Make the Familiar Strange: Decolonizing Speculative Fiction Through Postcolonial Visibility

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Introduction: At First Glance

In his 2018 craft book, *A Stranger's Journey*, David Mura writes, "We write to articulate who we are, to describe our sense of the world" (11). As a search for identity—an internal exploration using external media—writing is heavily influenced by personal experience. Stories handed down over generations form part of this influence. One of these stories is the narrative of colonialism (91).

The colonial narrative has been explored in all genres of literature, including nonfiction, poetry, and genre fiction. How do these media confront—or fail to confront—a world impacted by global coloniality? In "Writing Back: Speculative Fiction and the Politics of Postcolonialism, 2001," Nancy Batty and Robert Markley write, "Colonialist, anti-colonialist, and, later, postcolonial themes have long been staples of the genres that figure prominently in twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture: science fiction, fantasy, magic realism, and horror" (6). Speculative fiction in particular confronts colonialism, putting colonial themes at the center of narratives spanning history and the cosmos.

I began thinking more closely about postcolonial discourse in speculative fiction while working on my *Broken* trilogy. In the trilogy, the Mèresr are a colonized race whose history has been buried by the humans who invaded their island many centuries before. The journey of the Mèresr is one of rediscovering truth and selfhood, literally piecing their bodies back together to repair the breakage humanity wrought. The damage of colonialism is not easily overcome, and as I will discuss in the case of *The Lesson*, the marks remain long after the colonizers have departed.

Drawing on my own writing projects and reading, this paper will focus on postcolonial visibility in two subgenres of popular fiction: fantasy and science fiction. These subgenres traditionally articulate encounters with the Other, both in first contact narratives and the diversity of fantastical worlds. Treatment of this theme frequently occupies the territory Edward Said termed *Orientalism*: a mystical and unknowable East, discovered and catalogued by a protagonist cast in the role of the Western (European) explorer (Said 13).

Orientalism and colonialism often occupy the same space in literature. In "Science Fiction, Colonialism, and the Plot of Invasion," John Rieder describes the science fiction lexicon as directly related to "the celebratory narratives of exploration and discovery, the progress of civilization… and the unfolding of racial destiny that formed the Official Story of colonialism" (374). This

relationship can be likewise applied to fantasy; while science fiction often treads the ground of first contact as resulting in disaster, fantasy narratives follow the protagonist's journey to conquest and the suppression of an evil Other. By looking at these subgenres, we can see how colonialism (and Orientalism in the character of the Other) is played out again and again in fiction.

David Mura writes of a class of novel told, not by the protagonist, but by "a secondary character… the one who survives" (142). Mura's surviving character is cast as secondary but occupies the role of the storyteller, giving voice to what might otherwise have been silenced with the protagonist's death. Similarly, writers of the Global Majority[1] are survivors, voices that Western colonization failed to silence. However, the position they occupy is far from secondary. The discourse of postcolonial literature "has become an important vehicle for writers from outside the metropolitan centres of Europe and North America… [to] write back against the empire" (Batty 7). By reversing the lens, postcolonial authors reclaim visibility in fantasy and science fiction, revising and revitalizing canonical imperialist narratives with modern relevance.

Visibility is itself a *decolonial* act: critiquing the universality of Western knowledge production (Bhambra 116). In this paper I will draw on Sara Ahmed's process of disorientation, the process that "makes familiar spaces seem strange" (159). While Ahmed uses this term to refer to the hyper-visibility of people of color in spaces perceived as white, I will be adding another layer to her analysis. "Strange" in the case of this paper refers not only to defamiliarizing coloniality, but also to employ speculative elements to craft something beyond reality. Using hyper-visibility, postcolonial authors work to decolonize speculative fiction and make the familiar space of Western colonial thought very strange indeed. Hyper-visibility in this paper refers to the deep visibility of central point of view characters, their culture, and their lives. Rather than simply including characters of color, authors use hyper-visibility to situate the reader within a space that is (nearly) exclusive of Western Imperial culture. Using Cadwell Turnbull's *The Lesson* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Obelisk Gate* as primary texts, I will survey the theme of hyper-visibility as it fosters empowerment for a future divorced from Western coloniality.

Part One: A Closer Look

Due to our global colonial past (and present), first contact as a plot device can never be fully divorced from colonialism as it has been practiced by humans (Rieder 374). This brings us to Cadwell Turnbull's debut novel, *The Lesson*: a first contact novel involving the arrival of the alien Ynaa to the US Virgin Islands. It is also a novel about reclaiming visibility, even when that visibility can lead to danger.

In an interview, Turnbull cast his novel as one of survivance: "We haven't had the opportunity to truly be in charge of our political destiny. Yet we live. We live because we don't erase ourselves… Writing is an act against erasure and as such a decolonizing act" (Turnbull, "Write the World You Want"). Writing—and in turn, visibility—is a move toward decoloniality.

Turnbull interweaves visibility and mobility, highlighting how the mobility of the Ynaa plays against the immobility of the residents of St. Thomas, while the Ynaa's visibility—and the visibility of the humans who associate with them—leads to disaster.

In her essay, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," Sara Ahmed writes about the "politics of mobility" in a world where whiteness inherently "belongs" and anything not perceived as white is made hyper-visible; "The discourse of 'stranger danger' reminds us that danger is often posited as originating from what is outside the community, or as coming from outsiders" (162). For Ahmed, the danger comes from being hyper-visible as a person of color in a space perceived as white. In Western society, this perception of space is part of the process of normalizing whiteness while leaving people of color as constant exceptions to whiteness (159). Understanding the politics of whiteness and mobility is necessary for looking at The Lesson.

Turnbull's characters are St. Thomians, occupying an island that has been colonized again and again over centuries—by the Ciboney, Arawaks, and Caribs, followed by European invaders, and at last the Ynaa (Turnbull, 40-42). In making a "History of Invasions" visible, Turnbull restores part of St. Thomas's agency by recalling the history of colonization (40).

Agency for Turnbull's modern St. Thomians is limited. They are constantly reaching for something they cannot grasp, "trapped" on an island passed between the hands of colonizing forces (Turnbull 27). Despite this limit to mobility, Turnbull's characters are hyper-visible; they tell the story of invasion, and have the power to name, to speak back against, the Ynaa.

The interplay between looking and being looked at is present throughout *The Lesson*. Mera, ambassador to the Ynaa, is hyper-visible as an Ynaa among humans and as a Black woman who has endured slavery in the US Virgin Islands. Her presence on Earth through the centuries lends visibility not only to her character, but also to the traumas of St. Thomas's past. Mera is a link to the shifting identity of St. Thomas and its inhabitants: she is a product of colonialism, postcolonialism, and an agent of decoloniality all at once (146).

Ahmed writes that "Bodies stand out when they are out of place. Such standing re-confirms the whiteness of the space" (159). While St. Thomians occupy a space of continual colonization, the Ynaa stand out from the point of arrival: "A seashell in the sky, not obeying gravity" (Turnbull 38). Their approximated human movements, their superhuman strength—all place them in a category of unbelonging. But, like all colonizers, the Ynaa are defined by their power, and, as a result, their ability to claim mobility: "the Ynaa *chose* to stay where they landed" (85, emphasis mine). In contrast, St. Thomians are immobile, "marooned" (27). The confluence of St. Thomians' immobility with their visibility comes to the fore at the climax of the novel.

In retaliation for one man's crime, the Ynaa order the slaughter of every man on the island. Hyper-visibility dominates the end of the novel. Derrick, secretary to Mera and previously made hyper-visible by his relationship with her, is one of 25,000 targets of Ynaa bloodlust (234). Derrick and Mera rush to save as many men as they can, sending them on boats off the island before the

Ynaa can get them. In this way, St. Thomians scramble to reclaim the mobility that was actively denied them by multiple colonizations. Mera's own visibility as both ally and enemy in the eyes of Ynaa and humanity forces her to disappear after Derrick's death (255).

At the end of the novel the Ynaa depart, leaving St. Thomas irreparably affected by their occupation. The result is similar to Ahmed's "disorientation:" a process by which spaces are molded to suit whiteness, and thus alienate bodies that do not conform to expectations of whiteness (160). St. Thomas is disorientated by repeated colonization, and even when the colonizing forces have departed—the Ynaa into space, the United States as an "absentee landlord"—the impact of colonization endures (Turnbull 85). At the end of *The Lesson*, St. Thomas is no longer a familiar space; it has been ruptured by invasion. Turnbull articulates the impact of disorientation in the character of the room left vacant after Derrick's grandmother dies from a cancer Ynaa medicine could have healed: "It would be a long time before the room forgot her" (277).

The Lesson is a work of postcolonial ongoingness, using the theme of hyper-visibility to embody the impacts of colonization on the US Virgin Islands. Turnbull's novel turns the perspective of the colonial narrative back on the colonizer, using the vision of his characters to document colonial processes and take hold of cultural realities. Recalling the "moralistic" themes of mid-century science fiction, Turnbull turns them around, presenting aliens who are not emotionless but have themselves faced annihilation (Sontag 216). In the character of Mera, Turnbull gives voice to the Caribbean past in the body of a survivor. This brings us back to Mura's survivor, an observer whose story is entangled with broader themes. The recognition that comes out of this entanglement is that there can be no disentanglement, no sanitization: "the very act of writing… becomes a political act" (Mura 13).

Part Two: The Mirror

Susan Sontag casts the lure of science fiction as "generalized disaster," a fantasy of being released from "normal obligations" (215). I would argue that this is a central theme in fantasy as well: in the form of magical threats embodying unquestioned evil, particularly present in post-apocalyptic fantasy. This is the setting for N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy. *The Fifth Season* sets up the initial disaster, its primary purpose in constructing hyper-visibility for the main character.

Jemisin's world is constructed around what Gurminder K. Bhambra terms "a coloniality of knowledge" (117). This term refers to the treatment of knowledge as property—property held only by the colonizer. This property is associated in turn with modernity and rationality, casting the colonizer as the modern ideal and the colonized as a primitive Other. Bhambra writes of how "colonization invent[ed] the colonized," while simultaneously disrupting "the social patterns, gender relations and cosmological understanding of the communities and societies it invaded" (118). The coloniality of knowledge creates a logic of colonial difference which structures the relations and hierarchies between colonizer and colonized.

Bhambra suggests that knowledge is decolonized through an acknowledgement of "the sources and geo-political locations of knowledge while at the same time affirming those modes and practices of knowledge that have been denied by the dominance of particular forms" (118). Before the cataclysmic eruption that will destroy the world, the Fulcrum existed to keep orogenes controlled. The eruption that begins Jemisin's narrative acts as a decolonizing force, destroying the Fulcrum. But with the obliteration of the formal structure that symbolizes Bhambra's dominance, those who survive continue to hold onto prejudice cultivated by the dominant anti-orogene culture: Essun's existence as an orogene is not made acceptable merely because the Fulcrum is gone.

The Fifth Season is told from three points of view: Essun (second person), Damaya (third), and Syenite (third). However, these three voices are in reality one, told from one character's perspective across different points in her life. Through this narrative structure Jemisin constructs hyper-visibility, not just of her character's past and present, but of the shifting cultural identities that culminate in second person confrontation. These voices occupy a single character at three stages of being—not simply observing disaster, but living it: "To her, Syenite. To you, Essun… you'll be glad when you finally figure out who you are" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 446). While Essun is hyper-visible to the reader, she is constantly hiding from the characters around her, even her own family. It is not until the second book, *The Obelisk Gate*, that Essun begins to be visible to others—and herself.

The threat that arises in *The Obelisk Gate* is a forcible reintroduction of coloniality: a racialized attack on Essun's new comm, Castrima, by a group with views of racial purity and reinstituting the empire of Old Sanze (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 294). Essun's dual identities of Midlatter and orogene are both in conflict with perceived Sanzed purity. As a human, she is powerless. But as an orogene, she has the power to save Castrima.

Essun's visibility begins as a threat to her safety, but in claiming that visibility, it becomes a tool to turn back on coloniality. By claiming the name of orogene, Essun uses her visibility to fight against colonial influence and write a new future for herself, her daughter, and Castrima. It is in this fighting back that Essun interrupts the "staging of modernity" that situates coloniality as the only rational future (Bhambra 116).

N.K. Jemisin uses the theme of hyper-visibility to flip the colonial structure of fantasy and futurehood. Essun's recognition and acceptance of self is a radical act, " a terrible thing… that she loves herself" (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 314). In order to recognize the mutilation of history, Essun must recognize the mutilation of identity as a product of that history. Essun's self-reflection, her looking in the mirror, acts to deconstruct "how the idea of the universal was based both on an analytic bifurcation of the world and an elision of that bifurcation" (Bhambra 116). Displacement, in this way, removed the colonized body from the production of modernity: "History became the product of the West in its actions upon others" (116).

By highlighting how Old Sanze and the Leadership legends "have the air of a myth concocted to justify their place in society," Jemisin exposes the fallacy of colonial modernity (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 91). This is a different kind of visibility, one that is equal parts external and internal, just as the reader is placed squarely with Essun in second person narration. When one highlights the strings used to arrange this history, the universality of Western ideology falls apart. The future—and progress—can no longer be cast as unequivocally Western.

Part Three: Unfamiliar Faces

Postcolonial speculative fiction works to decolonize the future by exposing our colonial past. In *The Lesson* and *The Obelisk Gate*, this decolonization is achieved through hyper-visibility, situating the reader in the position of the colonized. In telling these stories, postcolonial authors decenter Western culture.

When discussing techniques for writing marginalized identity, David Mura counsels us that "the path forward may be particularly obscure, indeed may seem not to exist at all. But then the truly new is almost always strange, and the truly strange is almost always new" (213). Making the familiar strange—in speculative fiction and beyond—is a decolonial act (Ahmed 159).

Of course, Turnbull and Jemisin are not the only authors writing in this vein. Rebecca Roanhorse, in her novel *Trail of Lightning*, shows a post-apocalyptic world where white America has no place. Fonda Lee decenters Western coloniality in her World Fantasy Award-winning novel, *Jade City*, and K. Arsenault Rivera employs oral history in her novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*.[2] In all the postcolonial texts mentioned in this paper, central point of view characters are characters of color, actively decolonial in story and identity. The central characters in these novels have experienced colonialism and the after-effects. The postcolonial future that follows these experiences is theirs to confront and determine. These authors create a hyper-visible space in their choices of character, setting, and conflict.

Through speculative fiction, Turnbull and Jemisin—as well as Lee, Roanhorse, and Rivera—articulate the damage wrought by colonialism and assert resilience and survivance. In claiming speculative fiction as a postcolonial space, they present a future outside of Western "rationality" (Bhambra 116). I hope that my work can add to the growing number of science fiction and fantasy novels that focus on futurehood, visibility, and decoloniality.

Notes

1. This term acknowledges that Black, Indigenous, and people of color represent over 80% of the world's population. I use it to push back against the term "minority" as inaccurate and disempowering to many (Source: PGM ONE).

2. Oral history is a cultural practice that Western colonialism has repeatedly attempted to delegitimize (LaPensee, et al, "Decolonizing Science Fiction and Imagining Futures").

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