society that constrains them.

Pivotal to the storyline with Syenite is the breeding program that the Fulcrum initiates to create node stations that protect the continent from earthquakes and other geological catastrophes. In order to produce powerful orogenes, the Fulcrum pairs Alabaster, a ten-ring orogene, with other prominent orogenes. From their union, children of immense power are born. These children are taken from Alabaster and his mate and are forced into becoming node workers, orogenes who have been mutilated and lobotomized in order to act only on instinct to quell the seismic activities in their sectors. Syenite is a promising orogene who is forced to breed with Alabaster in order to create a powerful child for one of these node stations.

In a like manner to Offred, the explanation for the sexual encounter between inseminated and inseminator is filled with precise diction that can provide generative inquiry into questions of authority and oppression:

In the morning they copulate. There are no better words she can use for the act—vulgarities don’t fit because it’s too dull, and euphemisms aren’t necessary to
downplay its intimacy because it’s not intimate. It’s perfunctory, an exercise, like the stretches she’s learned to do before they start riding for the day. More energetic this time because he’s rested first; she almost enjoys it, and he actually makes some noise when he comes. But that’s it. When they’re done he lies there watching while she gets up and does a quick basin bath beside the fire. She’s so used to this that she starts when he speaks. “Why do you hate me?” (122)

Unlike with Offred, the word used here is *copulate*. For the narrator of this text, it is important that these two characters are coming together, conjoining, and linking. They are copulating to do a certain task, create a child, but their copulation is also leading them to destinies in the text that take them out of the hierarchical system that controls their sexual organs and acts through its breeding program—a future the narrator already knows. Additionally, the text recognizes that this act isn’t simply a harsh action (for a vulgarity to describe it, like *fucking* as Offred used) or a close and intimate action (*making love*, as Offred also didn’t use). The word *copulate* is used simply as a filler for the action.

However, if we take into account the narrator of the entire series, Hoa, then we will be able to better understand the use of the word *copulate* and its deeper meaning. In the final moments of the first book, Jemisin reveals to her reader that Hoa, the stone eater who has been accompanying Essun on her journey, is the *I* in the second-person, Essun-focused portions of the novel (443). As the series continues, we deduce that he is narrating all portions of the text, although in third person, since Hoa didn’t personally know the *she*-Syenite and *she*-Damaya like he knows the *you*-Essun. In this way, Hoa’s use of *copulating* is a use of the broad sense of the word. To Hoa, the joining of Syenite and Alabaster is a move in Essun’s history that allows the rest of the plot to happen; by copulating, Syenite and Alabaster become intertwined with each other, which leads them to Allia and then Meov and, ultimately, to Essun encountering Hoa and thus bringing about the end of the world, that has already been discussed earlier. By linking together Syenite and Alabaster in a sexual way, the Fulcrum, to Hoa, brought about its own destruction and Hoa’s companionship with Essun and what he is recounting in the text.

Even with the understanding that Hoa is narrating the text, the forced copulation between Syenite and Alabaster still remains a fruitful inquiry. There is no *choice* when it comes to Syenite and Alabaster copulating; they are forced into it by the system that oppresses them, the Fulcrum. This is why the text considers the copulation like a daily ritual, something that just happens and then the day is continued. Both Syenite and Alabaster are caught up in the same systemic oppression, and so, while both have chosen this life over
death by disobeying the Fulcrum’s orders, they are still trapped in the same situation and environment.

In comparing the Syenite–Alabaster matching with Offred–Commander, we discover that the difference between the two is the influence and hierarchy that society has placed on the sets of characters. The Commander is obviously higher than Offred in hierarchy, holding control over her; therefore, in telling her own story through the recorded tapes, Offred claims authority through the use of the word fucking. In the case of Syenite and Alabaster, both are products of their societal situation and innate difference, their power to be orogenes. While within that system, Alabaster holds more authority and power than Syenite does because of his being a ten-ringer, they still are both controlled by the same oppressive system, the Fulcrum, and a society that despises orogenes.

This reading then allows us to better understand why Alabaster asks Syenite why she hates him. To Alabaster, Syenite and himself are on the same plain of oppression. The Fulcrum is what is oppressing them and holding them together. But Syenite cannot see the system on the outside of her current system—Alabaster is higher in authority than she in the Fulcrum’s ranking system of orogenes. The Fulcrum has dual systems of oppression: the first is the ring system set up to differentiate the orogenes from each other; the second, the oppression of orogenes in general. As a society, the people of the Stillness have systemically oppressed orogenes. Syenite hates Alabaster because he is higher in authority within the Fulcrum than Syenite, and as such, she feels that Alabaster can end what is happening to her but doesn’t. In contrast, Alabaster recognizes that the ring system is a system of oppression meant to stop the orogenes from fighting back against the larger system of oppression—the society that created the Fulcrum.

Whereas The Handmaid’s Tale gives us a simple hierarchy, The Fifth Season shows us a hierarchy within a hierarchy, arguing that sometimes characters cannot escape one systemic abuse when they are so wrapped up in the smaller systemic abuse that safeguards the larger one. Alabaster’s ten-rings versus Syenite’s five-rings creates a vortex that Syenite is sucked into believing—even though Syenite proves herself to be just as powerful as Alabaster in utilizing an obelisk to destroy Allia, eliminate the volcano she created in Allia’s place, and decimate the Fulcrum’s forces sent to recover her and Alabaster on Meov. Syenite places Alabaster above herself, thereby creating a hierarchy between the two, even though she is powerful like Alabaster.

By comparing these two texts, we see that authority and oppression must take into account different levels and systems of oppression that surround a person. In The Handmaid’s
Tale, Offred gained power and authority by using her agency to define the terms of what was happening in the Ceremony. In The Fifth Season, Syenite and Alabaster are affected by the society and have no control over it; instead of using agency to define the term, Syenite simply moves on from the term, giving it time but ultimately conceding that it doesn’t need a definition because it is simply what is happening. It takes Syenite being removed from the oppression of the Fulcrum for her to realize the oppression of the entire system and recognize her own power as equivalent or almost equivalent to that of Alabaster’s—and, tellingly, to enjoy sex for the first time.

Both texts nuance themselves when we compare the narrative viewpoints. Offred’s text is in the first-person; we know she is gaining authority by declaring the Ceremony as fucking because it is her own voice. However, within the text, this first-person point of view becomes complicated: in a substantial, twelve-page historical note at the end of the novel, the text shows that the entire tale has been the work of male professors who found Offred’s recordings and are sharing them with fellow colleagues at a conference (Atwood 299–311). It complicates her first-person narrative because it is a first-person female narrative transcribed and delivered to the world by two male professors. The text subverts itself and asks whether the tale in question is really how Offred would have wanted it delivered or has it been tweaked and edited by the professors—ultimately questioning what the basis of storytelling truth and narrative are.

Like The Handmaid’s Tales’ complication of Offred’s voice, Syenite’s third-person narrative is complicated as well. As a third-person narrative, we are not as intimate with Syenite’s choices. The text reveals that the entire story is being narrated by Hoa, a male-oriented stone eater (Jemisin 443). This complicates the narrative authority because it shows that the events aren’t being told by the actor, just as the events are not being shared by the actor in The Handmaid’s Tale. Instead, it is the events as someone else saw them told to the person who actually experienced them—Hoa-spelling, if you will.

To conclude: in comparing these two texts, we have touched on questions of narrative authority and systemic hierarchy. I believe firmly, like Frederic Jameson, that dystopian literature “defamiliarize[s] and restructure[s] our experiences of our own present” (Jameson, 286.) This grasp of narrative authority restructures our understanding of looking at our society’s oppression and who is telling that story of oppression. From this comparative analysis, we can understand, for example, that sometimes one person tells a story (Offred), but that story is then controlled by others (Professor James Darcy Pieixoto). Narrative authority in The Handmaid’s Tale moves from Offred to Professor Pieixoto to Margaret
Atwood, the author. In comparison, narrative authority in *The Fifth Season* moves from first Syenite to Damaya-Syenite-Essun (when the reader discovers that all three characters are one) to Hoa to N. K. Jemisin, the author. The levels are complicated in Jemisin’s text, but both texts show that narrative authority can be claimed by those who are not the main actors or the main subjects being oppressed. We must turn to our society from this and ask questions of who is telling a story and for what reason are they telling it. In the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we must interrogate our academic telling of stories of oppression; in the case of *The Fifth Season*, we must interrogate our personal telling of stories of oppression.

In addition, the new understanding of systemic hierarchy—that we must not only look at large, demographic hierarchies, but also within relationship hierarchies and oppressive systems within oppressive systems—allows us to restructure how we analyze systems of oppression. For example, instead of simply saying all queer people are oppressed, we must look deeper into queer communities and cultures to see how queer people within queer communities and cultures cause each other to not see the greater oppression of the entire group. We must grasp that within the oppressed category “queer” there are a multitude of oppressed categories that must be recognized and critically approached.

In taking these two questions in concert with each other, we can see that many of our current views of systemic oppression must be viewed through what they are relative to. Instead of simply essentializing one demographic and expressing that it is oppressed, Atwood’s and Jemisin’s texts show that we must understand what is oppressing a demographic from the outside and how oppression from within stops the oppressed from either seeing the way out, as Syenite couldn’t. Our work is not done by simply saying we or other groups are oppressed; we must become self-aware of our own societies and selves.

In order to free ourselves and others from systems of oppression, we must discover how the narrative is told and what systems are within systems. For Syenite, this realization and freedom finally came when she was outside of the oppression of the Fulcrum. Offred’s freedom came from making tapes that explained her story to the world that were then subsumed into an academic presentation. But, of course, as Offred’s tale cautions, “freedom, like everything else, is relative” (Atwood 231). And so is oppression.

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THE notion that science fiction is heavily imbricated with the colonial project has been thoroughly discussed by, for example, John Rieder, Michelle Reid, Kodwo Eshun, Grace L. Dillon, Istvan Csicer-Ronay Jr., and Greg Grewell. Given that the very nature of the narrative form, tropes and conflicts are rooted in and routed through the imperialist project, the danger then becomes that those who wish to make use of these techniques and forms run the very real risk of reinforcing them. So, is it possible for, for example, that writers from the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora shaped by sociocultural circumstances in which they have been determined as objects of imperialism can dismantle the master’s house using his tools? The direct, simplified answer is yes. Nonetheless, it is worth considering that even though the response is straightforward, the execution of that textual resistance may not be. As Hopkinson observes, ‘massa’s tools’ can be used instead to “undertake massive renovations to build a house of me own” (qtd. in Reid 8).

The presence of aliens, time travel, and dystopic societies has helped us to consider how imperialist legacies have been written across our understanding of subjectivity, time and social relations. In exploring these three features, conventional narratives of science fiction as several scholars argue, repeat imperialist desires and anxieties concerning possession and dispossession of bodies, space and knowledge. As such, we have become accustomed to othered bodies, locations and knowledge systems produced to serve acquisitive values.

Patricia Hill Collins explains othering as a process by which power is taken from one group by another through first identifying difference and then inscribing a hierarchy of value to those differences. The systemic reinforcement of this binary opposition which demonises while conveniently objectifying difference turns the other into both a transgressive and necessary social presence: “As the Others of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries” (Hill
Collins 70). Rieder’s discussion about the ideological frames for science fiction identifies that the twin influences of capitalist-industrialism and imperialism replay in its canon, “popular anxieties about becoming the victims rather than the wielders of imperial . . . power” fundamentally, the anxiety of being othered (26).

Postcolonial studies have shown us that this exercise of power begins over material resources but even more crucially relies on framing the social, cultural, ontological, even the temporal as material to be claimed, possessed and then exploited. To be other in the vocabulary of capitalism-imperialism is to be a possession with the attendant result that all the features that contribute to one’s sense of being—relationships, culture, place and time—are also possessed by those responsible for this othering. The novels I have selected to be representative of Anglophone Caribbean speculative fiction each attempt to grapple with the implications of ‘otherness’ and the redemptive possibilities of that position instead of this perpetuation of an imperialising anxiety.

In Tobias Buckell’s The Apocalypse Ocean and Stephanie Saulter’s Gemsigns, otherness is embodied literally throughout the societies/worlds they have created. Buckell and Saulter have made all the bodies within the narratives ‘others.’ By this, I mean that the narrative gesture of privileging a particular body or state of being is withheld from the reader. Instead, these texts make use of shifting narrative perspectives that attempt to account for our familiar unhealthy responses to difference.

In Gem Signs, Saulter presents a far-flung future on Earth, set in the metropolitan space of London, in which the defining human social dilemma is the troubling presence of genetically modified human beings. The dilemma is produced by two significant, interrelated factors—the purpose for the genetic modifications and the treatment of non-GEM (Genetically modified) human bodies. Due to a debilitating disease, spread through communication technology ubiquitous to our early 21st century, human bodies have been incapacitated. This disease provides the impetus to move from biological procreation to reproduction through genetic engineering as a matter of survival. As a result, post-21st century human society consists almost completely of genetically engineered bodies. GEM bodies are designed as technological extensions of machinery in complete service to the needs and goals of non-GEMS. However, the designation of GEMS is not applicable to all modified bodies—only to those created specifically for labour—all others are designated as norms. The economic crisis produced by the Syndrome justifies the familiar capitalist arrangement in which certain bodies become commodities to be sourced, engineered and exploited: “In the uncompromising calculus of care, One for You—One for Us was a bargain”
Buckell’s *Apocalypse Ocean* is the fourth novel in his Xenowealth series, the latter is an apt overarching label given his comprehensive attention to a spectrum of foreignness, expressed through displacement and embodied in genetically-designed human slaves, cyborg resistance fighters, non-humanoid aliens, human diaspora in space, a biped black hole entity, and technologically advanced beings that make up a collective called the Structure. *Apocalypse Ocean* delineates power struggles across planets and realities that intersect with the one-woman battle waged by Kay, an adolescent human girl, against all those who threaten to return her to the state of powerlessness she experienced as a genetically engineered overseer of human slave labour. Kay, whose name is derived from her location in the assembly line of human labour—she is known as the ‘third child of room K of the Caretakers hut’ (Saulter 96), observes the enforced hierarchy of human society under the non-humanoid enslavers: “So the Nesaru had bred humans into a variety of forms to serve them, to create a calorie-based slave society instead of a fuel-based one. Like breeds of dogs, the Nesaru rapidly genetically engineered, bred, and reshaped humanity into Oxmen, Runners, Servants, Pickers, Calculors, Luminoids and many more” (Saulter 38). Even though they are all genetically manipulated—their bodies designed to serve a function that effectively objectifies them—the engineered differences are used to perpetuate the notion that some bodies are more valuable than others.

So, both narratives centralise these othered bodies and do so with genetically altered beings. Reider’s discussion of the hybrid-cyborg observes science fiction’s attention to the “artificial or altered human being” (111) which, he goes on to argue, serves as the “hyperbolic extrapolation of racial division…[that] plays upon the imaginary differences produced by racist ideology to buttress racial practices” (112). Even though Reider’s discussion specifically identifies racism, it is possible to see the applicability of this image to several practices of othering, such as gender, sexuality, disability, etc. as has been famously done by Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*. In it, Haraway speaks to a perspective that highlights the “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction” (7). This confusion of boundaries and suggestion of hybridity resonates within postcolonial thought, where the concept of hybridity is used to both interrogate and validate difference. A familiar signpost in this discussion is Homi Bhabha’s conceptualisation of hybridity, which is tied to his observations on mimicry. With this conceptual relationship, we get to examine the illusion of fixity made evident in strategies produced by the colonizer’s dependence on “this potentially confrontational Other” for identity-constitution. To provide an additional
way of looking at how these nexus of ideas around hybridity are deployed for a postcolonial Caribbean, I would like to introduce Wilson Harris's concept of regenerative hybridisation and I do so with the hope of exploring the relationship between bodies and time that come out of my reading of these two speculative narratives.

Wilson Harris—a Guyanese critic and writer—developed what he termed a cross-cultural theory of the imagination in which he seeks to identify dialogue between the Caribbean condition, with its experience of imperialism, and human societies across cultures and time. One of the principal areas of Harris's discussion is the manner in which the regenerative, exploratory and communal elements of a cross-cultural imagination engage with “conquistadorial legacies” on the grounds of history/memory and identity. Harris is very clear about the necessary role that the imagination fulfils in speaking to the disposessions fostered by what he calls a “pervasive conviction in absolutes.” For Harris, hybridisation is an activity that necessarily implies a regenerative element because, as he sees it, it is a process of innovative re-assembly. This regenerative element also identifies the capacity for “buried” or passive elements to become reassembled. For example, he is able to speak of the extant influence of pre-Columbian voices within language: “[t]hus you have a certain kind of visible text and then you have other layers beneath that go right the way down into peculiar absences which I believe are alive” (117). Regenerative hybridisation not only suggests an arc of community across cultural texts of diverse regions, it also refers to an apprehension of community that continually brings the past into dialogue with the present. At this point, I am attempting to put my Harrisian-inflected reading of otherness and time in dialogue with Fredric Jameson's argument concerning science fiction's representation of time and Kodwo Eshun's response to the imperialising ethos embedded in that representation. I do so in order to indicate the intersection of re-imagined futures, returns to dystopic presents, and revisionary pasts as well as their hopeful significance in Buckell's and Saulter's narratives.

For *Apocalypse Ocean* and *Gemsigns*, the preoccupation with otherness relocated to the future in the form of altered human bodies illustrates rehearsals of resistance instead of the “fantasy of empire” played out in adventure narratives of appropriation, acquisition and control. Greg Grewell in “Colonizing the Universe” distils these fantasies of control down to two forms: “a fantasy projected onto aliens who intend to take over or enslave the human body...or a not so fantastic reality in which humans mean to control humans” (27)—both of these fantasies are ostensibly played out in these narratives. However, *Apocalypse Ocean*’s perspectives of diverse others, such as Kay, the prosthetically enhanced Nashara,
the “homeless” street thief, Tiago, consistently interrogate and resist the attractive guise of that control. Buckell’s nuanced treatment does not rely solely on a good versus bad frame (aliens are bad—humans are good). As Grewell points out “most aliens and [monsters] are to differing degrees, personifications of human actualities and creations” (34). Buckell uses for example the relationship that the border character, Tiago, has with Nashara and Kay to highlight the already inherent duality of the altered body as both threat and promise/powerful and powerless. Both Kay and Nashara use their enhancements to work against hegemonic dominance. Kay in particular exemplifies how her specific enhancements designed for human manipulation are now being used against those who seek to control humans. But, as Tiago observes after working with Nashara: “She was indeed a kindred soul to Kay. Someone who wove the fate of everyone around them. People were things to ‘acquire’ and direct . . . . They were both scary” (44).

In *Gemsigns*, the division between GEMs and norms is undermined with the ambiguity Saulter develops around two of the main characters, Aryel Morningstar—a GEM advocate—and a found child, Gabriel, concerning their designation as either GEM or norm. Around this ambiguity, the narrative pulls together the views of religious adherents, media, the genetic corporations, the GEM community as well as scientific observations that repeat both the perceived threat and potential promise of the altered body as other. The narrative produces through these forms collectively a tension between treating the other as neighbour or kin alongside the familiar view of the other as alien. For example, Gabriel is found and informally fostered by a GEM couple. The courageous generosity of this couple’s gesture is constantly juxtaposed in the narrative to the strain in GEM-norm relations—the difficulty, as one of the science-trained characters expresses of how “people on both sides… find the other weird and scary” (Saulter 34). But yet here is the obvious well-functioning hybrid family making it work even though “it’s been twelve thousand years since there has been more than one strand to the human race, [so] no one knows what the rules should be” (Saulter 34). I believe these narratives show that the repetition of the latter and familiar response to otherness not only produces a fantasy that facilitates conquest, it enforces a dystopic nightmare of human control that seeks to produce a debilitating homogeneity.

So this is where I present my reading (or perhaps misreading) of Fredric Jameson’s notion of science fiction’s treatment of the future as the present/past. Jameson’s argument that our inability to imagine futures (specifically utopic ones) is demonstrated through science fiction’s tendency to “apprehend the present as history.” In that case, these narratives are outlining the presents/presences that are informing their imagined/imaginary futures.
According to *Gemsigns*, the present is the Squats—human bodies corralled into ghettos that are circumscribed by State surveillance and violence. For *Apocalypse Ocean*, it is human diasporas produced by long-standing oppression and exploitation, forced to make their home in inhospitable social circumstances, dealing with harsh, unforgiving climates—in which they still manage to be resourceful—surrounded by powerful, material-focused elites that reinforce this position by living at their expense and are willingly obliviousness to the cost of those decisions. Additionally, this narrative focuses on the community of displaced people who live on an island where advanced technology can only sporadically work and is trafficked through the island by powerful off-island organisations who see its physical location as a site to leverage their very expansive invasions of alien territories. So basically, migrant ghettoization, ecological disaster and the production of the Caribbean-Third World. Nonetheless, dystopia does not mean ‘fixed in a not-good place.’ Mark Rose explains that dystopias are “in a sense stories of possession and like, all such tales, they are concerned with freedom” (167). But instead of the focus being on an individual attempting to struggle against an oppressive totalitarianism, these novels present a network of collective efforts to push back against the engineering of these dystopias. As Graham J. Murphy points out in his entry on dystopia in the *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, the genre’s traditional tropes are now used to “go on to explore ways to change the present system so that . . . culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health” (475).

So if the future is the present turned into the past, what happens to the past? According to Eshun, “the powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past” (289). This seems as though the past is treated like an artefact, relegated to a sterile, ornamental uselessness and the disempowered live with this hollowed-out object devoid of access to a user-oriented technologically-driven future. Eshun’s thoughtful discussion points to the necessity of what he calls “countermemorial mediated practices” to address this dispossession of the past (298) produced by the conventional practice of “engineering feedback between [a] preferred future and [a] becoming present” (290). Several scholars such as Kamau Brathwaite, H. Adlai Murdoch, Joan Anim-Addo among others have observed that one of the tendencies in Anglophone Caribbean writing is a continual return to or engagement with the past. I observe this tendency in these narratives to return, in particular, to traumatic encounters of the past and re-vision them. However, it is not a straightforward rewriting for either of
these narratives. Saulter begins the novel with a historical documentation of the past which has produced the *Gemsigns* present relocated to the future (so it is really the becoming present). In it, the GEM injustices are uncovered in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the abolitionist movement (Saulter 61). The re-vision of that traumatic past occurs with the social response to these injustices, which, in the narrative, is widespread outrage and mourning. So, within this becoming present is Saulter’s gesture to a preferred future based on an acknowledgment of a traumatic past. Similarly, with Buckell’s narrative, traces of plantation slavery and colonial resistance inform the becoming present he outlines. When Tiago encounters the alien collective—the Structure—he learns that they have been at war with other powerful aliens who are part of the collective but have broken off into nationalistic clumps and reached into the “wild space” inhabited by the humans in order to establish supremacy for themselves. On reaching the wild territory, these aliens enslaved the humans. When the decision was made to retake the area, the Collective discovered that the humans had already unseated their invading oppressors. This re-visioning of the anticolonial struggle removes the political and financial intervention of colonial powers in the design of Caribbean political independence. In Buckell’s becoming present that points to a preferred future, when the colonial powers got around to the notion of Caribbean national independence, those countries had already wrested it for themselves (Buckell 201-202).

In order to hopefully draw together my meandering argument and bring it to a much needed conclusion, I end with a quote from Maria Fernandez’s article on postcolonial media theory: “A cyborg is not without origins. Thus, both postcolonial studies and electronic media theory view identity as multiple and open-ended, but they differ drastically in focus. In postcolonial studies theories of identity emphasize the social-identities are historically rooted, open-ended, collective political projects” (6). The othered bodies in Caribbean speculative fiction are not without origins—they are historically rooted, open-ended and collective. Science fiction’s engagement with time, in dialogue with these bodies, can allow for readings of the future, the present and the past not as linear encounters but layered within each other. Therefore, Harris’s view that ‘you have a certain kind of visible text and then you have other layers beneath that go right the way down into peculiar absences that are alive’ seems to me to be right at home in the reading of Anglophone Caribbean speculative fiction.
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Liu Cixin’s Alien Encounter SF as Postcolonial Fantasy

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Alien Encounters

Introduction

THE alien has been the most versatile trope of science fiction. Among all the different faces that the alien takes in the history of SF, a colonial face can be argued to be the most common one. Many critics have noticed the close relation between alien encounter stories and colonial history. For example, as John Rieder famously argues in Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction (2008), colonialism plays a major role in the formation of early science fiction, which “articulates the structures of knowledge and power provided by colonialism”. Whereas earlier, golden age alien encounter stories, like Clarke’s Childhood’s End, are often saturated with colonial ideologies and fantasies, latter texts have manifested some new twists to the old trope of the alien other as the colonialist.

This paper proposes to look at Chinese SF writer Liu Cixin’s alien encounter stories, such as the Santi (lit. “three-body”) trilogy—The Three-Body Problem, The Dark Forest, Death’s End—and short stories like “Devourer” and “Poetry Cloud,” as postcolonial fantasy. Postcolonial fantasy could be considered as part of postcolonial literature, defined in a broad fashion in The Empire Writes Back as writings in cultures that are “affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Postcolonial fantasy not only denotes a fantastical literary subgenre of postcolonial literature, but also the fact that these writings often question and subvert colonial ideologies and also manifest the fantasies of the colonized. I argue that Liu’s alien encounter stories are “fantastic” “resolutions” of colonial trauma and anxieties about technology and dehumanization, and they manifest the fantasy of the alien’s going native.

Alien Invasion as a Metaphor of Colonial Resistance

ONE characteristic that defines Liu’s alien encounter stories as postcolonial fantasy is that
they are alien invasion stories that work as metaphors of colonial resistance. It is stated in the foreword of *The Three-Body Problem* that “the author tries to tell the modern history of China replayed on the scale of light years.” The modern histories that are replayed in the series not only include the Cultural Revolution, but also the very beginning of China's modern history, which is resulted from the encounter with Western imperial powers around the mid nineteenth century.

The aliens’ failed invasion of earth in the *Santi* trilogy could be argued as symbolizing imperialist powers’ (especially imperial Japan’s) failed total colonization of China. In the story, there is even a direct comparison between the human-trisolaran war and the war between late Qing China and imperial Japan. When the main characters are discussing whether to focus on the development of media-propelled spacecraft or non-media radiation-drive spacecraft in preparation for the war with the Trisolarans, one character who argues for the latter says that depending on media-propelled spacecraft in future interstellar wars will be like repeating the tragedy of the Sino-Japanese war (215).

**Fantastical Resolutions of Postcolonial Trauma**

Except that Liu’s alien encounter stories are metaphors of China’s colonial resistance, they are postcolonial fantasy mainly in that they serve as fantastical resolutions of postcolonial trauma and anxieties. One of the main anxieties concerns science and technology in the colonial encounter as the defining criteria of civilization. The image of technology is at the core of the intertwined colonial ideology and discourse of time, evolution, and progress. As Jessica Langer concludes in *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*, “[t]he colonial ideology of progress includes the drive for technological process, and figures time as linear, with technologically progressive societies pushing forward and leaving others behind” (130). John Reider has argued that during a colonial encounter, the colonized are often denied “real contemporaneity,” and technology “is the primary way of representing this confrontation of past and present or of projecting it into a confrontation of present and future” (38).

Liu’s alien encounter stories often reflect an anxiety of the alien’s definition of civilization based solely on technological level. For example, in the short story “The Village Schoolteacher,” the life and death of a whole planet depends on the aliens’ verdict of whether human civilization is standard in terms of science and technology. The story starts by depicting a very not-so-sci-fi scene in a primary school classroom in a poor village in China. The teacher was teaching Newton’s three laws of motion, when suddenly he collapsed, because of overwork and dedication to education. While the students were crying beside
his body, they were beamed into another space, where they are asked a bunch of questions which they can't answer, such as “what is the smallest constitute unit of matter that you’ve found,” “what is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter,” “what is the energy source of a star.” It turns out, they are beamed by a group of aliens who are trying to test if Earth has a civilization of 3C or higher before determining whether to destroy it or not. Earth narrowly escaped destruction after the students finally answered several questions correctly, questions about Newton’s three laws of motion.

It is indeed a narrow escape. If the teacher hadn’t taught the children Newton’s three laws of motion (which were the only questions they answered correctly), the alliance would have destroyed the solar system; if a region of even less educated people had been selected, or if the alliance had come during the medieval period, or if a zone of only animals had been selected, the alliance would have destroyed the solar system without hesitation. The way that the encounter with the alien is presented as a deadly quiz reflects an anxiety towards technology as the criteria as civilization and shows how encounters with the colonial other and their system of discourse could result in the dehumanization and destruction of the colonized.

Another story that manifests this anxiety towards technology more explicitly is “The Poetry Cloud.” In the story, the aliens divide levels of civilization based on the number of dimensions that they can enter. Only those which can enter six dimensions or more are qualified to be called civilizations. The alien that can enter eleven dimensions is called “God” by the alien that can only enter four dimensions. In the story, “God” is passing by the solar system, and met the human character Yiyi. The former calls humans “foul worms,” for humans’ not-so-long history is filled with filth and atrocity (59), and humans can only enter three dimensions, thus are not considered a civilization at all. As can be seen, humans are dehumanized in this encounter with the aliens. However, this ideology is questioned in the story by pitting the omnipotence of technology as believed by the alien against poetry. The aliens believe that technology can transcend anything. Yiyi does not believe that and argues that the best poems written by ancient Chinese poets can’t be transcended. Thus, god will write poems that transcend those, to prove the omnipotence of technology to the “ignorant” humans. The rest of the story revolves around the suspense of whether the technology of “God” can transcend the arts of human.

This conflict between alien technology and native art is reflective of a recurrent theme in Chinese science fiction since the late Qing period, which is, in Nathaniel Isaacson's words, the “attempt[s] to come to terms with the contradictions between ‘indigenous tradition’ and
a ‘foreign modernity’”(4). “The Poetry Cloud” plays out this contradiction by representing “indigenous tradition” with traditional Chinese poetry and “foreign modernity” with alien technology.

The Fantasy of “Going Native”

“POETRY Cloud” not only reflects the anxiety about technology by presenting a confrontation between alien technology and native art, but also reflects a fantasy of the alien/colonial other’s “going native.” In the story, this conflict between alien technology and native art is solved by the alien's appreciation of human art, through its becoming human and “going native.” “Going native” is an age-old fear of the colonists that “the civilized, the conquerors and missionaries” are turned into “dogs, monster and man-eaters” (Lestringant, 326). Here, when it’s applied as a fantasy of the colonized, it means the assuming of the native identity, culture, lifestyle and so on by the colonists.

In the story, the process where “God” tries every way to transcend those poems is also one where s/he gradually goes native. Originally, God was a ball of pure energy. S/he does not have a body, therefore, does not feel pain, hunger, coldness, warmth, and other sensations, and therefore s/he does not feel frustration, anger, love, longing, envy, and other emotions, which are the life force of art. In order to write poetry, s/he turned her/himself into a human form. After acquiring a human body, God clothes him/herself with a gown in the Tang Dynasty style made with white silk, and exclaims: “I, Li Bai.” He considers himself as the “Li Bai” who will surpass Li Bai, the most famous ancient Chinese poet.

When he is about to write a poem, he felt something is missing. He then made (again from pure energy) a jar of wine and several wine bowls. It is known to most Chinese readers that the great poet Li Bai is famous for being an alcoholic and writes the best poems while drunk. And then God got drunk and passed out in his own vomit. As can be seen, in this process of becoming human, God became the opposite of the god-like image, the image of Western modernity itself, which is comprised of control, order, and intellectual power.

Two months later, when Yiyi meets God again, he has changed significantly. His hair is shaggy, his beard long, his face tanned, with a cloth bag on his left shoulder and a wine bottle in his right hand. His gown is ragged, and so is his straw sandal. He has, in his own words, “returned to nature” (70). He no longer makes things from pure energy like magic, but in a more “natural” way. The beef stew he brings to share with Yiyi is hand made by himself using the ancient Chinese Pingyao Beef method (originated sometime around the mid-fourteenth century), the secret recipe of which, he tells Yiyi, is urine alkali. He has also
built several wineries, and the wine he brings this time, Green Bamboo Leaf Liquor, is made by soaking bamboo leaf in fenjiu (an ancient Chinese alcohol, whose written record goes back to the 7th century). In a way, “Li Bai” has become even more “native” than Yiyi, who is less knowledgeable concerning these traditional Chinese cultures.

“Li Bai” has written some poems, but he doesn’t think these poems could transcend those of the real Li Bai. So he decided to solve the problem in another way. Instead of trying to write poems that are better than those of Li Bai, he made a computer program that wrote all poems, every possible poem that could ever be written in the future. Of course, those that transcend Li Bai’s will exist among them. In fact, in this way, “Li Bai” not only transcends Li Bai, but also terminates the art of Chinese poetry itself. Any newly emerged poet will only be a plagiarist, for all the poems s/he writes will have already been written by “Li Bai.”

Although it seems in the end that the alien has won the contest between technology and art, “God” admits that he sees the limit of technology now. Although he has written the top work of Chinese poetry (among the poetry cloud), he could not get hold of it, for he still could not build a poetry evaluation software to search out the best poem from the poetry cloud.

Conclusion

As can be seen, many of Liu’s alien encounter stories could be considered postcolonial fantasy, in that they are fantastical resolutions of postcolonial trauma. The Santi trilogy and “Poetry Cloud” reflect the anxiety of technology as the sole criteria for civilization in colonial encounter, and the fantasy that the alien/west could go native and Chinese tradition and culture could be appreciated as having intrinsic values that can’t be replaced by Western modernity. The concept of postcolonial fantasy is useful in recognizing the vast varieties of postcolonial literature, and in recognizing how the classic tropes of science fiction has been reinvigorate by postcolonial nations around the world in the twenty-first century.

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Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction From Around the World

Rachel Cordasco


As American readers and scholars have become more intensely interested in global speculative fiction (sf) over the past few decades, some have recognized the need for a critical overview and analysis of those texts. Dale Knickerbocker and the essay authors in Lingua Cosmica have stepped forward to fulfill this need, offering readers and scholars in-depth, extensive information about some of the most important sf authors currently (for the most part) at work around the globe. From the “planetary imagination” of Japanese author Sakyo Komatsu, to the philosophical speculations of Poland’s Jacek Dukaj, to Finnish author Johanna Sinisalo’s feminist dystopian vision, Lingua Cosmica introduces us to the themes, preoccupations, and trends emerging from a genre in which, in Knickerbocker’s introductory words, “the themes of exploration and encounters with others (extraterrestrial, technological, etc.) are so important” (viii).

Especially heartening for readers who follow world sf and note the dearth of recognition for it in US- and UK-based awards is Knickerbocker’s discussion early in his introduction about “world’s best” awards that are given almost exclusively to Anglophone texts. A collection like Lingua Cosmica may not directly change this state of affairs in the near future, but it will encourage sf scholars in particular, and academia in general, to recognize the value of world sf both for Anglophone readers’ understanding of the genre in its global context, and to write about it for both academic and lay audiences. After all, speculative fiction is still not seen as a genre worthy of study in many colleges and universities in the US and elsewhere. This collection will surely change that perception.

Lingua Cosmica includes essays on such diverse stylists as Cuba’s Daina Chaviano, Poland’s Jacek Dukaj, France’s Jean-Claude Dunyach, Germany’s Andreas Eschbach, Argentina’s Angélica Gorodischer, Japan’s Sakyo Komatsu, China’s Liu Cixin, Québec’s Laurent McAllister (Yves Meynard and Jean-Louis Trudel), Nigeria’s Olatunde Osunsanmi, Finland’s Johanna Sinisalo, and Russia’s Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. And while it is indeed tempting to ask “why are India or the Philippines not represented here?” or “where are the essays on Hebrew and Arabic sf, especially given the rise of the latter in recent
years?” we must also accept that this collection is not meant to be a comprehensive volume encompassing everything readers will ever need to know about contemporary global sf. Rather, the book is meant to serve as an introduction and a springboard to further work. Knickerbocker does raise the point that Linguë Cosmica leaves out certain traditions but asks us to dive into what is in front of us and advocate for even more books like this that will address those absences.

While all of the essays focus on one or two important authors (or filmmakers, in the case of Osunsanmi) and place them in the context of their linguistic and national sf traditions, some of them stand out in their ability to balance overviews of the author’s work in context and the ideas and preoccupations that influence their texts. The Chaviano, Dukaj, Eschbach, Cixin, and Strugatsky essays, in particular, are excellent studies that walk the line between academic studies and overviews geared toward the general reader.

In his study of Daína Chaviano’s work, Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo nimbly navigates the Cuban author’s fluid movement between “soft” science fiction and fantasy. Further, Redondo’s essay is a study not just of Chaviano but of how her work encapsulates the expression of sf in Cuba around the turn of the twenty-first century. Pawel Frelik, too, in his essay on Dukaj, situates the author in the tradition of Polish sf and Stanislaw Lem in particular, examining, in turn, Dukaj’s texts’ tendencies toward “genre-bending,” “world-building,” and “national time-traveling.” And while Chaviano and Dukaj are writing in language traditions (Spanish and Polish) with which American readers might be more familiar (because of the large number of translations from Spanish and the availability of many of Lem’s texts), Vibeke Rützou Peterson’s essay on the work of Andreas Eschbach will introduce American readers to many German sf authors they may never have heard about before, given that contemporary German sf in English is, indeed, dominated by Eschbach and texts that are marketed as “mainstream” rather than “sf” (such as works by Yoko Tawada and Daniel Kehlmann, for instance). Peterson makes up for a rather brief survey of Eschbach’s place in modern German sf with her fascinating critical reading of the author’s oeuvre, especially the role that Germany’s history of fascism plays in the author’s conceptualization of humanity’s potential interplanetary and technological future.

Mingwei Song’s essay on Liu Cixin and Yvonne Howell’s on the Strugatsky brothers both situate these authors in their national-historical contexts, a knowledge that readers may lack despite the popularity of these authors’ books. Thanks to Song, we learn about the development of Liu’s ideas about first contact and the place of human morality in an amoral universe. Howell, in turn, explores how the Strugatskys’ early life under a repressive Soviet
regime influenced the authors’ recognition of the “peculiar ‘science fictionality’ of Soviet culture in the twentieth century and beyond” (202) and how they offered alternatives in their fiction.

As anyone reading these essays will notice, the authors highlighted here don’t work solely within the sub-genre of “science fiction,” whether “hard” or “soft.” While Knickerbocker acknowledges this in his introduction, the inclusion of “science fiction” in the collection’s subtitle is somewhat misleading. Over the past several years, many critics and reviewers have started using the term “speculative fiction” to encompass science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, the Weird, and other subgenres. A broader term would perhaps draw even more readers and scholars to these essays.

And while *Lingua Cosmica* is a vital and much-needed resource for people interested in world sf and what is or is not in English, some of the essays could have been clearer about which works are already in English. Perhaps an appendix would have been a good place for this information.

Nonetheless, let us hope that *Lingua Cosmica* encourages a whole new group of scholars and critics both inside and outside of academia to critically assess and introduce the reading public to global speculative fiction and the authors who create it. These essays offer both helpful overviews and interesting close-readings of texts with which any Anglophone sf reader should be familiar. After all, speculative fiction is a genre concerned with the Other, the unknown, the new. Let’s read that way, too.
The Ages of the Justice League: Essays on America’s Greatest Superheroes in Changing Times

Anelise Farris


SUPERHEROES have been a mainstay of American culture since the early twentieth century. And with the recent abundance of superhero-related films, television series, novels, and merchandise, these beloved figures are reaching an increasingly-diverse audience. However, while their treasured status in popular culture has never wavered, the different ages of comic books, along with the varied incarnations of staple characters and the introduction of new ones, reveal that comic books are much more than entertainment—as Joseph J. Darowski’s collection The Ages of the Justice League: Essays on America’s Greatest Superheroes in Changing Times maintains. Each of the contributors to this collection offers analyses of the Justice League franchise through historical and social contexts. In doing so, they argue that the Justice League is as important for its entertainment value as it is for what it reveals about the relationship between popular culture and the development of American society and its culture.

The scope of the collection—concerned only with DC Comics’ Justice League, which was launched in the 1960s—both wisely limits the content to a select number of superheroes and also creates a smooth trajectory for such analyses. Each of the seventeen essays included here considers the role of the Justice League in different eras of American history, from their start to their recent rebirth. In line with pop culture scholarship, these scholars argue that comic books are informative products of the times in which they are created—tackling, whether directly or indirectly, domestic concerns, war, violence, societal norms, as well as fears and anxieties. Just how do the original members of the Justice League subvert the nuclear family model? What does Black Canary have to teach us about intersectional feminism? And, where is the line drawn between fictional and real-world geopolitical events in these works? These are just some of the compelling questions this collection invites us to consider.

Darowski’s introduction to the collection thoughtfully outlines the beginnings of the
Justice League, right at the peak of the Cold War. In an era filled with both excitement and unease over technological innovation, as well as the race to space, comics provided a unique platform to consider these issues. Comics, which was originally held to be a low-stakes medium, came under attack, however, with the work of German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham and the creation of the Comics Code Authority. Darowski skillfully relates this shift in comics production and reception to the rise of advertisements and worries of brainwashing, along with the fear that the Puritan work ethic was being upended by technology. This introduction effectively sets the tone for the rest of the collection, which, as mentioned previously, provides historically-grounded analyses.

The chapters included here are organized chronologically—based on when the time of the material they are examining was published. The first chapter, Louie Dean Valencia-García’s “A League of Orphans and Single Parents: Making a Family in an Era of *Father Knows Best*,” discusses the formation of the Justice League in the context of sociological theory concerning “The Family” (the socially-constructed concept) versus the “family” (which allows for non-normative constructions). Building upon Valencia-García’s argument for the Justice League as a proto-feminist/queer entity, Thomas C. Donaldson’s chapter “The Caged Bird Sings: *The Justice League of America* and the Domestic Containment of Black Canary” is one of the stronger chapters in this collection. Responding to the numerous scholars who insist that comic books have exclusively treated women as sexual objects, Donaldson reveals how the Black Canary embodies an intersectional feminism—a woman capable of being a lover, a business owner, and a superhero, a character who can both feel and fight.

In addition to domestic and gender studies, chapters consider the relationship between comics and the Vietnam war, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and WWII nostalgia, as well as social justice concerns and the role of comedic effect. Each essay, ranging from only 10-15 pages, serves mainly as a starting point for additional work to be done. And, in most of the essays, this objective works, as the authors carefully position their material to be introductory rather than exhaustive. That said, in several of the chapters here this proves problematic. “Relevance in Wonderland: The Mixed Success of Gardner Fox’s Message Comic Books” by Gene Phillips examines two of Fox’s arcs that aim to amuse and inform: “The Case of the Disabled Justice League” and “Man, Thy Name is Brother.” The first arc, as the name suggests, addresses disability, and the second arc involves matters of race. The issue here, however, is that Phillips treats the essay more as an informative piece rather than an analytical one. In breezily drawing attention to these arcs, Philip overlooks critical race
and disability theory, as well as the interesting—though inherently problematic—alignment here of marginalized identities with spectacle. Similarly, Jason Sacks’s “The Benefits of Doubts: Steve Englehart’s Radical Take on Tradition,” though equally interesting, suffers from a lack of theory and awareness of the fields he is working in. In an essay concerned with tradition and reinvention, it is remiss to ignore the field of folklore studies—where this type of analysis occurs.

Nevertheless, in a collection of seventeen essays, a few missteps do not take away from the overall merit of the work. The variety of material included, as well as the range of years covered, makes it both a worthy introduction to the Justice League, as well as a gift to long-time fans. The short essays and accessible, theory-light pieces in *The Ages of the Justice League: Essays on America’s Greatest Superheroes in Changing Times* will appeal to both scholars and general audiences. Ultimately, this collection guarantees that the insight the Justice League provides into the development of America will continue to interest comic book scholars, historians, and interested readers alike for years to come.
The X-Files and Philosophy

Matthew J. Fogarty


IN The X-Files and Philosophy, editor Robert Arp plays the role of FBI Assistant Director Skinner, giving various contributors a broad remit to discuss and pose philosophical questions related to concepts and characters within the show. As with other editions in the successful Popular Culture and Philosophy (this one being number 108!) series, the aim is to whet the appetite of the general reader for a deeper engagement with a particular cultural touchstone. Additionally, a substrate is provided upon which some specialist knowledge is introduced without alienating (!) the readership. Arp arranges each chapter within thematic sections, although some overlap is unavoidable.

In many X-Files episodes, and within the fictional universe Agents Mulder and Scully inhabit, the fantastical (both supernatural and super-science) is readily observed. Mulder's often outlandish theories regarding their investigations are occasionally proved correct, albeit only to the viewer. In a persuasive chapter by Daniel Malloy, the classification of Mulder the believer and Scully the sceptic is refined into Mulder the pseudoscientist and Scully the scientist. Malloy deftly asserts that Mulder does not so much believe in extra-terrestrials and the supernatural but desires to believe in them. Further, he wants his belief to be based on more than faith alone. Malloy advances that Mulder is a sceptic whose pseudoscientific threshold for evidence is pretty flaky - even when events prove him right. The rich history of the philosophy of science is referenced, beginning with Karl Popper's falsifiability concept. Mulder, content to rely on vague predictions that are impossible to be wrong, clearly violates this principle. The demarcation between science and non-science (in this case pseudoscience) is further explored with reference to T.S. Kuhn, who in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions stratifies scientific progress into “normal” and “revolutionary” phases. Normal science involves incremental improvements working within the current paradigm. Revolutionary science takes place when the current paradigm is unable to explain the observed data (i.e., the breakthrough changes from an earth-centric to heliocentric solar system or from Genesis to natural selection). This concept is embodied best in the Churchillian vernacular, “When the facts change, I change my opinion. What
do you do, sir?” In many scenarios Mulder relies on outdated paradigms (astrology) or misunderstood current paradigms (genetic memory). By contrast Scully maintains that although current knowledge is inadequate, further incremental improvements or a shift in paradigm will reveal them to be phenomena entirely consistent with falsifiability. Malloy touches upon a key difference between *The X-Files* and many other science fiction universes, namely the tension inherent in the demarcation between science and non-science. In other fiction, the world is as it is, and characters tend not to question its nature. In *The X-Files*, part of the genius is the constant debate between Mulder and Scully about what constitutes as acceptable evidence for the extraordinary. Viewers too are invited to ponder whether erratic lights in the sky are experimental aircraft (incremental improvements to the current paradigm), or if memories of a serial killer grandfather are passed down genetically (a misunderstanding of the current epigenetic paradigm).

Each section provides a similar analysis of various *X-Files* episodes within a given philosophical approach. For example, Elizabeth F. Cook in “Mulders Metaphysics” gets at the idea of materialism versus idealism in her character study of Fox Mulder, making an engaging argument to his essentially pluralist outlook. Cook’s effective summarising of pluralistic ontology ranges through Aristotle, Cartwright, Dupre, and Suppes. Mulder’s simultaneous materialist and idealist tendencies are drawn from examples within a half dozen episodes from throughout the show’s run. Mulder’s ontological adaptability is rated above Scully’s rigid approach, suggesting his capacity for flexibility judgement makes for good judgement.

*The X-Files* was blessed with an excellent creative team that managed to build a rich and evocative experience. Indeed, certain episodes have a myriad of subtexts and possible interpretations. The strength and depth of *The X-Files* as dramatic fiction is highlighted by key episodes referred to in multiple essays. In particular, elements within “The Post-Modern Prometheus” and “Jose Chung’s ‘From Outer Space’” are employed in consideration of insanity, Rene Descartes, the goodness of the natural versus the artificial, unreliable narrators in fiction, and Romanticism. The engagement of popular culture with the academy has not always been reciprocated. Unsurprisingly, the ubiquitous appearance of aliens in various fictional media has not prompted serious engagement. To address this oversight, Jerold J. Abrams, in his essay “Submitting to Superior Aliens,” repurposes Aristotle’s *Politics*, taking the demigods of ancient Greece and substituting them with extra-terrestrials. The solution Aristotle proposes to the demigod’s incompatibility with human society is assimilation, assassination, or exile. Assimilation is ruled out, as it would be an injustice for vastly superior
being to be constrained by human mores and law. For Abrams, humanity (under the auspice of ‘the syndicate’), lacking the capacity to effectively fight or exile the alien invaders, chooses capitulation and assimilation. In the film *Fight the Future*, this choice proves disastrous, as the alien plans lean to eradication, rather than to the perfection of society that Aristotle’s demigods would foster.

Much like the conspiracy narrative in the later episodes of the show, some of the chapters devoted to the fabled “mytharc” seem repetitive. Consideration of experimentation on humans, bad government, and the ethics of lying become dulled by tedious reference to the nefarious “Syndicate” at the heart of the shadow government. Although individual elements within these topics can be illustrative of creator Chris Carter’s fictional objectives, (i.e., the “syndicate” playing the role of Vichy France in an alien invasion), excessive attention is paid to the Cigarette Smoking Man and his ilk. Regardless, it is notable how many concerns and problems regarding governmental ethics that were raised within the mytharc have echoes in the realities of the current epoch (an issue touched upon by Kevin Meeker in “Is The X-Files Bad For Us?”). By contrast to Mulder and the Cigarette Smoking Man, Agent Scully is paid relatively little consideration. To this reader, the clever inversion of hackneyed stereotypes (rationalist male and emotional female), make Scully’s compelling character deserving of greater analysis.

In conclusion, *The X Files and Philosophy* is an engaging read and easy to consume in part or *en bloc*. Individual contributions cover the gamut of philosophical concerns without assuming *a priori* knowledge. Importantly, the book promotes a deeper engagement with the source material. Some chapters prompted the irresistible temptation to dust off an old DVD boxset and watch some classic episodes. Despite my minor quibbles about the emphasis on conspiracy, no individual contribution outstays its welcome, and each author maintains a sense of unabashed joy regarding the source material. The reader is left with the strong impression that the phrase “I want to believe” hides a much deeper and more capricious metaphysics and validates the search for truth as a virtuous good. Overall I’d recommend this book to any fan of *The X-Files*. It would make a useful addition to any undergraduate library and could be considered for entertaining primers on the philosophical treatment of science in fiction or the philosophy of science.
Japan’s Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaiju Cinema

James Hamby


*KAIJU eiga*—Japanese monster movies—have the unfortunate reputation in the popular mind of being cheap, badly dubbed, juvenile films. However, the admittedly unconvincing special effects and poor efforts at making the films available to English-speaking audiences mask the depth and complexity of a genre that has much to say about ecocritical thought in post-war Japan. While a majority of *Godzilla* scholarship tends to praise the original 1954 film and dismiss most of the subsequent kaiju films as insipid imitations at best, and cheap kitsch at worst, Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle take a more sympathetic and holistic approach and consider how the environmental themes of this genre emerged and changed over time. In addition to the *Godzilla* franchise, they also examine the often-dismissed *Mothra* series and the lesser-known *Gamera* films, tracing the threads of ecocriticism that run through them all.

Rhoads and McCorkle begin their analysis of *Godzilla* by reviewing Japan’s relationship with nuclear weapons at the end of World War II and throughout America’s series of atomic tests at Bikini Atoll. While most casual observers would probably identify Godzilla as a metaphor for the United States’s destructive atomic attacks on Japan, Rhoads and McCorkle favor the interpretation, first proposed by Yoshikuni Igarashi, that Godzilla represents the souls of the Japanese war dead returned to wreak destruction on Japan as punishment for their new alliance with the U.S., the nation that caused their homeland so much suffering (29). As partners of the Americans, the Japanese thus become complicit in the ecological disasters perpetrated by the U.S. in its pursuit of developing nuclear weaponry. Rhoads and McCorkle note this connection by pointing out that the first scene of *Godzilla* features the sinking of the ship *Glory No. 5* by Godzilla’s atomic breath, a clear reference to the incident of the irradiation of the *Lucky Dragon No. 5* by the atomic testing at Bikini Atoll. Rhoads and McCorkle also note that here there is also “a connection between Godzilla and mythology” (37) as villagers possess knowledge of this monster that the modern, urban
Japanese population, represented in this film by journalists and scientists, do not have. Ultimately, the only way that Godzilla can be defeated is by the use of an oxygen-destroyer that removes oxygen from water. Godzilla is destroyed, but so too is everything else in Tokyo Bay. This ending, Rhoads and McCorkle conclude, suggests that “[h]umans may be safe, at least for a time, but nature pays the ultimate price” (40). Once the victims of the irresponsible use of technology, the Japanese have now become the perpetrators.

This original _Godzilla_ film, with the horror of the monster’s impending footfall and the pathos-filled death scenes of Godzilla’s helpless victims, is largely praised by critics as a successful horror/science-fiction interpretation of Japan’s wartime suffering. As time and the _Godzilla_ series wore on, however, things changed. Rhoads and McCorkle point out that in order to view the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, many Japanese families purchased televisions, which had a dire consequence on the Japanese movie industry. As a result, production budgets began to plummet (71). This shortage of funding led to films considered by many critics to be forgettable. However, Rhoads and McCorkle argue that these films should not be ignored, as they document the evolution of Japan’s reaction to industrial pollution (112). One film in particular, _Godzilla vs. Hedorah_ (known to Western audiences as _Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster_), draws the particular ire of critics and is panned by many, as Rhoads and McCorkle put it, as a “nonsensical and silly film” (112). Yet Rhoads and McCorkle contend that this film “raised different issues and emits a new ambiguity, ambivalence, and social malaise not present in _Godzilla_,” and they further argue that “it is no longer American science in the form of nuclear weaponry that rains destruction on Japan, but Japanese industry and economic progress itself. […] Gone were the days when Japan could blame America for its social ills and collective psychoses” (114). Rhoads and McCorkle point out that this film was emblematic of Japan’s burgeoning environmental movement. Additionally, Rhoads and McCorkle observe that this film astutely lampoons the hippie culture of the time as “self-absorbed and ineffective” to solve the serious environmental problems of the day (121). Rhoads and McCorkle argue that with its bleak outlook and graphic violence “_Godzilla vs. Hedorah_ succeeds as a dark, bleak film” (121). Far from being merely a low-budget, campy flick, this film offers important social commentary and plays a valuable role in the evolution of _kaiju_ cinema.

Much like _Godzilla vs. Hedorah_, the _Mothra_ and _Gamera_ franchises are often both written off as derivative and juvenile, yet they too make important ecocritical statements. In the chapter devoted exclusively to Mothra, entitled “Mothra, Marx, Mother Nature,” Rhoads and McCorkle examine the intersections of capitalist critique, feminism, and
environmentalism in the *Mothra* series. They assert that Mothra represents “both nature and the feminine. She is a monstrous symbol at odds with rapid postwar industrialization and the greedy pursuit of capital” (50). Likewise, the *Gamera* movies are often dismissed, due largely to their having been made for younger audiences. Yet, as Rhoads and McCorkle argue, Gamera, with his insatiable hunger for many different types of energy, “implies that Japanese socio-economics during the high-speed economic growth period of the mid-1960’s were equally monstrous” (99). Though perhaps heavily indebted to *Godzilla*, the *Gamera* franchise does go its own way and serves as a turning point for *kaiju* cinema from criticism of solely atomic energy to other types of environmental concerns.

Rhoads and McCorkle’s study is a valuable contribution to Godzilla studies, *kaiju eiga*, and ecocriticism. Their work should be considered alongside that of William Tsutsui, Chon Noriega, and Yoshikuni Igarashi as necessities for serious scholarship of Godzilla. The strength of this study is the way in which it considers all of the Godzilla, Mothra, and Gamera movies as parts of a continuum larger and more complex than its individual components and as examples of a genre that has been undervalued for far too long.
Doctor Who and History

Amanda Lerner


THE television show Doctor Who, which originally debuted in 1963 and was created by Sydney Newman, has had remarkable staying power. Though the show was off the air from 1989-2005 (apart from a TV film in the ‘90s), its time-hopping protagonist has journeyed via paperback, videogame, and audio series nearly continuously. The new volume edited by Carey Fleiner and Dene October, Doctor Who and History, explores history in the Doctor Who canon in three ways: the history of the series itself, how history is presented within the series, and the evolution of the teaching of history in tandem with the evolution of the television show. Drawing together both the historical context of the creation of the series, as well as the series’ treatment of history itself, this volume fills an important lacuna in Doctor Who scholarship.

The original vision for Doctor Who was largely educational: these initial adventures, dubbed “pure-historical” in-house, would follow the Doctor through different historical eras with the intent to portray them at least somewhat accurately. The first part of Doctor Who and History, “Television as History: Inform and Entertain,” examines this goal, comparing and contrasting the presentation of classical history in the schoolroom versus in “public history.” Beyond merely addressing the role of history in the series, however, this first section reflects on how the series supported and reinforced British worldviews in the 20th century. This is highlighted most forcefully in Aven McMaster and Mark Sundaram’s excellent chapter “O tempora, o mores: Class(ics) and Education in Doctor Who,” which examines the implications of the British model of teaching history on the aesthetic and storytelling choices made by the creators of the series.

This examination of the British education system carries over into part two of the collection, “Historical Drama: Genre and Conventions.” Perhaps inevitably for a show predicated on a blend of SF and history, the series gradually forsook the “pure historicals” that emphasized a certain degree of fidelity to “what actually happened,” in favor of pseudohistorical narratives. Ramei Tateishi uses the example of a 1966 Western serial in
his chapter “History as Genre, Aesthetic and Context in ‘The Gunfighters’” to explore both the self-reflexivity and the rumination on the meaning of genre that took place during this transitional period of the series. Andrew O’Day, in “A Rude Awakening: Metafiction in Eric Pringle’s ‘The Awakening,’” takes the question of genre one step further: O’Day argues that the SF element of the later serials is quite obviously invented, and it is thus easier for the viewer to understand that it is “not genuine history.” As O’Day, and many others throughout the collection, note, Doctor Who is an excellent example of how history must always be both interpreted and mediated.

The third part of the volume, “Historical Constructions/Reconstructions,” examines mediated history taken one step further: alternate histories in the Who universe. Rhonda Knight’s chapter, “Playing with History: Terrence Dicks, Fans, and Season 6B,” examines the existence of counterfactuals within the Who universe, such as the alternate histories that transformed from “fanon” – stories created by fans – to Doctor Who canon created between the first and second parts of season 6. Knight also explores the alternate histories that Who creates, such as a history in which Germany won World War II or in which the Doctor prevents Winston Churchill’s assassination. Similarly, Karen Kellekson’s chapter highlights alternative histories entirely within the series’ own timeline and centered on the “What-Ifs” of the Doctor’s life.

The last section of the work, “History and Identity,” confronts the problematic British identity that informs every episode of the series. Peter Lowe explores the quintessential British village and its sinister implications in the series, arguing that these small-town English communities are Potemkin villages, a tranquil veneer barely concealing the malevolent forces that, in Doctor Who, are almost always taking refuge within. The collection ends with the insightful “Doctor Who and Environmentalism in the 1960s and Early 1970s,” in which Mark Wilson analyzes the role that television in general, and Doctor Who in particular, played in informing the British public about environmental issues.

Doctor Who has evolved from a show about history into a show that creates history. The series has confronted the great man theory of history time and again, often with seemingly-contradictory outcomes. And yet, as this volume of thought-provoking essays demonstrates, this is largely the point. Though the show was initially envisioned at least partially as a tool to educate the British public on past historical events, it has created a much larger conversation on the meaning of history itself. Through history and in creating history, Doctor Who has inspired both its viewers and its scholars to reexamine historical narratives with a critical eye to just who has decided what that narrative will be.
Mr. Robot and Philosophy: Beyond Good and Evil Corp

Amanda Lerner


As volume 109 in an impressive line-up that, as of this review, includes 123 titles in the “Pop Culture and Philosophy” series (which shows no signs of slowing), Mr. Robot and Philosophy nevertheless stands out. The volume is perhaps more relevant than one would hope, examining the philosophical questions and moral implications of hacking—whether virtual or socially engineered—in the digital age. The volume is appealing to those who eagerly watch, and rewatch, Elliot Alderson and the radical hacking group fsociety on the series Mr. Robot. Those who take an interest in developments in cybersecurity, and those who have philosophical qualms about those developments, will be interested as well. The volume is approachable and easily digestible, if a little light on academic exposition.

The anthology is divided into six loosely-organized sections, although with a show as layered as Mr. Robot, the divisions feel somewhat arbitrary. Lacking a meaningful introduction, the collection is disorienting. This is a conscious choice on the part of Greene and Robinson-Greene: the two-page opener adopts the style of the television series, which itself constantly challenges the audience to wonder what, if any, of what they are experiencing is real. As the editors write, “I sure hope that this book is real, because I need answers to these questions and all the other ones that the philosophers in this book are tackling” (xii). However, this is the closest to an introduction that the anthology gets. Consequently, when the reader dives into the first section, “We’re All Living in Each Other’s Paranoia,” she is left—to borrow a frequently-used device from the anthology—wondering who she is interacting with in the work, and indeed if anybody is there at all. The standout chapter from this first section is undeniably Christophe Porot’s excellent “Click Bait for Black Fish,” in which Porot reads Elliot’s actions through a Rousseauian lens. Though Porot uses a single scene from the show, in which several of the show’s leads are assembled and eating black fish, he uses it to make a larger statement about freedom in a capitalist society. Indeed, throughout the anthology, the strongest chapters are those that do not merely zoom into Elliot’s admittedly fascinating psyche, but those that also zoom out and contextually place
the project of fsociety into our capitalist, digital landscape.

This holds true for the second section of the work, “Control is an Illusion.” In her chapter “Who Has the Power?” Heidi Samuelson dissects the power dynamics of Mr. Robot through the lens of Michel Foucault. Weaving together the ideas of the panopticon, biopower, and power-knowledge, Samuelson deftly demonstrates that those in the show who believe they hold the most power, such as CEO of Evil Corp Philip Price, in fact are mere conduits of power. Thus, Samuelson essentially returns agency to the everyman: the very people who are likely to read this book.

The third section of the anthology is perhaps the tightest and most compelling. Entitled “They All Think I’m the Ringleader,” each chapter explores how an individual can move through a world that is constantly shifting, morally and psychologically, and in ways that may or may not be objectively “real.” Christopher Hoyt’s chapter, “Mr. Robot, Mad Son of Noir,” is unique in the anthology. Unlike every other chapter, which all approach Mr. Robot strictly in terms of plot or character development, Hoyt’s contribution examines the physical quality of the show’s production. Hoyt argues that the series is a descendent of neo-noir, from Rami Malek’s brooding eyes to the color palettes of the Allsafe office and Elliot’s New York apartment.

Rachel Robison-Greene’s chapter in the fourth section, “Politics Is for Puppets,” is the strongest in the anthology. Robison-Greene’s contribution, “The Gods Are Dead and Elliot Has Killed Them,” is the most academic approach to Mr. Robot: she succinctly outlines “The Problem of Evil,” using a philosophical debate as a jumping-off point for her own argument about, as she puts it, “Elliot the badass.” Robison-Greene’s chapter demonstrates the best of what this type of work can be: a generally accessible, well-explained bridge between complicated philosophical questions and pop culture phenomena.

In “Power Belongs to the People Who Take It,” the fifth section, Mia Wood uses E Corp to explore the question of legal personhood. Wood’s chapter, “Is E Corp an Evil Person?” springs from Plato’s Forms to corporate personhood, eventually arriving at the unfortunate reality of diffused responsibility. Just as Enron itself could not go to prison, Wood writes, so too does the fictional E Corp ultimately escape moral accountability.

The anthology ends on a strong note, concluding the sixth section, “Is Any of It Real?” with Verena Ehrnberger’s excellent chapter “Please Tell Me You’re Seeing This Too.” The uncomfortable truth of Mr. Robot the television series is that, until it ends, the viewer has no real idea if any of what is being depicted is happening, or if Elliot is simply creating it in his mind. We, the viewers and readers, cannot trust our narrator because he has lost
our trust. Ehrberger expertly reads the narrative device of “the fantastic” into the show, a compelling way to understand both the frustrations of the show, as well as its real efficacy.

As Ehrnberger writes, “the beauty of fantastic literature, is that—even when you reach that part of the story where the ambiguity is gone—you can still rewatch it, because you’re watching an entirely different story the second time around.” (202). As is true of the television series, so too does this hold for the anthology *Mr. Robot and Philosophy* itself. As the show is still being aired, it will be interesting and exciting to return to the anthology after the show has concluded and see just how much of any of it was really real.
AN infamous literary anecdote recounts that Robert Louis Stevenson burned the first draft of *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) after his wife Fanny complained about its lack of moral allegory. Despite the conflicting accounts of the novella’s creation, this anecdote suggests that serious moral themes should be integral to works of science fiction. Russell Blackford makes this argument with great clarity and incisiveness in *Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination*. While he identifies his audience as those with limited knowledge of science fiction, his study holds interest for both novice readers and advanced scholars. Blackford’s major argument is that science fiction “often explores the social and psychological effects—and hence the moral significance—of scientific and technological innovations” (14). As part of his critical framework, he builds on Damien Broderick’s idea of science fiction as a “mega-text” consisting of a dense web of intertextuality that “can provide the enabling form to dramatize a wide range of philosophical themes” (53).

As I will briefly sketch out, this study focuses mainly on literary works written in English throughout the book’s eight chapters, which encompass a wide assortment of topics within these parameters. Chapter One locates the origins of science fiction in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and explains that it developed in reaction to the rapid changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and shifting conceptions of the future. In addition, Blackford offers an overview of his definition of science fiction: a narrative mode that displays novelty, rationality, and realism (following Darko Suvin). The Introduction’s roadmap indicates the book’s excellent organization, with the first four chapters laying out Blackford’s critical apparatus and the last four covering specific themes. The second chapter details a conventional history of science fiction from *Frankenstein* to the present day, including its major periods, movements, and authors.

In Chapter Three, Blackford elaborates on why science fiction makes the perfect vehicle for exploring questions of morality and uses specific examples to illustrate his points. His analysis of Christian-themed novels like James Blish’s *A Case of Conscience* (1958) and Mary Russell Doria’s *Sparrow* series (1996-98) stands out for its nuanced discussion of
religion, morality, and alien life. Blackford shows how science fiction can make us question various topics such as utilitarianism (Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, 1932), war (Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*, 1959 and Joe Haldeman’s *The Forever War*, 1974), and gender roles (Samuel Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, 1984). Chapter Five, Six, Seven, and Eight consider how science fiction typically portrays the topics of technoscience, Intelligent Others (aliens, mutants, and created beings/robots), human mutation, and terraforming, respectively.

Throughout the book, Blackford responds to one of the biggest counterarguments against his study’s premise: science fiction is a shallow genre that represents entertaining adventures, not complex moral problems. He gains credibility in conceding that much science fiction is inferior, it can pander to readers, and thought-provoking works often fail to gain popularity. He writes “[t]here has been no true merger of science fiction and the literary mainstream, often forcing writers to choose a career in either one or the other” (43).

At the same time, Blackford responds to this objection with a strong defense of his argument and backs it up by examining various moral themes in literature and film. For instance, he memorably describes the movie adaption of Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986-1987; 2009) as “a seminar in moral philosophy” before reading it through the lenses of utilitarianism and Kantian philosophy in Chapter Four (76).

The book’s weakness is that the clarity and sophistication Blackford applies to written science fiction does not always translate to his scrutiny of movies, which he admits he mostly left out due to their subpar quality. Since he looks at multiple examples in each chapter and sometimes covers several works in a series at once, his ability to keep all the plots, names, and characters straight for readers is impressive. While Blackford mentions examples from the same authors numerous times (Wells, Heinlein, Le Guin, etc.), this repetition produces a sense of coherence throughout the book. In the last chapter, he effectively takes texts from earlier chapters and weaves them together in his survey of human enhancement, terraforming, and power. He includes an appendix that he stresses could be a good introductory reading and viewing list for beginners to science fiction. However, Blackford’s investigation of films like *Passengers* (2016) and *Rogue One* (2016) in Chapter Three makes the book seem dated because it echoes the pop culture commentary at the time of their release. The comparison of *Ex Machina* (2015) with H. G. Well’s *Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) in Chapter Six as well as the examination of the *Watchmen* film go beyond superficial interpretations to illuminate these works.

One underlying theme that runs throughout *Science Fiction and the Moral*
Imagination is power and what we would choose to do if we were given control over space colonization, artificial intelligence, or the fate of humanity. In the final chapter, Blackford recognizes that science fiction often features moments in which characters must make momentous decisions with cosmic implications. While “such narratives eschew appeals to cognition in favor of power fantasies and spectacle,” they can also “offers maps of what might await round the next bend of history—within our own lifetimes, maybe, or those of our children” (182; 192). As he indicates, Blackford’s study leaves readers with the responsibility of choosing whether to engage with the moral imagination presented in these works as we navigate future debates about science, technology, and more. That being said, his study makes a compelling argument that we should take the ethical questions in science fiction literature and film seriously. Blackford’s exploration of this genre’s portrayal of various moral quandaries would please even a rigorous critic like Fanny Stevenson with its profound look into science fiction over the past two centuries.
The Phantom Unmasked: America’s First Superhero

Aaron Ricker


THE Phantom Unmasked is a fact-packed rewrite of Kevin Patrick’s doctoral work at Melbourne’s Monash University (ix). As Patrick stresses, the work is not solely concerned with one hero born in American newspaper strips. Tracing the Phantom’s shifting incarnations across several oceans and media platforms offers an enlightening cross-section view of the pop culture business itself. Individual chapters are organized with this wider goal in mind. Chapter 1 introduces the key players and places (real and fictional) in the Phantom’s story, “mapping the boundaries of his fictional world” (12). Chapter 2 shows how print syndication launched the Phantom strip, and asks why the Phantom “failed to enjoy the same level of success enjoyed by the likes of Superman, Batman, and Captain America” in the derivative medium of comic books (13). “Chapter 3 recounts the vital role played by foreign media entrepreneurs” in “tailoring” the Phantom for international markets (13). “Chapter 4 looks at the raft of political, economic, and cultural factors which governed the dissemination of American comic books in Australia, Sweden, and India” (13). Chapter 5 shows how market developments drove Swedish publishers to create their own Fantomen content, with mixed results. “Chapter 6 juxtaposes the relative failure [of official Phantom pop culture adaptations] with a diverse range of unauthorized adaptations of The Phantom which have circulated in Australia, Sweden, and India since the 1960s” (14). Chapter 7 unpacks the results of the survey Patrick conducted to find out “why so many Australian, Swedish, and Indian readers identify with this comic-book hero” (15). The eighth and final chapter “reflects on the remarkable longevity of The Phantom comic-book franchise and asks how it can survive in today’s rapidly-changing media environment” (15).

Through this detailed review, The Phantom Unmasked opens a window into the “unpredictable and sometimes chaotic process” of procuring, selling, reselling, and “tailor[ing] American comics for domestic tastes” (76). The accomplishment of collecting and organizing all the relevant data here is impressive in its own right. The attention paid to local “tailoring” (26-27, 68, 97, 104) has the further benefit of helping Patrick “question the stark polarities of the cultural imperialism thesis” (59). Noting significant local variations—
along with the ways the Phantom’s overseas successes “galvanized” more local comics initiatives (78, 87, 93-98, 115) and resulted in new international dynamics like the market dominance of Swedish Phantom comics in Australia (118)—does indeed add nuance to the “centre-periphery narrative” of globalization as the passive global consumption of American culture (202).

Patrick’s detailed treatment also provides a glimpse into the real-world accidents that can shape the public career of a pop culture icon: cross-exchanges between markets that understood English and markets that didn’t (80), local dramas of government restrictions and smuggling (82-83, 85), comics arriving like invasive species with army bases (83) and publishers needing new readerships when those bases closed (84), personal-life connections guiding industry leaders (86), the deaths of key players who must, unlike the Phantom, inevitably age (104, 106, 119, 165, 197), the chance elements of printing prices and schedules (96), the limitations imposed by squeezing syndicated content into new formats (104, 108)—including the number of pages available in a given local comic book volume or the square inches available for dialogue on a given newspaper page (106-107), etc. All that was missing for me as a reader with an interest in History and Comics Studies was an actual image or two grounding all this discussion of the real humanity and publishing physicality of the Phantom’s story.

Patrick does, it must be said, put a lot of comics scholars to shame with his patient attention to the actual production and consumption of Phantom products, including room provided for the perspectives of Phantom consumers, in the survey mentioned above—apparently the largest of its type ever conducted (7). I would have liked to have seen this welcome attention to consumers and their engagement (reading, viewing, clubs, research, paraphernalia, and even the smell of aging newsprint) followed up even further. It seems like a missed opportunity, for example, when one fan observes that the Phantom “feels more real” in strips than in live-action films (203), but no time is taken to reflect on lo-fidelity versus hi-fidelity comic-based art in terms of audience connection and consumer fidelity. Such reflection might have helped Patrick answer his question about the relatively amazing survival of Phantom newsprint strips versus the relative failure of Phantom movies, TV shows, toys, etc. (2-7, 175-176). In the same vein, Patrick concludes that the Phantom is “almost totemic” for many (194), but doesn’t explore the implications of this observation for his study, or explain why it should be qualified with the apologetic-looking word “almost.” Religious Studies scholars like Kathryn Lofton have been stressing for years that “religious” needs and satisfactions happen where we find them in our mass-media consumer society.
Is this unrelated to the life-long devotion, the “intense level of personal identification,” the reading and debating rituals, the competing clubs, the signifying visible paraphernalia, and the “canonical texts” of Phantom fans (147-161)?

Overall, Patrick’s Phantom-focused analysis of pop culture production and consumption makes The Phantom Unmasked a valuable resource for research and classroom use. Its potential value as assigned reading is increased by the fact that the English is clear and noticeably well-edited: I noticed only two words out of place (an extra “so” on page 135 and an extra “as” on page 174). It felt strange to see the self-designation of Phantom fans as “phans” repeatedly treated as something new requiring explanation (ix, 15, 170), but a certain level of confusion about what’s already been mentioned is all but inevitable whenever a mild-mannered dissertation ducks into a phone booth to emerge as a dashing new book. The happy end result is in this case a highly readable and informative work that succeeds in achieving Patrick’s stated goal of offering “fresh insights into how the interlocking structures of globalized media industries guide the international production and dissemination of popular culture” (16).
The Ultimate Game of Thrones and Philosophy: You Think or Die

Russell A. Stepp


The Ultimate Game of Thrones and Philosophy: You Think or Die is the 105th volume in the series Popular Culture and Philosophy, and the tone and structure of the volume reflect an attempt to engage the Game of Thrones fan base with philosophical questions as well as introductory critical theory. This edited volume contains a total of thirty-one short (eight to ten page) essays divided into seven overarching categories dealing with issues such as power, love, honor, religion, or the nature of evil. The collection integrates the universe of George R.R. Martin’s novels and the popular HBO show by constructing essays as though written from inside the fictional universe. For instance, the contributors section casts each of the authors as ‘maesters,’ reflecting the keepers of knowledge in the world of Westeros. While these maesters may not have received their chain from the Citadel in Oldtown, they represent a variety of professional academics, instructors, graduate students, and public officials, principally from European and North American universities. While many of the contributors have academic backgrounds, the individual essays are decidedly not academic and maintain simple language and avoid technical jargon, except when clearly defined and explained by the author. The structure of the essays also reflects something more appropriate to a popular audience, and absent from the text are footnotes or formalized citations. Instead the editors have a bibliography at the end of the book containing detailed citations to all works referenced in the main body, allowing interested readers to delve more deeply into topics covered in the essays without clogging the text with too much critical apparatus.

A playful tone permeates the essays, and the popular nature of the collection becomes apparent as the contributors strive to locate their writing in the Game of Thrones universe. Many authors refer to illustrious ‘maesters’ of the past such as Maesters Plato, Kant, and Kierkegaard or recast philosophical or academic discussions in terms of the characters of the HBO program or Martin’s novels. As an example, Jeremy Pierce’s article “Bran, Hodor, and Disability in Westeros” presents the medical and social models of disability and discusses differences between impairment and disability by using characters such
as Bran, Hodor, Aemon Targaryen, Theon and Varys who have some sort of physical or developmental impairment. In a similar vein, William J. Devlin in “Stannis - Knight of the Faith or Tragic Hero?” presents his audience with Kierkegaard’s formulation of the tragic hero and the knight of the faith as well as Kant’s deontological approach to morality, using the complex character Stannis Baratheon from the HBO program. Even small illustrative examples use figures from the Game of Thrones universe, as in Erik Baldwin’s contribution “How Can We Know Anything in a World of Magic and Miracles?” when he compares acquaintance knowledge to Hot Pie eating a Lamprey pie, or competence knowledge to Ser Jamie Lannister’s knowledge of and skill in swordplay. This playful engagement with both the subject matter and Martin’s fictional universe helps to present common academic discussions to a popular audience.

Naturally there is a difficult line to walk when engaging a non-academic audience through the lens of an extremely popular fictional work, and some contributors negotiate these challenges better than others. Many of the authors fully engage with the collection’s conceit and write as though they were inhabitants of the Game of Thrones universe, while other articles feel as though they were extracted from some other text, with a Game of Thrones reference or two thrown in to fit with the collection’s theme. Perhaps the most jarring trend is that many of the articles end with what feels like hasty and incomplete conclusions. The impression is that there was a strict limit to the length of each essay and that, after an engaging introduction and extensive development, the authors simply ran out of room and cut their chapters short in order to meet a word limit. This trend may well have been intentional, designed to encourage readers to draw their own conclusions rather than to rely on the author’s opinions, but the abrupt conclusion to these essays is frequently jarring and gives the impression that something is missing.

Given the intended audience of this volume, scholars of philosophy, speculative fiction, or George R.R. Martin’s universe will probably glean minimal value from the essays. However, the book’s playful tone, combined with its easily digestible essays, positions it as a potentially valuable teaching tool. As an increasing number of universities are offering courses on speculative fiction or using popular media like Game of Thrones as a way to engage undergraduates, The Ultimate Game of Thrones and Philosophy: You Think or Die can fill an important role as a bridge between popular culture and academic discourse as its treatment of the subject matter is rigorous enough to allow proper engagement while simultaneously retaining readability. Although it is unlikely that each of the thirty-one essays would apply directly to most courses, many of them could be used either as an introduction
to a philosophical question or to an aspect of critical theory. The tendency of these essays to rush to a conclusion, or lack a definitive conclusion, could be leveraged to further discussion in a classroom setting. Thus, the volume’s essays could serve as a bridge between popular culture, with which many students are familiar, and more extensive readings in Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, or contemporary scholars, and engage students with academic material and give them some stake in the ideas. The popular nature of *The Ultimate Game of Thrones and Philosophy: You Think or Die* surely means that it will be more likely found on the bookshelves of those *Game of Thrones* fans with a passing interest in philosophy than in scholars’ libraries, but the engaging way in which the collection presents academic material could see it serving a useful function in a university classroom.
The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy: Subversive Reports from Another Reality

Russell A. Stepp


THE Man in the High Castle and Philosophy: Subversive Reports from Another Reality is the 111th volume in the series Popular Culture and Philosophy. Like the other volumes in the series, The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy contains short articles that present philosophical or literary-critical ideas to a non-academic audience through the lens of popular culture, in this case the Philip K. Dick novel and corresponding Amazon streaming series, The Man in the High Castle. While many of the essays in The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy discuss Dick’s novel, it is clear that the volume was designed to capitalize on the success of the Amazon series, and, as a result, the references to the novel serve principally to supplement, enhance, or provide an alternate perspective on the material in the series. The volume was published in 2017, on the heels of the release of the series’ second season in December 2016, and this publication timeline has impacted the content of several of the contributions. None of the essays refer to events of Season 3 (released in October 2018), but many contributions seem oblivious to portions of, or even the entirety of, the second season. Thus, the bulk of the content contains in these essays focuses on the events of the series’ first season.

The volume is divided into five sections, each composed of three or four short essays of between eight and ten pages each. The bulk of the contributors are European or North American academics, mainly junior faculty or PhD candidates, but there are a handful of contributions from non-academic authors. The brevity of these articles, combined with their thematic grouping, makes them relatively easy to digest and provides the reader with brief introductions to more complex philosophical or literary-critical ideas. While the length of the essays allows the contributors’ ideas to be easily assimilated, occasional entries in the volume feel truncated – as if the author began to develop an idea too complicated for the eight to ten-page editorial limit, and instead of reworking, the author hurriedly concluded to meet a submission timeline. Contributions of this type are rare, but they can be jarring...
when encountered.

Thematically, *The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy* treats precisely the topics that a reader of Dick's novel or viewer of the streaming series would anticipate: fascism, terrorism, fate, the nature of reality, and the existence of alternate realities. Some of the collection's highlights include Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Emiliano Aguilar's article “Say Heil! to Architecture,” which explores how the streaming series relies on a viewer's ability to read monumental architecture; Benjamin Evans’ “Defying Fate,” which not only looks at the nature of fate and prognostication of the future through the *I Ching*, but also pays particular attention to how individuals respond to life through the lens of the Stoic school of philosophy; Timothy Hsiao's “Are We Really Sure They're Wrong?” which almost instantly subverts its title by asserting that the Japanese Empire and Nazi regimes are, in fact, wrong by presenting Augustine's just war theory as justification that these governments' actions were not just; and Ananya Chattoraj's “When Worlds Diverge,” which uses *The Man in the High Castle* to present David Lewis's theories about possible worlds. The contributions all appear to come from individuals who are invested in their topic, excited about *The Man in the High Castle*, and willing to condense and simplify their thoughts for a non-specialist audience.

The editors of *The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy* clearly took great pains to curate a wide variety of topics in this volume, but also ensured that the collected essays presented different perspectives. Perhaps the most illustrative example of this juxtaposition of ideas occurs in the second section, “The World Dick Made.” In the second essay in this section, “In the Neutral Zone, a Libertarian's Home Is Their (High) Castle,” M. Blake Wilson argues that Dick's worldview is essentially a Libertarian one, and that this viewpoint is manifest in Dick's opposition to and criticism of fascism. The contrast comes in the fourth, and last, article in this same section, Bruce Krajewski's “What if Your Hero Is a Fascist?” in which the author (and editor of the volume) promotes precisely the opposite idea, namely that “Dick and his works promote fascism rather than provide a warning about its return,” and that “Dick aligned himself and his works explicitly with fascism” (73). While this juxtaposition of competing ideas is the most obvious and compelling in the collection, it is clear that one of the editors' primary goals was to present differing interpretations of the novel and the Amazon streaming series. This attention to viewpoint diversity results in a much more compelling, and ultimately long-lasting, take on the source material.

Given that the series *Popular Culture and Philosophy* targets a generalist audience, *The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy* is unlikely to appeal directly to specialists of
philosophy or Dick’s works. While this volume may be of casual interest to a philosopher or literary critic who is a fan or the novel or streaming series, or one who desires a quick introduction into a new component of popular culture, the most likely use of The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy will probably be as a teaching tool in a university. As the popularity of college courses devoted to popular culture is increasingly on the rise, a course dedicated to The Man in the High Castle would surely attract a large audience. The Man in the High Castle and Philosophy can serve as a supplement to the novel or series and can provide a vector through which students can begin to examine popular culture through an academic lens.

Park and Park frame their anthology of fiction between two nonfiction essays: Sunyoung Park’s “Introduction” opens the volume and contextualizes the history of science fiction in Korea. Park notes that the genre was introduced in the early twentieth century through translations of works by H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Karl Čapek, and others, with works by Korean writers not opening into the genre market until the 1950s. Park names significant authors and works like Han Nagwon’s *The Venus Expeditions* (1962-64, *Keumseong tamheomdae*), Cho Sehui’s *The Dwarf* (1975-78, *Nanjangiga ssoa olin jageun gong*), and Bok Geo-il’s *In Search of an Epitaph* (1987, *Bimyeongeul chajaseo*). Of these classics, only *The Dwarf* has appeared in translation, in a University of Hawaii Press edition published in 2006. Though Park states that science fiction is a vital and integral element of contemporary Korean popular culture, the focus on dystopic and political science fiction presented is at odds with the broader possibilities of the genre produced in other media (such as the numerous romances, comedies, and fantasies portrayed in television genres). Is literary SF so unrelentingly gloomy then?

The fiction selections themselves seem to imply it, at least. Three pieces are excerpts from novels: Mun Yunseong’s *Perfect Society*, Choi In-hun’s *Empire Radio, Live Transmission,*
both from 1967, and Kim Young-ha’s 2007 Quiz Show; the remaining nine works are all short stories from 2005 and later. Each selection is prefaced by a brief introduction to the author and short description of the following work, meant to lend context and gesture at criticism, followed by a black and white illustration. Works are organized chronologically, so the reader can intuit a gradual shift and evolution over fifty years. A pair of stories particularly stand out: Lim Taewoon's “Storm Between My Teeth” plays, albeit inelegantly, with problems of race and discrimination, as aliens battle with one another on Earth. The main character is simultaneously Jamui, a teenaged immigrant from Kenya, and Remitolppoñawi, a young warrior facing his rite of passage. Kim Changgyu’s “Our Banished World” is a response to the real-life 2014 MV Sewol ferry disaster that killed hundreds of schoolchildren; in this fictionalized version, schoolchildren are loaded onto a ferry meant to save them from the deletion of their digital simulation world. Both stories are told in spare, blunt prose that makes the extraordinary, normal, and the horrific, everyday—indicative, in their own ways, of the hallmarks of this anthology.

The collection closes with Sang Joon Park’s “Appendix: A Brief History of South Korean SF Fandom.” Park appraises the history of SF fandom, focusing on the transition from print readers in the middle and latter twentieth century to the digital consumers of the twenty-first. No mention is made of transformative fan cultures, though a recent book by Jungmin Kwon, Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies (University of Iowa Press, 2019) fills that gap in some respects. A single paragraph is devoted to the 2018 establishment of the Korean Science Fiction Association, of which Park is president, but aside from referencing its appearances at three major conventions it is unclear who or what the organization actually represents. Rightly or wrongly, I am left with the impression of Korean SF fandom as being like that of the American old guard: overwhelmingly male and print-focused. Whether it is as out of touch and culturally irrelevant as its American counterpart, I have no idea, but sincerely hope not.

This was an incredibly challenging book to read, less because of the text’s contents per se, but more their presentation and format. Paragraphs are reverse-indented, with the first line of each section left-justified and the remaining lines indented. It’s unclear why this choice was made—perhaps to maintain character formatting as it is used in Korea?—and one that I was not prepared for as a reader. The peculiar decision was also made to render the capital “S” as a section sign ($) in the essays, such that Park and Park frequently reference “$F” and “$outh Korea.” Curiously (and thankfully) this formatting was not used in the short stories; it was distracting and baffling enough even in its limited use.
Finally, Korean literature in translation is almost as rare in the non-genre marketplace as it is in SF, which is at odds with the booming popularity of Korean music, television, and film. Indeed, aside from written works, Korean popular culture is generally only a click or two away on all major media platforms (Amazon, Netflix, iTunes), making the struggle to obtain translated fiction all the more frustrating. The problem holds with Chinese literature as well, with only a tiny handful of works ever appearing in English—and these often dystopian, if genre, or conventionally literary (read: dull and/or depressing) if mainstream. Popular fiction is available in amateur translation online, with all the problems this often entails: questionable accuracy, inelegant prose, unfinished and abandoned works. Consequently, even as we must praise how the literary globe has opened in recent years, we should still mourn its cultural bottlenecks: the vast gulf of works that will remain out of reach to those without linguistic expertise. Readers and critics will want this book for its glimpse into literatures to which we thus have limited access. However, our ability to respond in an informed way will be limited until we have additional volumes.
Recursion

Lauren Crawford


WHAT moments in our lives do we wish we could redo? What turning points, what crises? In Recursion, Blake Crouch envisions a timesick world, a world damaged by those who wield the power to change the past, present, and future. After the technology of time travel is harnessed and commodified, a select few can pay for the opportunity to journey backward, to recast their past decisions, or to act with the benefit of foreknowledge. But this technology, far from being a benign product, conjures apocalypse—multiplied apocalypse—that loops, twists, dies, and begins anew, ad infinitum.

In 2018, Barry Sutton, a New York police officer, chances upon the technology after an encounter with a suicidal woman suffering from false memory syndrome, or FMS—a mysterious contagion in which the mind suddenly populates with memories from an imagined, alternate life. Against his will, he is sent ten years into his past, to mere minutes before his daughter is killed in an accident. Armed with foresight, he intervenes and saves her life, and, unable to return to the present, progresses through the new timeline.

It is in this new past, in 2008, that scientist and researcher Helena Smith, with funding from billionaire Marcus Slade, constructs a “memory chair” designed to record memories to improve prognosis and quality-of-life for Alzheimer’s patients. But Slade pushes the technology past the point of medical intervention, opting instead to create “pure-heroin … memory reactivation” (53), a totally immersive, entertaining memory re-experience. When a test subject “mapping” his memories suffers a heart attack and dies while connected to the device, a new power is revealed: memory travel. The chair manipulates time and throws a human consciousness back into a memory, essentially overwriting the past self with the present (resulting in “dead memories” [171]). Slade revels in the power and immediately moves to control and commercialize it, opening the door to waves of potential time travelers. But Smith cannot mitigate the potential for obliteration. She decides to destroy her creation before she even conceptualizes it, using its very technology to undo its existence. In a world with multiple timelines, this proves to be a complex, theoretical problem, and Smith must take the memory journey again and again, restarting before the timeline inevitably ends in
annihilation. It is only when she entreats Sutton, himself slowly unraveling the mystery of his own memory travel, that the two devise a plan to rid the world of the chair before it can fall into the wrong hands.

*Recursion* affirms and disrupts the tropes of the genre, toying with and testing their limitations. There is a nod to the ‘Rip Van Winkle’ time traveler: When the chair (later deprivation tank) “maps” a subject’s memory, they are required to be in a sort of stasis, sleeplike, before being intentionally brought to the “brink” of death. Likewise, the technology—at first—manifests as a byproduct of a medical experiment, an unintended and unanticipated result, echoing works in which accidentality triggers time travel. *Recursion* also certainly owes a debt to Ken Grimwood’s *Replay*, which features a similar method of time travel. (In fact, the cause of such travel in *Replay* is a fatal heart attack, and the main character is transported into his younger self, with his present-day memories intact.) The hinting at a temporal paradox invokes Heinlein’s “By His Bootstraps,” and the alteration of mass memory mirrors Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*. But Crouch interrogates these ideas by problematizing the insertion of a causal loop—although the memory chair exists to make itself, always outside of and within all possible timelines, the other timelines still exist in the form of dead memories. Once the chair is completed in a certain timeline, all of the dead memories rush back into society, a panoply of diverging experiences and choices that wreaks havoc in people’s minds. Their realities become unrealities, and vice versa. It is in these paradoxes that *Recursion* shines, and Crouch devotes much of the plot to exploring the potential logical consequences of time- and memory-travel: How does memory shape our reality? Can we rely upon it, and can we trust it? What are the consequences of multiply manipulating the past? In fact, the title itself hints at the underlying premise: multiplicities of realities that, because of their very existence, infinitely repeat.

Crouch’s prose is unabashedly cinematic—an unsurprising detail, due to his career as a screenwriter. Despite—or perhaps due to—the plot’s extraordinary, complex multidimensionality, the characters that populate it are muted and uninteresting. Little attention is paid to their development, and they function mainly as convenient archetypes to keep the plot moving: a power-hungry billionaire, a hard-boiled detective with nothing to lose, a work-obsessed scientist whose only goal is to help others. Their flatness contrasts oddly with the complexity of the plot, making their stereotyped identities all the more noticeable. As such, their convergence, their conflict, is forced, and their motivations in the end seem hollow and incomplete. Here, *Recursion* often flounders under its own weight, too consumed with the mechanics of destruction and desolation, of rethinking calamity,
to engender anything beyond. That apocalypse is repeated so often that it becomes wholly
denatured, stripped of its magnitude—the end of the world becomes, in these scenes, purely
perfunctory. Moreover, the moments that do have the potential to push beyond the filmic
and expand the genre—the societal reaction to FMS, the buying and selling of memory
travel, the trauma and human cost of dead memories and the overwritten self—fall by the
wayside in service of the main action (as do many of the opening themes and characters).

Recursion, then, might be best understood as a thriller, one perhaps more at-home
on the silver screen. It pays tribute to earlier time travel fiction while simultaneously
embarking on an entirely new path, but, unfortunately, it defers too much to the macro,
leaving stultified, empty minutiae in its wake.
MEDIA REVIEWS

Colossal

Luiz Felipe Baute


In this strangely imaginative tale by Nacho Vigalondo (Timecrimes and Extraterrestrial) the world is under alert due to the appearance of a mysterious monster, out of thin air, in Seoul. Meanwhile, in the United States, a young writer named Gloria (Anne Hathaway) is trying to rebuild her life after several disappointments, as she returns to her parents' house in a small town in the New York state. Then, Colossal (2016) poses a thought-provoking, yet at the same time, quite absurd question: “What if these two apparently unrelated events were intertwined?”

Vigalondo openly stated his desire to create a kaiju genre movie “with a twist”. The “twist” remarked by the director is that, although there is a giant-monsters “bridge”—a direct connection between a children's park in upstate New York and central Seoul—his movie chooses to commit itself solely to the humans’ flaws. It takes the individual dramas surrounding its characters and explores them in detail, and for that, it subverts the nature of the kaiju monster. In the film, kaiju are a projection of a psychological trauma.

Just after being fired, Gloria's boyfriend Tim (Dan Stevens) throws her out of his house in New York City because of her continuously erratic behavior and escalating alcoholism. With no other option, Gloria returns to her parent’s house and soon bumps into Oscar (Jason Sudeikis), an old friend from her childhood. Later, he offers her a job at the bar he owns, which she accepts – an ironic development given that Gloria is an alcoholic. Unsurprisingly, her condition aggravates. One morning, after hanging out the previous night with Oscar and his friends — Garth (Tim Blake Nelson) and Joel (Austin Stonewell) —, Gloria wakes up from a severe drunken black-out in a public bench, by a children's park. She soon finds out that a giant monster appeared in South Korea the night before causing havoc in Seoul, as newsreels continuously screen images of the events. The film informs us that both these instances are connected and that somehow what Gloria does in the park is immediately copied by the kaiju in South Korea. Moreover, when Oscar enters this strange park, he too creates a material projection in South Korea, but unlike Gloria's kaiju, Oscar emerges as a giant robot. As preposterous as it might be for a giant lizard and a giant robot to appear in Seoul as two extensions of North Americans in their mid-thirties, and though
we may think that, from that point on, the story would focus on these projections in action-packed sequences, *Colossal* instead maintains its premise and successfully continues to follow the personal dramas of the human counterparts.

When things seem to be moving toward a peaceful (and conventional) resolution, the film takes a U-turn. Oscar reveals a dark side of his personality and tries to control Gloria's life, first as her employer at the bar and then directly threatening to destroy Seoul as the giant robot. Here the film addresses one of its most important aspects: dealing with emotional and physical abuse, paving the way to its feminist overtones to unfold. Gloria has been forced to face her condition as an alcoholic and now must cope with Oscar's escalating violence as well.

Unable to reconcile from past traumas, both use their giant doubles in a proper stand-off. The battle takes place in the park, with sounds of a cheering crowd from both the TV (that shows what is happening in real-time) and Seoul, resulting in an interesting portrait of a giant monsters’ battle. There is no visual explosion or intricate special effects. Following this script, *Colossal* could provide an interest juxtaposition with Susan Sontag's influential “Imagination of Disaster”. It plays with the schematic structures presented by Sontag's essay and subverts some of its model scenarios. The main character in *Colossal* is a woman battling addiction, there are no authorities being summoned, no international conferences being called, and no nuclear or advanced weapon being built to battle the monster; it's only the hand-to-hand combat between two human beings. There are cities being evacuated, panic in the streets, atrocities being made on a gigantic scale, but all that stays in the background. Although the film concentrates its drama more into (imminent) disaster than actual science, it does not go into the full-blown visual imagery of destruction. It focuses on the microcosm of characters and actions, the uniqueness of its individuals. In this sense, *Colossal* could be categorized as one of those films—considered rare in Sontag's analysis—that chooses to look “inside anyone's feelings” as opposed to a dominant SF aesthetic of the 1960's that explored, primarily, “the purest forms of spectacle” (215).

Unemployed, forsaken by her ex-boyfriend Tim and forced to return to her old parents' house, and constantly abused and bullied by Oscar who tried to control her at all costs, Gloria remarkably triumphs under these circumstances while dealing with her own alcoholism. Furthermore, in a more grandiose way beyond the individual aspects, Gloria saves Seoul. Throughout its undeniable focus on the characters’ personal dramas, the film slowly builds an impressive feminist narrative.

*Colossal* offers, at one hand, a refreshing take on *Kaiju Eiga* genre and monster films
in general, and it can be expected to become a cult classic. On the other hand, its genre
subversions could be analyzed as an interesting case study for alternative SF premises and
set ups, as well as gender/genre critical approaches, contributing to new and exciting SF
formations.

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X-Men: Dark Phoenix

Shaun Duke


THE X-Men franchise is dead. Long live the X-Men. 2019 marked the end of the X-Men as we know them as the Walt Disney Company put the finishing touches on their purchase of 20th Century Fox, the former owner of the film rights to the X-Men comic book characters. As a film, Dark Phoenix leaves much to be desired, both in its reliance on lackluster villains and distracted plot. Yet, it is also a film that raises questions about how we – as viewers and media scholars – continue to understand popular fictional characters and the role of corporate influence on the media we enjoy.

Whether Dark Phoenix will be remembered for its story will depend on how much attention it continues to receive as a franchise conclusion arguably coerced by a corporate takeover. The X-Men and related properties have long been excluded from the Marvel Cinematic Universe since pre-Disney Marvel sold the film rights to 20th Century Fox – a situation similar to the one Disney recently resolved with Sony Pictures, which maintains ownership over the film rights for Spider-Man and his cast of villains. Now, however, Disney can reboot the X-Men under its committee-based, shared universe model.

Arguably, interpretation of Dark Phoenix as a narrative depends entirely on framing it within the context of this merger. First, the merger represents the figurative closure of the current iteration of the X-Men, which will likely result in Disney rebooting the Marvel property to fit within their post-Avengers: Endgame (2019; dirs. Anthony and Joe Russo) Marvel Cinematic Universe. Any film which exists in the tenuous boundary between drastic corporative change (i.e., Disney buying 20th Century Fox) and franchise culture is bound to raise questions about how corporate control, IP rights, and other factors impact film narrative and production.

Second, the uncertainty of the future of the franchise, at least from the perspective of the general public, grants a degree of creative control, which certain members of the cast exerted, as in the case of Michael Fassbender pushing for the introduction of Genosha, the famed mutant haven from the comics, and James McAvoy requesting that the narrative explicitly explore Xavier’s hubris (Couch). That creative control also extends to writer and director Simon Kinberg, who returns to the Dark Phoenix saga for the second time as an act
of redemption (Douglas). His first foray into the X-Men universe was the much-maligned *X-Men: the Last Stand* (2006; dir. Brett Ratner). Rarely does a film writer get the opportunity to re-write one of their own films and take the helm as director.

The story begins in the 1990s, some nine years after the events of *Apocalypse* (2016; dir. Bryan Singer). The X-Men have become global heroes, and Charles Xavier's (James McAvoy) mission of creating unity between humans and mutants appears to have worked. In a rescue mission in space, Jean Grey (Sophie Turner) is struck by and absorbs a mysterious energy wave, which drastically amplifies her telepathic and telekinetic powers and unveils painful memories that, we learn, Xavier had suppressed when she was a child. Jean's apparent PTSD becomes the pivot point of the narrative, as multiple groups attempt to influence her vulnerable state or seek vengeance against her for the deaths and mayhem her uncontrolled power inevitably causes. Among these groups are the D'Bari and leader Vuk (Jessica Chastain), whose home world was destroyed by the Phoenix force and who wish to use the Phoenix force to conquer Earth. The narrative concludes when Jean destroys Vuk and, presumably, herself; in the aftermath, Xavier retires and Beast becomes Dean of the now-renamed “Jean Grey School for Gifted Youngsters.”

The meat of *Dark Phoenix* lies in its nearly uncompromising approach to Xavier's mind meddling. Numerous characters throughout the film directly accuse Xavier of lacking empathy. Some rightly blame him for using the newfound fame of the X-Men to prop up his public image, abusing his mutant powers, and relying on the labor of others (i.e., the actual X-Men) to provide him legitimacy in the political sphere. Much of this criticism hinges on the death of Raven, reducing Lawrence's competent performance to mere plot contrivance.

Perhaps the most telling moment for this criticism of male hubris involves Xavier's direct line to the U.S. President, which is cut off once it's clear that mutant powers are, in fact, more dangerous than Xavier would like to admit. Xavier's entire arc in *Dark Phoenix* is a stunning indictment of the phrase “he means well”; indeed, Xavier does mean well, but his frequent refusal to accept the autonomy of his so-called allies suggests that meaning well is not enough when not directed by a foundational ethic in respect for consent.

Overall, *Dark Phoenix* is strongest when it focuses on Xavier's hubris and the attempt by the X-Men to deal with the failures of their leader and the loss of Raven and Jean. Yet, much of the narrative is given over to Vuk and the other D'Bari, who hollow out the emotive potential of the film. Part of that hollowness comes from the fact that, like many other superhero films, the D'Bari are particularly lifeless villains. We are mostly told about the plight of the D'Bari, but nothing presented to the viewer makes their actions
comprehensible or makes them particularly interesting as villains. Unlike the explicit anti-imperialist message explored through a similar shape-shifting species in *Captain Marvel* (2019; dirs. Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), *Dark Phoenix*’s villains are merely destructive shape-shifting aliens who occasionally talk.

Ultimately, *Dark Phoenix* is a competent conclusion to the X-Men franchise, one which will probably be remembered more for existing during Disney’s continued expansion as the dominant force in blockbuster media than for the strong performances of its cast (especially Sophie Turner and James McAvoy). As an interpretation of the Phoenix Saga, it is about as good as one could expect; the same could also be said of its effort to “end” the franchise. The phoenix is an apt metaphor for the corporatized landscape of reinterpreted and adapted media in which *Dark Phoenix* resides. Indeed, *Dark Phoenix* affords scholars a potent example of this media paradigm, one which tasks us to consider how corporate influence changes how adaptations and re-adaptations are perceived in popular culture.
Aniara

Daniel Helsing


IN the Swedish science fiction movie Aniara, an unnamed organization or corporation is evacuating people from Earth in large spaceships. Images of chaotic weather in the opening sequence make it clear that Earth is becoming uninhabitable due to environmental destruction. During a routine evacuation to Mars, the ship Aniara is forced to veer away from space debris to avoid collisions. A fire erupts in the engine, however, and to prevent the ship from being destroyed, the crew ejects the ship’s fuel. Aniara begins to drift off course.

The captain Chefone (portrayed by Arvin Kananian) tries to keep widespread panic at bay by claiming that Aniara will eventually be able to get back on course, but as time goes by it becomes apparent that there is no chance of returning to Earth or reaching Mars.

Aniara is based on the Swedish poet and Nobel laureate Harry Martinson’s epic poem Aniara: En revy om människan i tid och rum (1956) (translated into English as Aniara: A Review of Man in Time and Space in 1963 and Aniara: An Epic Science Fiction Poem in 1999). In the poem, Martinson wanted to ponder questions about the significance of human life in the space age as well as to warn against the consequences of environmental destruction. These themes permeate the movie too.

The plot centers around the lives of the passengers as they adjust to life onboard Aniara. The protagonist (portrayed by Emelie Jonsson) is the nameless “Mimarobe.” She is in charge of the “Mima,” a kind of AI system that is able to induce vivid images and the sensation of being back on Earth by tapping into people’s memories. Eventually, however, the cruelty of humanity overwhelms the Mima: she (the Mima is gendered) self-destructs. Rather than evoking the ruthless logic of the AI system Hal in 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), the Mima functions as a kind of conscience whose self-destruction marks the moral bankruptcy of humanity and the over-abundance of suffering caused by humans. One of the last things the Mima says is: “There is protection from nearly everything, but there is no protection from mankind.” The passengers, who have come to rely on the comfort that the Mima has provided, become apathetic and disoriented and start forming cults. Chefone, meanwhile, uses violence to keep people in line.

The actions and emotional life of the Mimarobe form the primary focus of Aniara.
And in contrast to both the fascist tendencies of Chefone and the self-destruction of the Mima, the Mimarobe displays an admirable form of emotional resilience. Even though she is nervous at times and does experience panic, she learns how to deal with her emotions. She cares about the well-being of others and wants to make the best of the situation in which they find themselves. She becomes romantically involved with the female pilot Isagel (portrayed by Bianca Cruzeiro), who bears them a child. However, on the sixth year of the voyage Isagel kills the child and commits suicide. This seems to be too much for the Mimarobe to bear. Four years later—the movie omits the years in between—she is portrayed as being depressed and apathetic.

On the 24th year, labeled “The Sarcophagus” on a title card, Aniara is in a state of disarray. A group of emaciated people are sitting in a dimly lit and dust-filled room. One of them is praying to God. The scene ends without resolution, and the next title card lets the viewer know that 5,981,407 years have now passed. The ship, dark and lifeless, drifts toward an Earth-like planet in the Lyra constellation.

As should be evident, it would be difficult to argue that Aniara is an uplifting story. Its refusal to end on a triumphant note, however, is refreshing. It rejects the kinds male heroism, technological solutions, and happy endings present in such movies as Interstellar (2014) and The Martian (2015). It is closer to science fiction movies of the more reflective kind that explore emotional complexity and interpersonal relationships, such as Solaris (1972) and Arrival (2016).

The directors’ choice of making the Mimarobe female puts Aniara in a tradition of science fiction movies with female protagonists—for example Alien (1979), Contact (1997), Arrival, and Annihilation (2018)—and is a welcome addition to the genre. This is an innovation with respect to Martinson’s poem. This choice also changes the primary couple of the movie into a same-sex couple. What makes Aniara especially progressive in this regard is that the movie does not comment on the fact. The love story is portrayed as a love story, period, not as a same-sex love story.

Aniara’s focus on relationships, group dynamics, and the emotional effects of environmental destruction, isolation, and aimlessness makes it a movie worth exploring both academically and pedagogically. It poses deep and serious questions about our present and future predicament in a world marked by climate change, but it does not present any easy answers. Even though Chefone and others attempt to bring Aniara back on course, those attempts do not comprise the movie’s main narrative thread. Instead of making the quest to find a solution to the predicament the focus of the movie, Aniara emphasizes the
importance of love and companionship in dealing with harsh realities. And instead of letting the plot turn on whether everything is ok in the end, Aniara encourages us to focus on the present and our immediate environment. These narrative strengths, in combination with Aniara’s meditative storytelling and visual beauty, make it one of the best science fiction movies of recent years.
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