

**51/3**  
Summer 2021

  
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**SFRA** THE OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL OF THE  
**Review**  
SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

ISSN 2641-2837

*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. As the flagship journal of SFRA, 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, and individual reviews of recent scholarship, fiction, and media germane to SF studies. Articles are single-blind peer reviewed by two of three general editors before being accepted or rejected. *SFRA Review* does not accept unsolicited reviews. If you would like to write a review essay or review, please contact the relevant review editor. For all other publication types—including special issues and symposia—contact the general editors. All submissions should be prepared in MLA 8th ed. style. 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.

**SFRA Review History**

*SFRA Review* was initially titled *SFRA Newsletter* and has been published since 1971, just after the founding of SFRA in 1970. The *Newsletter* changed its name to *SFRA Review* in 1992 with issue #194 to reflect the centrality of an organ for critical reviews of both fiction and scholarship to the SF studies community. The *Newsletter* and *wReview* were published 6 times a year until the early 2000s, when the *Review* switched to a quarterly schedule. Originally available only to SFRA members or sold per issue for a small fee, *SFRA Review* was made publicly available on the SFRA's website starting with issue #256. Starting with issue #326, the *Review* became an open access publication. In 2020, the *Review* switched to a volume/issue numbering scheme, beginning with 50.1 (Winter 2019). For more information about the *Review*, its history, policies, and editors, visit [WWW.SFRAREVIEW.ORG](http://WWW.SFRAREVIEW.ORG).

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# FROM THE EDITORS



*Image by Tilgnerpictures*

### Summer 2021

Ian Campbell



“Heat Dome” is the phrase we’ve all learned to associate with Summer 2021: while here in Atlanta, it’s just another warm but unremarkable summer, a friend in Oregon tells me it’s like living on a different planet out there. The Anthropocene is already here: it’s just unevenly distributed. We can hope that the science-fictionality of the present will encourage the powers that be and the general populace to consider the solutions SF might have to offer, but given that citizens wanting yet another term for Jim Crow ransacked the Capitol on live TV, this seems rather unlikely.

In cheerier news, we have a great deal happening at the *Review*, including our transition to partial peer review. We believe that with the exponential growth in the serious study of SF in recent times, it’s important to provide a platform where emerging scholars can receive publishing credit that will help them advance. We are of course absolutely looking for established scholars to help with the peer review, so you may expect a politely phrased request from us at some point in the future.

In this issue, we also have the annual results from the SFRA conference, including statements from award winners, reports from officers and a version of the keynote. We also have statements from candidates for executive positions, so please take the time to read these before you consider how to vote. In addition, we have a long-form piece on and a translated story by the Bulgarian SF master Lyuben Dilov, a special section on Mormonism and SF, some papers from the 2021 ICFA conference and our usual suite of reviews.

The Editorial Collective would like to welcome three new members and two members to new positions. Former associate editor Virginia L. Conn is now our managing editor; former fiction reviews editor Jeremy M. Carnes is taking Virginia’s place as associate editor. Jeremy is joined by Andrea Blatz, our other new associate editor; Michael Pitts is our new fiction reviews editor. Josh Derke has also just joined us in the new position of fiction editor, so if you’ve always wanted to write SF, he’s the one to reach out to. We look forward to serving you with more and better content in future issues.



### The *SFRA Review*'s Transition to Partial Peer Review



#### The Editorial Collective

With the explosive growth in scholarship on SF in recent times, the Editorial Collective feels that there are more scholars who need peer-reviewed scholarship to obtain and advance in their positions. As of the Winter 2022 issue, the *SFRA Review* will move to a peer-review model for some of its feature articles. This will happen gradually over the course of 2022: by the end of that year, we hope to be publishing three or four peer-reviewed articles per issue. We will of course need established scholars to perform peer review: you are more than welcome to volunteer by emailing us at [sfrev@gmail.com](mailto:sfrev@gmail.com).

Scholars wishing to submit their articles for peer review should take care to properly edit and format their manuscript before sending it to us, and to clearly notify us that they wish their article to go through the peer-review process.

- Articles should be a maximum of 8000 words in length, including notes and works cited.
- Articles should conform to MLA 8th edition standards throughout.
- MS Word .docx format only, or Google Docs should you not have access to Word.
- Your first page should be a title page containing only your name and affiliation and the paper's title.
- Please anonymize your manuscript by making sure your name appears only on this title page; we will take care of disabling the automatic user tagging before sending the manuscript to peer reviewers.
- Please make sure pages are numbered.
- Please use endnotes, not footnotes. Do not link the note to the in-text number; this will require you not to use Word's automatic notes.
- Please avoid discursive notes when possible.

Articles not conforming to these guidelines will be returned rather than sent to peer review.

Once an article is received, two of our editors will review it and discuss its suitability for peer review. If we do not believe it suitable, the editors will either return it or propose that it be published as a non-peer-reviewed article. If the editors do believe it suitable, the submitter will be informed that it has been sent for peer review. For such articles, our intention is to have it reviewed by two scholars who are qualified to evaluate the work. Our intent is to spend no more than sixty days on the peer-review process.

After receiving the results of the review(s), the editors will decide whether the article in question should be accepted as-is, perhaps with a few minor edits, or accepted only after major revisions, or rejected entirely. We will notify the submitter as soon as is practically possible after this decision is made.

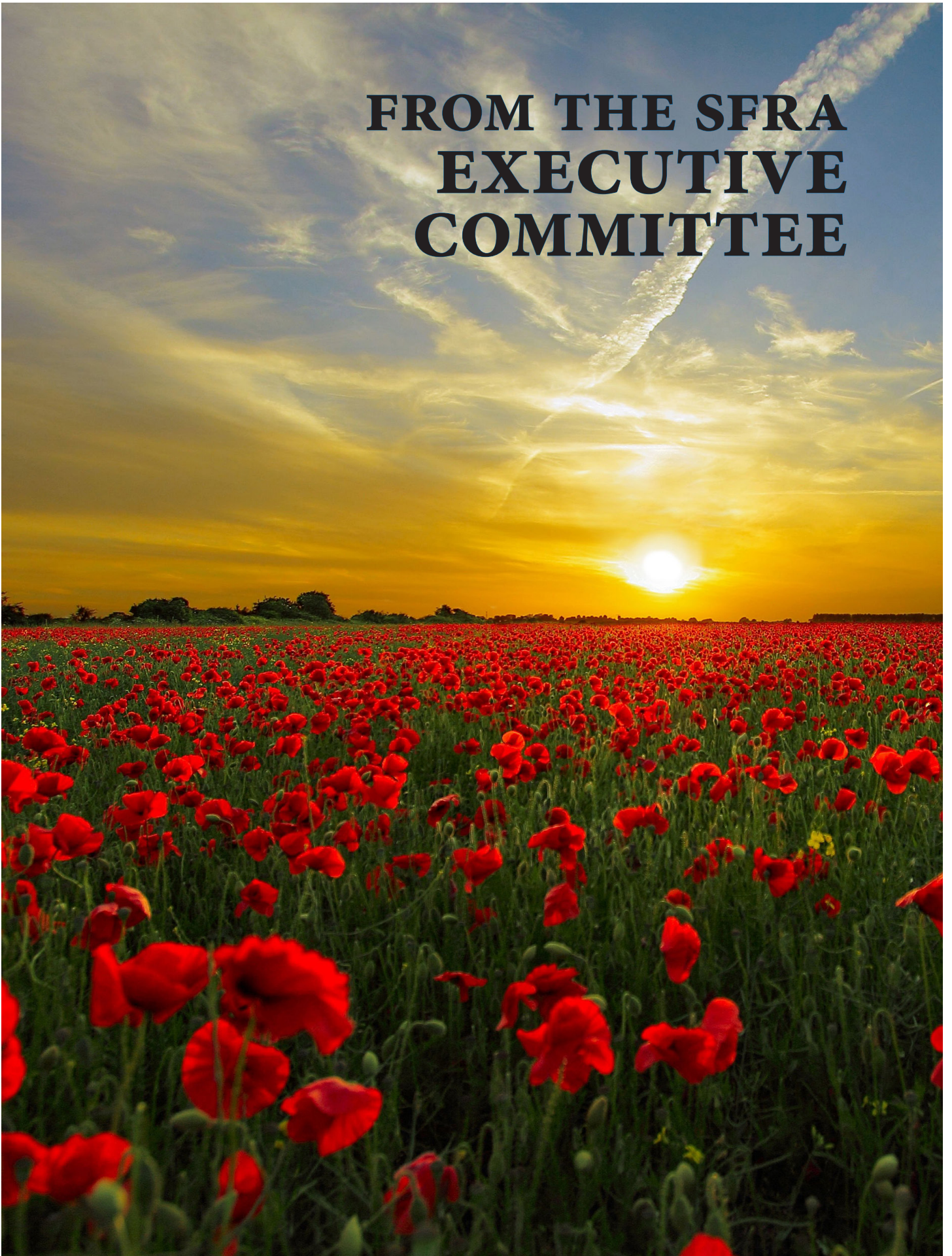
Again, we will be doing this slowly and carefully. While scholars are encouraged to submit their work for peer review beginning now, please note that we will only accept two articles into the process for the Winter and Spring 2022 issues. This is not because we do not value your contributions; rather, we want things to move as smoothly as possible and are therefore being as careful as possible.

We are also planning a move away from WordPress to an established academic publishing platform, one that will allow for indexing in scholarly databases and DOI numbers. This will also be a gradual process, not least because it involves the appropriation of funds; we will keep you posted as the process unfolds.

We look forward both to your submissions and to bringing the Review, gradually, into the ranks of peer-reviewed journals in SF.



# FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE



*Image by Roman Grac*

### From the President

Gerry Canavan



Thank you, thank you, thank you for a successful and stimulating SFRA21! It was an amazing conference, technical snafus and all, and it made me tremendously grateful to be a part of this community. People attending the business meeting and the banquet have heard my thanks already, possibly twice, but I wanted to extend one more round of appreciation to Graham Murphy for organizing such a terrific event; to Keren Omry for working such magic with the schedule; to everyone on the executive committee who pitched in in so many ways; to Carma Spence for her help with the website and design work; to the three amazing keynotes for their stellar presentations; to Aisha Matthews for her generous help both public-facing and behind-the-scenes; to Lisa Yaszek, De Witt Kilgore, Isiah Lavender, and Taryne Taylor for the bracing and honest bias and belonging roundtable; to the panelists on the and to Ida Yoshinaga, Ali Sperling, and Bernie Mendoza for the terrific job workshop. I also wanted to extend some personal thanks to Lisa Yaszek, Isiah Lavender, Ida Yoshinaga, Sonja Fritzsche, Taryne Taylor, Sherryl Vint, and Bodhi Chattopadhyay, among others, for their counsel and good advice.

One of the things we've learned from this strange year is that some of the structures that govern SFRA are no longer working as well as we'd like them to, especially with regard to representation of its many different stakeholder groups. Following up on our robust conversation at the business meeting, we are exploring some possible changes to the composition of the executive committee that we hope to speak with the membership more about soon. Some of these changes will be customary; others of them would potentially require a vote of the membership to alter the bylaws. But we will have a robust comment period before we do anything; we certainly want anything that happens to reflect the will of the entire group. Our goal is to promote an SFRA that better represents the diversity of its membership, in every sense.

In the meantime, thanks to all those who have stepped up to serve on the awards committees, and to those who will be standing for election to the executive board this fall. We are still looking for help with design work for the new plaques and trophies; if you have experience with this sort of 3D design, or know someone who does, please, reach out to me! We are also still looking for a US-based host for the 2023 conference; if you think your institution might be a good fit for an in-person conference, and think you have the capacity to work with the group to plan one, please, let me know! Thanks again to all those whose labor and generosity help make SFRA work.



## From the Vice President

Sonja Fritzsche



Our first virtual conference was a success and attracted a greater number of participants than usual including more international representation!! Many thanks to the virtual conference host Graham Murphy and his institution Seneca College in Toronto, Canada!! Thank you too to Keren Omry who put the program together as well as Gerry Canavan, Sean Guynes, Hugh O'Connell who helped to run the conference and Carma Spence for the program art. The keynote speakers, many high-quality presentations, discussions, and hang-outs prompted by the conference theme—"The Future As/In Inequality"—made it especially memorable. Thank you to everyone who patiently navigated the technology as the conference progressed. Congratulations to all of the winners of the 2020 and the 2021 Awards!! We were finally able to congratulate both years. We especially want to thank the guests and participants who engaged with intentionality and candor in the special events surrounding race, bias, equity, and belonging both in the organization and in the broader academy. The Executive Committee has already engaged in meetings to follow-up on some of the resulting ideas from these sessions. More information will be forthcoming soon. The next conference in summer 2022 will be hosted by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay of the Blindern Campus at the University of Oslo in Oslo, Norway. This will most likely also be a virtual conference given the continued challenges across the globe as a result of the pandemic. It should be a very compelling event, so look for more information as it comes available.

The SFRA Country Representatives have met twice this year and are planning the next virtual meeting in early September. This initiative was organized in an effort to encourage support for the study of science fiction globally and also to help these scholars network with each other. Responsibilities include acting as an informational liaison between the SFRA and the country's science fiction scholarly community through the promotion of events, 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. All country representatives must be current members of the SFRA. If you would like to contact your representative with ideas or for more information, you can find their name on the website at <http://www.sfra.org/Country-Reps>. They represent seventeen different countries. Country reps are also contributing to each issue of the SFRA News, so look for that essay in these pages. If you are interested in being a country representative, you can contact me at [fritzsc9@msu.edu](mailto:fritzsc9@msu.edu).

Please also continue to pass on your announcements and any cfps that you would like to have posted on the SFRA Facebook or Twitter pages.

## Post-SFRA Executive Committee Meeting Notes



06 July 2021

Attendees: Gerry Canavan (president), Sonja Fritzsche (vice president), Sean Guynes (secretary), Hugh O'Connell (treasurer), Keren Omry (immediate past president)

1. New Exec Composition: Development, DEI Officer, "At-Large" Membership
  - a. We will need to rewrite bylaws and poll membership
  - b. DEI Officer
    - i. Someone in charge of making sure EC has a "diverse" perspective and who is in charge of a DEI committee that makes decisions and suggestions
    - ii. Verdict: a good idea to add to EC, will explore specifics in a follow-up meeting
  - c. Development Officer
    - i. Someone in charge of bringing in money for SFRA
    - ii. Keren suggests it's difficult to see how "feasible" it is, esp. given how difficult it is to find people to take on positions like the Treasurer
    - iii. Hugh suggests making this a "board-appointed" position, rather than an EC position, someone who could work on this for more than just a short term
    - iv. Verdict: not to be added to EC but will begin looking for someone to appoint
  - d. At-Large Members
    - i. Voting members who represent some portion of the SFRA community, but don't serve a more specific role, e.g. Treasurer
    - ii. Keren suggests that our organization is quite small and there might be enough voices already on EC; we have business meetings to get people involved; and we are generally transparent as an organization
    - iii. Verdict: Will discuss more with a stakeholder group
2. Conference Standing Committee
  - a. This is a great idea as one of several committees that work in tandem with the EC



3. Next Steps
  - a. For a soon-to-happen discussion with a stakeholder group:
    - i. DEI officer
    - ii. At-Large Members of EC
    - iii. What committees would be worthwhile to get membership involved and feeling like they have a stake in SFRA?
4. Polling the Membership?
  - a. A Google form or Google doc (or both) that allows people to comment on our plan, and then propose a final decision and put forward a vote on any by-law changes.
5. Shorter stuff:
  - a. Elections
    - i. Keren is having difficulty finding volunteers to be voted on for the treasurer position; she has reached out to several candidates
    - ii. For VP, one candidate has come forward, and Keren has considered others
    - iii. Several names were discussed and suggested by the EC
  - b. Award Committees
    - i. An email will go out soliciting volunteers for award committees
  - c. *SFRA Review*
    - i. Ian is gathering materials to present to us on peer review and a journals platform hosting solution
    - ii. It was suggested that a stronger embrace of *SFRA Review*'s role in the organization would lead to greater feeling of participation from the membership, since the Review works with dozens of scholars each year
  - d. Website Migration
    - i. This will be happening at the end of 2021, as we transition away from Wild Apricot and to a new TBD web hosting platform

## 2020 Treasurer's Report

Hugh C. O'Connell



### 2020 Final Account Balances

Checking	\$66,897.90
Savings	\$20,466.82

### 2020 Income (Journal Subscriptions, Memberships, Donations, Savings Account Interest, Etc.)

Total Income	\$15888.57
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### 2020 Expenditures

Journal Subscriptions	\$14,727.26
Wild Apricot	\$1,001.16
Check Order Fee	\$45.20
Adobe Creative Cloud	\$254.27
2020 Conference Costs	\$0.00
Conference Travel Grants	\$0.00
Postage	\$1.15
Accountants	\$635.00
Wordpress/ <i>SFRA Review</i>	\$96.00
Book Award	\$500.00

<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$17,260.09</b>
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**Difference of Income to Expenditures    (\$1371.52)**

## SFRA Proposed Bylaw Amendments 2021

Gerry Canavan



### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coming out of our collective discussions at the business meeting at our 2021 annual meeting, the executive committee of the Science Fiction Research Association would like to propose a number of amendments to our existing organizational bylaws. These amendments are intended are oriented around the following general goals:

- Explain and clarify existing procedures of the SFRA, as well as update terminology that has changed since the last round of bylaw revisions.
- Expand representation on the executive committee through the creation of at-large positions, including a standing “representative at-large” position intended to increase structural representation of graduate student and NTT members and another intended to increase structural representation of international members.
- Formalize the organization’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, including in the composition its executive committee.
- Create a standing conference committee to ensure continuity and best practices across annual conferences.
- Create a development officer intended to pursue growth of the organization, including grant support, bequeathments, and investment of our savings in a traditional index fund.
- Create a two-stage public “nomination” process for positions on the executive committee and eliminate the requirement that elections be competitive.

The executive committee, with the assistance of an ad-hoc bylaw amendment committee, discussed the creation of a formal diversity, equity, and inclusion committee, including the establishment of a formal DEIB officer on the executive committee. This was determined by the group to be a potentially unwieldy and potentially problematic solution, and we elected instead to infuse a commitment to the diversity through the SFRA’s existing structures and task them with implementing concrete DEIB goals. The idea is that the organization should dedicate itself as a whole to DEIB by committing resources to diversity, equity, and inclusion through our existing institutional practices, rather than locating this work in a single committee or individual that can too easily be scapegoated or ignored.

The group has proposed that we set a goal of 50% self-identified DEIB minority-status members and 40% elected/appointed leaders of minority-DEIB status by the end of the next cycle of elections in 2026.

FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE  
*Proposed Bylaw Amendments*

The executive committee would like to thank the ad-hoc bylaw amendment committee (De Witt Douglas Kilgore, Selena Middleton, Taryne Taylor, Christy Tidwell, Dagmar Van Engen, Lisa Yaszek, and Ida Yoshinaga) for their assistance in drafting these amendments.

This is intended to be as public and transparent a process as possible. If there are questions or concerns about any of the proposed amendments, please post them to the SFRA-L list and they can be discussed; concerns can also be raised privately to Gerry Canavan at [gerry.canavan@marquette.edu](mailto:gerry.canavan@marquette.edu) or to any other member of the executive committee.

## SECTION-BY-SECTION SUMMARY OF PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

- Article I, Section 2 adds the word “diverse” to the overall charge of the organization.
- Article I, Section 3 is added to state expressly that SFRA possesses resources that it is empowered to use in pursuit of the goals described in I.1 and I.2.
- Article II, section 2 reflects the new name of the SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship; clarifies that multiple categories of academic workers are eligible for subsidized membership; and changes he/she to they.
- Article III, section 1 clarifies that sometimes conferences are scheduled but not held.
- Article IV, section 2 adds at least two at-large members to the executive committee, including a requirement that to the extent possible one be from graduate student and NTT ranks and one be from outside the US/Canada; and tasks the executive committee with recruiting candidates for elections that reflect the diversity of the science fiction community.
- Article IV, section 3 changes he/she to they.
- Article V, section 2 changes he/she to they.
- The new and altered sections of Article V describes the roles of the representatives at-large, development officer, the conference committee, and the outreach officer (formerly the public relations officer).
- The changes to Article VI explain the nomination process for executive officers and removes the requirement that elections be competitive, replacing it with a process in which members of the organization nominate or self-nominate candidates both before and after the slate of candidates has been announced.

# FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

## SFRA Bylaws with Amendments Added

Gerry Canavan



*Editor's Note: the proposed changes are in blue text in this document. The document available on the SFRA Review website is the amended document without the changes tracked.*

### ARTICLE I Name and Purpose

#### Section 1

The organization shall be named, known, and styled as the Science Fiction Research Association. It is incorporated in the state of Ohio as a non-profit organization.

#### Section 2

SFRA is irrevocably dedicated to educational and beneficial purposes, fostering the common interests of its members in the field of science fiction and fantasy by encouraging new and diverse scholarship, furthering excellence in teaching at all levels of instruction, exchanging information among students and scholars throughout the world, improving access to published and unpublished materials, aiding in building library research collections, and promoting the publication of scholarly books and works pertinent to the fields of science fiction and fantasy. SFRA also promotes the advancement of this field of study by providing financial assistance or by conferring appropriate honors upon worthy writers, students, or scholars.

#### Section 3

In furtherance of the purposes described above, but not in limitation thereof, SFRA shall have power to engage in appropriate fundraising activities; to hold such property as is necessary to accomplish its purposes; and to conduct promotional activities, including advertising and publicity, in or by any suitable manner of media. This chapter is organized and operated for the above stated purposes, and for other nonprofit purposes related to the field of science fiction and fantasy. No part of its assets, income, or profits shall be distributable to, or inure to the benefit of, any individual, except in consideration of services rendered.

### ARTICLE II Membership

#### Section 1

There shall be four classes of membership: active, honorary, institutional, and subsidized.

#### Section 2

(a) Active members: Individuals paying annual dues to the association (or pairs sharing a residence paying joint annual dues) thereby become active members of SFRA. They shall receive publications as designated in ARTICLE VIII sections 1 and 2, have the right to vote on all issues presented to the membership, and be eligible to hold office and serve on committees.

(b) Honorary Members: Recipients of the [SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship](#) shall be honorary members. They shall pay no dues but shall receive all of the rights and benefits designated for active members in part a, above.

(c) Institutional Members: Certain appropriate academic or educational organizations may hold membership in SFRA. Such organizations may designate appropriate individuals to represent them in the association and, upon payment of annual dues, shall receive publications as designated in ARTICLE VIII.

(d) Subsidized Members: [Certain](#) members [as described below](#) shall be eligible to pay annual dues to the association at a reduced rate. Subsidized members shall receive all of the rights and benefits designated for active members in part a, above.

(i) Persons enrolled in accredited institutions shall qualify to enroll as subsidized members. Ordinarily, student memberships may be used no more than five times. A student may petition the Executive Committee for an extension of this period if special circumstances apply whereby [they are](#) a full-time student for a longer time.

(ii) Persons employed less than full-time (nine-month) in academic positions, [including adjunct teachers, contract workers, and independent scholars](#) shall qualify to enroll as subsidized members.

(iii) Retired persons (and persons over age 65) who have been active members for a period of at least five years shall qualify to enroll as subsidized members.

### Section 3

The membership of any person or institution will be terminated if delinquent in payment of dues. Delinquent members will be notified by the Treasurer.

## ARTICLE III Meetings of Members

### Section 1

An annual conference open to all members of the association and such guests as may be determined by the Executive Committee shall be [scheduled](#) at least once during each calendar year. The president and members of the committee of the host institution shall decide upon the time of the meeting subject to ratification by a majority vote of the Executive Committee.

### Section 2

A business meeting shall be held at some time during the annual conference. The time and place of the business meeting shall be clearly indicated on the SFRA website at least 21 days prior to the convening of the annual conference.

(a) An agenda shall be provided to those members present at the conference. The business of the meeting shall not be limited to the agenda. Any member may propose additional business from the floor.

(b) The voting membership present at the meeting shall constitute the quorum needed to carry on business matters. A simple majority of those present shall decide an issue. Within a period of sixty days either any five members or the president in consultation with the Executive Committee may ask that a given action be confirmed or ratified by a vote of the entire SFRA membership. General membership participation shall be obtained in the same manner as described in section “e” below.

(c) The business meeting shall be conducted under the current edition of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised.

(d) Proceedings of business meetings and Executive Committee meetings shall be reported promptly to the general membership through the SFRA Review.

(e) Such items of business as cannot be delayed until the next annual meeting shall be conducted by the Executive Committee which may, where it deems appropriate, request the membership deal with the issue by means of a vote conducted through such electronic means as the Executive Committee deems appropriate. In such a case, a fair time limit shall be set, and such issues shall be decided by a plurality of the votes cast. The results of such ballots will be reported to the membership at the earliest possible time through the SFRA Review, and time shall be made available for discussion of these matters at the next annual meeting.

### Section 3

Other meetings and conferences of members may use the name SFRA only upon prior approval of the Executive Committee.

## ARTICLE IV Executive Committee

### Section 1

The function of the Executive Committee shall be to serve as the corporation and to conduct the business of the association in such a manner as to promote the aims of SFRA as outlined in the Articles of Incorporation.

### Section 2

The Executive Committee shall be composed of the president, the vice president, the immediate past president, the secretary, *the treasurer, and at least two representatives elected at-large: to the extent possible, at least one apiece from graduate students and NTT faculty, and one currently living outside the United States or Canada. The immediate past president and the executive committee, while recruiting candidates for elections, will also make every effort to*

ensure that the executive committee composition is sufficiently representative of the full diversity of the science fiction community with respect to race, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability.

### Section 3

The president shall preside at all meetings of the Executive Committee unless they are unable to do so, in which case the succession shall be the same as the succession of the officers.

### Section 4

The Executive Committee shall meet upon call of the president or upon call of one-third of the membership of the Executive Committee to consider such matters as may be pertinent to the association. In the event of inability to convene the meeting of the Executive Committee, the president is authorized to conduct the business of the committee by mail, telephone, or any other appropriate means of communication. All actions of the Executive Committee shall be reported to the membership at the earliest possible time following such actions by means of the SFRA Review.

## ARTICLE V Officers and At-Large Members

### Section 1

The officers of the association shall be chosen by the membership. There shall be a president, a vice president, a secretary, and a treasurer. They shall take office on January 1 of the year succeeding their election. The terms of office shall be staggered, such that in any given year up to two officers may be newly elected to their positions.

### Section 2

The president shall be chief executive of the association; they shall preside at all meetings of the membership and the Executive Committee, have general and active management of the business of the association, and see that all orders and resolutions of the Executive Committee are carried out; the president shall have general superintendence and direction of all other officers of the association and shall see that their duties are properly performed; the president shall submit a report of the operations of the association for the fiscal year to the Executive Committee and to the membership at the annual meeting, and from time to time shall report to the Executive Committee on matters within the president's knowledge that may affect the association; the president shall be ex officio member of all standing committees and shall have the powers and duties in management usually vested in the office of president of a corporation; the president shall appoint all committees herein unless otherwise provided.

### Section 3

The vice president shall be vested with all the powers and shall perform all the duties of the president during the absence of the latter and shall have such other duties as may, from time to time, be determined by the Executive Committee. At any meeting at which the president is



to preside, but is unable, the vice president shall preside. The vice president shall have special responsibility for membership recruitment for SFRA (working along with the secretary, the web director, and the [outreach](#) officer).

#### Section 4

The secretary shall attend all sessions of the Executive Committee and all meetings of the membership and record all the votes of the association and minutes of the meetings and shall perform like duties for the Executive Committee and other committees when required. At any meeting at which the president is to preside, but is unable, and for which the vice president is unable to preside, the secretary shall preside. The secretary shall give notice of all meetings of the membership and special meetings of the Executive Committee and shall perform such other duties as may be prescribed by the Executive Committee or the president. In the event the secretary is unable to attend such meetings as may be expected, the Executive Committee may designate some other member of the association to serve as secretary pro tem.

#### Section 5

The treasurer shall be the chief financial officer of the association and have charge of all receipts and disbursements of the association and shall be the custodian of the association's funds. The treasurer shall have full authority to receive and give receipts for all monies due and payable to the association and to sign and endorse checks and drafts in its name and on its behalf. The treasurer shall deposit funds of the association in its name and such depositories as may be designated by the Executive Committee. The treasurer shall furnish the Executive Committee an annual financial report within 60 days of the fiscal year; the fiscal year shall end on December 31. At any meeting at which the president is to preside, but is unable, and for which the vice president and secretary are unable to preside, the treasurer shall preside.

#### Section 6

The term of office for the president and vice president shall be three years. The president and vice president shall not succeed themselves in office.

#### Section 7

The term of office for the secretary and treasurer shall be three years. Secretaries may succeed themselves in office for a second successive term but shall serve for no more than two successive terms. Treasurers may succeed themselves in office for a second successive term but shall serve for no more than two successive terms.

#### Section 8

The order of succession in the event of death or resignation of the president shall be first the vice president, then the secretary, and then the treasurer.

#### Section 9

When the position of an officer other than the president shall become vacant due to death or resignation or for any other reason, the Executive Committee shall choose from the membership to fill the unexpired term of the position.

#### Section 10

The representatives at-large shall be elected by the membership. The term of office shall be three years; representatives may succeed themselves in office for a second successive term but shall serve for no more than two successive terms. The at-large members shall represent the interests of the membership at large to the executive committee. The representatives at-large will be voting members of the Executive Committee.

#### Section 11

Officers, members of the Executive Committee, and members of the association shall not be entitled to any compensation for their service but shall be entitled to reimbursement for their expenses in carrying out such duties as may be designated to them.

#### Section 12

The office of the web director shall be responsible for the maintenance of the SFRA website. The web director will report to the Executive Committee and will update the contents and format of the website as deemed appropriate by the Executive Committee. The web director will be appointed by the Executive Committee, and will serve an open-ended term, which can be terminated by either the web director or the Executive Committee. The web director shall not be a member of the Executive Committee.

#### Section 13

The outreach officer will organize, in coordination with the vice president, the various internet and social media outlets, in order to publicize and further the goals and mission of the organization. They will also be responsible for seeking opportunities for collaboration and outreach with other scholarly organizations, especially organizations that serve populations that have historically been underrepresented in SFRA. The outreach officer will be appointed by the Executive Committee and will serve a three-year term, which can be terminated by either the outreach officer or the Executive Committee. The outreach officer shall not be a member of the Executive Committee.

#### Section 14

The SFRA Review editor(s) shall be appointed by the president and confirmed by the Executive Committee; editor(s) shall serve for a three-year period with the first year to be probationary. Editor(s) shall be responsible for electronic preparation of the SFRA Review, for obtaining and maintaining advertising, for coordinating print-on-demand requests, for coordinating other electronic sales mechanisms (such as links to online stores), and for fulfilling back issue requests.

FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE  
*Bylaws with Amendments*

Section 15

A development officer shall be appointed by the president and confirmed by the Executive Committee. The development officer shall work with the president and the treasurer to invest SFRA's assets, as well as seek grants and other sources of significant institutional funding for the organization and coordinate bequeathments and donations. The development officer will be appointed by the Executive Committee and will serve an open-ended term, which can be terminated by either the development officer or the Executive Committee. The development officer shall not be a member of the Executive Committee.

Section 16

A standing conference committee shall be appointed by the president and confirmed by the Executive Committee. The purpose of this committee is to select the host of future annual conferences, as well as to assist the host with the selection of a theme, keynote speakers, and programming. This committee will understand that its goal is to ensure that annual meetings of the SFRA reflect the full diversity of the membership at all levels. This committee shall consist of at least three members, including (1) a chair; (2) the host of the most recently held conference; and (3) the host of the next upcoming conference. Additional members may be appointed by the president with the approval of the executive committee. Non-host members, including the chair, will serve three-year terms.

ARTICLE VI Elections

Section 1

Elections shall be held for three-year terms. The president and secretary will be elected in 2019 (to serve from January 2020 through December 2022) and every three years thereafter. The vice president and treasurer will be elected 2018 (to serve from January 2019 through December 2021) and every three years thereafter. The at-large members will be elected in 2023 and every three years thereafter.

Section 2

The general membership shall elect the president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and representatives at-large as set forth in ARTICLE V.

Section 3

In each year in which elections are required, the Executive Committee shall establish a time and date by which ballots for the election of officers must be received, which date shall be known as the election date.

Section 4

The immediate past president, in consultation with the Executive Committee, shall submit a slate of candidates for each position to be filled at least 60 days prior to the election day. These candidates will be nominated by current members (self-nominations and nomination by current

members of the Executive Committee will be allowed). The immediate past president shall notify the membership in the SFRA Review, and all other appropriate and available electronic and social outlets, of this slate of candidates. Within 30 days of the publication of this slate of candidates in the SFRA Review, additional candidates may be nominated by submission of a petition signed by at least five persons of the membership in good standing entitled to vote in the election to the secretary of the association. At the end of this 30-day period nominations shall be closed and the ballot shall be prepared.

#### Section 5

Not later than October 1 of the election year, a ballot containing the names of the nominees shall be made available to the membership via a secure electronic, online voting format. The voting process will remain open for a four-week period.

#### Section 6

Except as provided in these Bylaws, the Executive Committee shall provide for administrative workings of the elections and the method of return and receipt of ballots cast by the membership. Except as otherwise specified herein, the immediate past president shall be responsible for conducting the election including the preparation and counting of ballots.

#### Section 7

Those candidates receiving a plurality of the votes cast shall be elected.

#### Section 8

The Executive Committee may fix a time not more than 60 days prior to the date of any meeting of the membership or date of election as a record date for the determination of the persons holding membership entitled to notice and to vote at such meetings or election.

### ARTICLE VII Dues

#### Section 1

The annual dues shall be set annually by the Executive Committee.

### ARTICLE VIII Publications

#### Section 1

All members of the SFRA will automatically receive the publications which are recognized as official publications of the SFRA, which are listed in section 2, below.

#### Section 2

The SFRA Review is an official publication of the SFRA and shall be published four times per year or as directed by the Executive Committee. The expenses of the SFRA Review shall be paid from the association's general fund.

### Section 3

SFRA will continue to explore ways in which to sponsor and promote future publication of material valuable to the study of science fiction in the various media.

### Section 4

Arrangements involving publications will be made by the president of the association with advice and consent of the Executive Committee, and such arrangements shall be reported to the general membership at the earliest time after completion through the medium of the SFRA Review.

## ARTICLE IX Affiliate Organizations

### Section 1

Appropriate regional, subject matter, and other special interest groups may seek affiliation with the Science Fiction Research Association. Such affiliation must be approved by the general membership upon recommendation of the Executive Committee. Such recommendation shall be made only following approval by the committee of the group's constitution, Bylaws, and fiscal procedures.

## ARTICLE X Assignment of Assets

### Section 1

Should SFRA cease to be a viable organization, dissolution shall be effected in the same manner as amending the Bylaws described in Article XI.

### Section 2

In the case of a dissolution, the Executive Committee shall determine at that time to which qualified tax exempt fund, foundation, and/or corporation organized or operating for charitable or educational purposes any SFRA assets remaining after payment of debts or provisions shall be distributed and paid.

## ARTICLE XI Amendments

### Section 1

Amendments to these Bylaws shall be proposed by the Executive Committee or by petition to the committee by no fewer than five percent of the persons holding membership in the association at the time of presentation of the petition to the Executive Committee.

### Section 2

The proposed amendments shall be distributed by appropriate electronic and social media 60 days prior to the meeting or the voting process.

### Section 3

The membership may by a majority vote of the membership present and voting at a meeting or by a majority of votes cast in electronic voting pass such an amendment.

\* \* \*

The following sections were changed as a result of a vote of the membership of the SFRA in October 1992: Article I:1, 2; II:b; III:2, 2.d, 2.e; IV:2, 4; VI:5; VIII:2,a,4. A new Article X: Assignment of Assets was created; old Article X became Article XI: Amendments.

The following sections were changed as a result of the vote of the membership of the SFRA in June 2004: Article III:2a; V:3, 7; VIII:2a.

The following sections are proposed for change/addition by vote of the membership of the SFRA in June 2015: Article II:1,2; III:1, 2; IV: 2, 4; V: 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13; VI; VII; VIII: 1, 2; XI.

The following sections were changed as a result of a vote of the membership of the SFRA in October 2017: Article V:1; Article VI:1, 3.

### Statements from Candidates for SFRA Offices



Keren Omry

Below, please find the statements from the candidates for two Executive Committee positions that are open this year: Vice President and Treasurer. Each successful candidate is expected to serve for a three-year term. Please read and consider the candidates' statements and, when we open our online voting page in early October, cast your vote.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to everyone for their willingness to run for office. Like all volunteer organizations, we depend entirely on our members' efforts. While being an SFRA officer may look glamorous on paper, it is also a commitment of time and attention in the service of others. We should always remember this and acknowledge their participation – thank you Ida, Jessica, Lars, and Tim!

#### VICE-PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

##### Ida Yoshinaga

I am a non-traditional scholar and producer who works between the fields of transmedia narrative theory and production studies. I got my Ph.D. from the University of Hawai'i Department of English's Creative Writing Program, after decades of being in and out of graduate school across several disciplines. In that time, I had helped mainstream scholars become effective classroom instructors from my staff labor at college teaching centers, and also served as an adjunct instructor in diverse higher-education institutions (teaching, among other subjects, race/class/gender in popular culture, women and work, screenwriting, sf/f short fiction writing, and the history of the Hollywood screenplay). As a researcher, I have been writing about the management-labor relations that create politically fruitful dynamics between corporate professionals and Indigenous (usually diasporic) workers as members of the latter class deploy cultural forms of sf/f as an expression of their labor value. For instance, between show creator Ray Bradbury and Maori director Lee Tamahori on *The Ray Bradbury Theater* series of the early cable era; between the Walt Disney Company's *Moana* story trust of largely U.S.-raised animation managers and the Oceanic Story Trust of Indigenous Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian cultural consultants; between indie darling writer-director Cameron Crowe and Kanaka Maoli sovereignty activist Bumpy Kanahele during the production of the film *Aloha*; and between Iranian American showrunner Nahnatchka Khan and her team of mostly East Asian American and European American writer-producers and the Pacific Islander and Black cast on the prime-time network series *Young Rock*. In these case studies, science fictionality becomes a hybrid modality, a sign of creative innovation, a momentary way to signal one's imagination and talents. Not a reified genre (as in the "Science! Fiction!" which we have all definitionally debated over), nor approached with a whole-text sensibility. As an alternative and ethnic media scholar interested in DEIB issues during the development of sf film, TV and transmedia narrative, I research the use of this genre as a business practice, viewing

science fiction as an orientation, a cultural form of media expression and a praxis involving workplace agency (or resistance) and individual creative labor.

I regard the SFRA as an intellectually excellent North American scholarly organization for sf studies which aims to be global, innovative and diverse at this point in its history. As such, I am interested in experimental recruitment strategies that make us appear welcoming to minority groups. Such as (for example): a 2-year free trial memberships for BIPOC or Indigenous scholars; immediate commitment to sponsoring events that center around non-binary and genderfluid (etc.) topics (perhaps beginning with a much-needed LGBTQ+ themed national conference); and outside-the-box, digitally powered, sustained tactics to help our ABDs, recent Ph.D.s and adjuncts find meaningful employment worthy of their intellect and academic training. The COVID-19 era has gotten academia to rely upon live digital communication to run its professional meetings; we can take that one step further and ask how such technologies might help us overcome longstanding class barriers, disability issues and other unequal byproducts of the creaky outdated conference system, as we reboot for the new era. Finally, how do we reinject our field, riven with a perhaps too-aware sense of the climate apocalypse and other ongoing neoliberal crises, with a sense of wonder and refresh our imaginaries so as to continue to help students and colleagues make their way into the future with resilient hope and resistant grit?

Excited about starting these types of conversations with everyone!

### **Lars Schmeink**

I wanted to start this message with a snappy quote, a motto, or a quip. Thinking about my time with the SFRA, my scholarship (and career) over the last few years and maybe even the very strange corona-times that we are living in, I think William Gibson's "the street finds its own use for things" or maybe his "the future is already here, it is just not evenly distributed" might work. Life, career, and certainly research never go quite as planned and I think my biggest take-away from last year is that you must take things the way they come and change plans and traditions to adapt to new challenges ... and organizing the Cyberpunk Culture Conference and the Cyberpunk Research Network were a few of the many things that came out of that year.

When I started my career and my membership in SFRA, something like 2007 or 2008 (not quite sure anymore), I was a PhD student in Germany – not the most likely of places to work in SF (though we did get better, see the German Country Representative report in this issue). When looking for a "home" for myself and my research interests, the SFRA really did shine like the proverbial city upon the hill, even though it was usually an ocean away. So, for better or worse, I organized my own network, the Association for Research in the Fantastic (GFF, see [www.fantastikforschung.de](http://www.fantastikforschung.de)) in Germany and started building bridges to international organizations such as SFRA and IAFA. I was pretty preoccupied there for a long time, but kept up contact with SFRA—I was Managing Editor of the SFRA Review for a while, I attended the wonderful SFRA



conference in Lublin, Poland and I started to write articles and reviews mainly on posthuman SF, especially cyberpunk and biopunk. Many of you will know me from my ongoing editorial work for *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture* (2018) and the *Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020) and now *Fifty Key Figures in Cyberpunk Culture* (2022) and *New Perspective in Contemporary German Science Fiction* (2021).

But since stepping down from the GFF presidency and looking for more international connections and projects, I have been wanting to engage with the SFRA more deeply. I believe, that as a Vice President of the SFRA I could continue the amazing work at internationalization and diversity that Sonja has started, that presidents Pawel, Keren or Gerry have made a central thrust of the development of the SFRA. I have been the German Country Representative since the inauguration of the Country Reps and would like to further develop this group. I would like to help address issues of diversity, make SFRA more accessible to BIPOC, LGBTQ+, people with dis/ability and specifically scholars with less access to financial support. As an association of scholars these are the key issues we will need to address, to allow everyone in our community to participate, to broaden the horizon and the choir of voices that get to do research in SF. My hope is that I can be there to help SFRA distribute “the future” a bit more evenly, that I can help tinker with what we got to get the best and most surprising uses out of things. I hope for your vote and would love a chance to serve in the SFRA. Thank you.

## TREASURER CANDIDATES

### **Jessica FitzPatrick**

I am excited to stand as a candidate for the position of SFRA Treasurer. I have been a member of the SFRA since 2015, when my graduate work on world literature shifted into the realm of science fiction studies. Since then, the SFRA has been my intellectual home and model for joyful critical discourse and steadfast community. I’ve had the pleasure of serving on the Mary Kay Bray Award committee for the past two years, and I look forward to taking the reins as committee leader this year. The SFRA’s dedication to access—conferences where established and early scholars mingle, opportunities for publication circulate, and convivial inclusive networks flourish—are dear to me. Like Tom Moylan’s understanding of utopia, I believe that community requires ongoing effort. As a member of the board I will work to keep making the SFRA as welcoming, exciting, and productive as possible. Outside the SFRA I am a Lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh (PA, USA), where I teach interdisciplinary approaches to SF in courses like Science Fiction and Narrative and Technology. I also direct Pitt’s Digital Narrative and Interactive Design program, which combines the fields of English and Computing and Information to analyze, code, and wire story. Thanks to this position, I have experience in interdisciplinary approaches to SF, budgeting, and balancing evolving organization needs. I would be honored to serve as SFRA Treasurer, keeping us in financial health and supporting vital operations as we continue towards an ever more equitable and accessible future.

**Tim Murphy**

My main qualification for the post of SFRA treasurer lies in the fact that, nearly 40 years ago, I failed calculus as an undergraduate. That failure forced me to change my major from physics to literature, and transformed my lifelong affection for fantastic fiction—science fiction, fantasy, horror, weird fiction—from a hobby into a constant element of my teaching, and ultimately, over the past decade, into a main focus of my scholarship. Had that not happened, I probably wouldn't be a member of the SFRA today. That failure is also pertinent to the treasurer's job because it means I lack the mathematical skills to perpetrate an effective embezzlement scheme or other fraud, so SFRA members can rest assured that their dues will be going where they're supposed to go, and not into my pockets. I promise to be a trustworthy steward of the Association's resources, though I cannot promise that I will be the best possible counselor for the Association's planned investment portfolio, as that would once again require mathematical acumen far exceeding my own. Thank you for your attention.

# **PROCEEDINGS FROM SFRA 2021**



*Image by kangbch*

## Some Thoughts on Capitalist Futures: An Excerpt from the SFRA 2021 Keynote



Lars Schmeink

I would again like to thank Graham J. Murphy and the executive committee of the SFRA for the kind invitation and the opportunity to speak at SFRA. It was a really enjoyable experience and I regret that it wasn't possible in a personal format. When asked by the *SFRA Review* to publish the keynote, I had to admit to myself that it did not feel ready for publication in its current form. I feel it needs further exploration, giving me a chance to incorporate aspects that were cut short from the text, adding new thoughts from the discussions afterwards and so on. But I still felt that some form of it should be included in this issue to mark its presence at the conference, whose topic "The Future of/as Inequality" is just too entangled with the exploits of capitalism to not comment on it in one way or the other. This short essay is my way of letting you in on my thought process. I have trimmed the keynote ramblings and instead offer up an extract from my "50 shades of capitalism" and their expression in science fiction.

So, as with the keynote itself, I wanted to start with a two preliminary remarks. The first is that the ideas expressed are largely based on my research for the "FutureWork" project, which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Research and Education.<sup>1</sup> And the second is a self-position. Given the intersectional nature of inequality, I would like to acknowledge that I am in many ways privileged: a white, male, cis-hetero European. But inequality is intersectional, and I would like to mention that I am a first-generation academic, struggling my whole professional life with the precarity that has become so endemic to academia. And I struggle still to this day without a full-time and secure position, even though funding from a Federal source sounds like quite a feat. The irony of this is not lost on me. This essay, then, wants to explore the underlying socio-political construction that enables, entrenches, and arguably generates these inequalities. Yup, you guessed it: It's capitalism.

Following Chris Harman, I would argue that capitalism is the central reason for many, if not most, of the problems, we are facing:

Capitalism transforms society in its entirety as it sucks people [...] into labouring for it. It changes the whole pattern by which humanity lives, remoulding human nature itself. It gives a new character to old oppressions and throws up completely new ones. It creates drives to war and ecological destruction. It seems to act like a force of nature, creating chaos and devastation on a scale much greater than any earthquake, hurricane or tsunami. Yet the system is not a product of nature, but of human activity, human activity that has somehow escaped from human control and taken on a life of its own. (11)



Thus, when thinking about the future as/of inequality, I return, evermore, to the idea that the central aspect we need to address is capitalism. As Marc Fisher argues, we need to articulate “new economic science fictions” as it becomes a “political imperative” to oppose capitalism and counter it by “economic science fictions that can exert pressure on capital’s current monopolisation of possible realities.” In this essay, then, I want to pause and consider what futures our current science fiction has in store for us.

There are so many different forms of capitalism that it is hard to limit one’s exploration, so I decided against the more “classical” forms such as mid-20<sup>th</sup> century industrial capitalism or European-style Rhine capitalism. And I also excluded attempts to paint capitalism more positively, such as sustainable capitalism or green capitalism, both of which argue that the structure of capitalism can be used to promote ecological policy. Instead, I describe today some examples of what I call the “50 shades of capitalism” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which we encounter in an ever-growing amount of scholarly work.

A good and recent example is what Naomi Klein has termed “disaster capitalism,” by which she means “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (6). In Germany, we are currently seeing examples of this in the way the Corona-crisis is being handled with disaster capitalists making huge profits of medical masks, testing, and app development. And I am sure there are similar examples in other countries around the globe. In popular culture, Steven Soderbergh’s science-fictional film *Contagion* (2011) shows us Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), who peddles a homeopathic drug called Forsythia through creating fake news stories, ending up making millions in stock options.

Biocapitalism, as another example, takes “materials such as egg-cells, sperm or organic tissue [...] as disposable things” and uses them for “processes for capitalist accumulation” (13), as Susanne Lettow argues. The human (and non-human) body—not its labor, but the biomaterial itself—generates value. A famous example here would be the immortal cell line taken from Henrietta Lacks in 1951, which is to this day used for research and capitalist exploitation. Thierry Bardini takes this concept further, extrapolating a “genetic capitalism” (130) that will extend the idea of biocapitalism to include gene sequences, leading capitalist society not just to discipline or control its subjects but ultimately to generate them. And here we are fully in the realm of the future as inequality as expressed in the dystopian worlds of biopunk and its explorations of a posthumanity.

In the worlds of Paolo Bacigalupi, for example, posthumans are specifically engineered for obedience and servitude. In *The Windup Girl* (2009), the title character is described as an object—and here the novel can be criticized for including a problematic racialized and gendered reduction of the character. Emiko, the windup girl, is a Japanese invention created in the image of Geishas to serve the whim of a society growing old. Into her genetic make-up, her creators inject genes of loyalty and obedience taken from dogs and other companion species. A similar loyalty is bred

into the warrior species, so called augments or half-men, in the Ship Breaker trilogy.<sup>2</sup> Tool, the character linking all three novels, has overcome this genetic programming which binds him to military obedience, when his generals slaughter his whole pack and leave everyone to die. Both Emiko, the server, and Tool, the military grunt have been created merely to fulfill a purpose within the framework of capitalist value production.

The economic frame behind the genetic engineering becomes even more obvious in Stephanie Saulter's *Gems* (2013), in which humanity becomes sterile, forcing massive shifts in demographics. Genetic engineering of servile workers becomes the solution to re-establish a growing economy, and posthumans are engineered so that they can fulfill a range of services, from autistic mathematical savants to superabled physiques for heavy work. The so-called 'gems' are property of large biotech corporations and only after years of exploitation are finally granted civil freedoms. The novel discusses the problematics of inequality, the need of the society to have gems work for the well-being of all. For genetic capitalism to function, gems need to be seen as objects, similar to dangerous machinery, in need of maintenance and supervision. In the novel, biotech corporations retain a narrative of differences of species in order keep up hegemonic superiority and the extraction of surplus value.

But not only does capitalism gain from the building blocks of life, controlling and genetically creating life, as Bardini argues. Capitalism has also found a way to accumulate profit from the "dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death," as Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee claims, resorting to "death, torture, suicide, slavery, destruction of livelihoods, and the general management of violence" (1548). Based on Achille Mbembe's idea of necropolitics, Banerjee calls this necrocapitalism. By using colonial legacies to declare continuous states of exception, necrocapitalism is able to define death worlds in which, as Warren Montag argues Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* has found a sibling: "he who with impunity may be allowed to die, slowly or quickly, in the name of the rationality and equilibrium of the market" (11).

By extrapolating necropolitical practices and combining them with the idea of genetic engineering as a capitalist technique, Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018) is a biopunk novel that explores the darkest aspects of capitalist exploitation. On the one hand, the novel extrapolates that genetic engineering will be able to bring back the Caspian Tiger, hunted to extinction because it was in the way of imperialist practices such as deforestations and the establishment of plantations. The ironic commentary of Lai's novel is that the returned tigers are resurrected only to be killed for capitalist exploitation once more, their bone marrow extracted and distilled for its perceived traits in Chinese medicine. But the genetic capitalist practice—creating new biomaterial to be used for capitalist accumulation—turns on society. The Tiger Bone Wine is highly addictive, making it even more profitable and creating a huge farming industry. As a long-term side effect though, it also carries in its DNA a deadly virus that eventually kills the majority of the people—mostly men—creating needs for alternative reproduction of the species. Julia Gatermann argues that Lai here criticizes western science and its interconnection with capitalist practices—in this case, I would argue, a form of genetic capitalism turning towards necropolitical exploitation.

With the effects of the plague thus comes the need for workers, the need to replace the dying labor to uphold the privileges of the elites—so a leading biotech company in the novel clones Asian women as slave labor. But with most men dead, the species also needs another way of procreation. The solution is the genetic engineering of the clones, splicing with lizard and other animal DNA to select for special traits such as the ability to regrow organs and function as donors, or the ability to self-reproduce through parthenogenesis. The so-called ‘Grist sisters’ are the ultimate commodity for necrocapitalist practices, as their organs can be sold to the rich, while their self-reproduction in litters of four to six clones allows them to be slowly worked to death with a constant flow of new sisters being born. Gatermann here pointedly argues that Lai employs these necrocapitalist practices as a critique of techno-Orientalism reducing the Asian body to a machine—a critique that here produces a “powerful image of colonial exploitation and dehumanization”.

But so far, we have a blank spot in our discussion, that of Information, capital-I. There are a variety of ways to describe this—more shades of capitalism. Yann Moulier Boutang calls this “cognitive capitalism” and argues that it “is interested in the valorisation of intelligence and innovation” (41) based on “collective cognitive labour power” (37). Shoshanna Zuboff calls it “surveillance capitalism” that “claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” and uses it for “behavioral modification”. Lastly, Mackenzie Wark argues that this is indeed not capitalism anymore, but something else, something worse. Wark claims that there is “a whole political economy that runs on asymmetries of information as a form of control” that should not be lumped together with capitalism as it is determined by a new level of abstraction:

It may even amount to a new kind of class relation. Sure, there is still a landlord class that owns the land under our feet and a capitalist class that owns the factories, but maybe now there’s another kind of ruling class as well—one that owns neither of those things but instead owns the vector along which information is gathered and used.

Wark calls them the ‘vectoralist class,’ which is exploiting its own labor form, the ‘hacker class,’ people “who produce new information out of old information.” Wark continues: “This is not capitalism anymore; it is something worse. [...] The dominant ruling class of our time owns and controls information.” And vectors are present in all of today’s capitalist practices, be it GM, Nike, or Pepsico. Today, Wark argues, a “company is its brands, its patents, its trademarks, its reputation, its logistics, and perhaps above all its distinctive practices of evaluating information itself.” Vectoralism is post-capitalist in the sense of creating a new mode of production, a new political economy.

In SF we find this new political economy most prominently expressed in the British TV series *Black Mirror* (2011-19), with many episodes commenting exactly on the issue of information, vectors and who has access to them. In “The Entire History of You,” a device allows for the recording and playback of all of a person’s experiences, which leads to a close scrutiny of personal

performances and decisions, every memory painstakingly available for revision. In “Be Right Back,” a new online service creates virtual duplicates of deceased love-one via all their social media history and the information that is available about them. “Nosedive” explores a society based on the rigorous evaluation of each and every social interaction, gathered in a social score that determines benefits and restrictions within this society. And “Hated by the Nation” investigates the idea of shitstorms and social media rage becoming a real threat when the hashtag #deathto is used to kill people with controversial media performances. In all, the series explores different examples of how vectorialism might be seen as the “something worse” that Wark warns us moves beyond ‘mere’ capitalism. Vectors of information, today, are engrained in all aspects of our social, cultural, economic, and political life—the vectoralist class thus exerting new power relations over us.

To conclude, then, science fiction today shows us how strong capitalism (or vectorialism) is still going strong. Whether we have to accept this, accelerate through them, or fight to abolish them depends on our ability to form new economic scenarios in which post-capitalist worlds are possible, in order for us to form them into realities. Science fiction can help us to understand how capitalism impacts us, but it can also help us formulate those new scenarios and hopefully save ourselves from the abyss that we are currently staring down into. Thank you very much.

## Notes

1. Funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) under the funding numbers 02L18A510 and 02L18A511, supervised by the Projektträger Karlsruhe (PTKA).
2. A young adult series comprised of *Ship Breaker* (2010), *The Drowned Cities* (2012) and *Tool of War* (2017).

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# PROCEEDINGS FROM SFRA 2021

## SFRA 2021 Award Winners



Support a New Scholar Award

**Guangzhou Lyu**

Speculative Fictions and Cultures of Science Book Award

**Melody Jue** for *Wild Blue Media*

Mary Kay Bray Award

**Virginia L. Conn and Andy Duncan**

Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service

**Grace Dillon**

Innovative Research Award

**Jesse Cohn**

*Honorable Mention: Adriana Knouf*

SFRA Book Award

**Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee**

for *Final Frontiers: Science Fiction and Technoscience in Non-Aligned India*

Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship

**Veronica Hollinger**

## Recipient's Statement for the Support a New Scholar Award 2020



Guangzhou Lyu

“Unity in wisdom; none shall separate.” This is the motto of the Goodenough College in central London, a student residential college where I have been staying for the past a few years of my PhD. (I know its name sounds unusual, as it is inherited from its founder, the Goodenough family.) People from across the world, regardless of their culture, race, belief, nationality, and academic expertise, are united in this place, all included and welcomed in the same community. Ideas clashing, passions growing, there comes the true wisdom out of an atmosphere of diversity, conviviality, and heteroglossia, where one is all, and all is one.

This is why I feel so delighted, so honoured, and so flattered to be this year's awardee of the “Support a New Scholar” scheme, to be welcomed into such a fabulous community of science fiction studies, and even more gloriously, to be trusted to make recognised contributions to SFRA. Here I would like to take this chance to thank my supervisors Dr. James Kneale and Dr. LU Xiaoning for their consistent and painstaking academic guidance. They enlightened me not only with the nuances within the domain of science fiction, but also the profound reference to politics, history, economy, and society in these narratives. Science fiction can be politicised, historicised, serving as a line of flight towards alternatives, towards the hope that has not yet to come. This is how I read science fiction in my PhD thesis “The Boom and The Boom: Historical Rupture and Political Economy in Contemporary Chinese and British Science Fiction”, juxtaposing the latest renaissance of science fiction in the two countries—the British SF Boom and the Chinese New Wave. I put these two movements under the broader social-cultural transitions in the post-Thatcher Britain and the post-socialist China, interrogating and amplifying the transgressive nature of science fiction.

I would also like to thank everyone who support me along the way: people of the London Chinese Science Fiction Group which I co-founded with Angela Chan, people of the London Science Fiction Research Community who welcomed me as a co-director, and people of the Science Fiction Research Association who nominated me for this award, who invited me to another wonderful community where I could join the unity of all science fiction scholars, writers, readers, and publishers. Unity in wisdom; none shall separate. I will keep this in mind and stand with all my fellow colleagues in exploring the unlimited line of flight connoted in science fiction, with the broadest definition.

### Recipient's Statement for the Speculative Fictions and Cultures of Science Book Award 2020



Melody Jue

It is an incredible honor to have *Wild Blue Media* receive the Speculative Futures and Cultures of Science Award. I am grateful to the awards committee, Paweł, Amy, Lisa, and Sherryl, for their hard work and careful attention to all of the book nominations, especially on top of their extra responsibilities this particular year. In many ways, *Wild Blue Media* marks a pre-pandemic moment for me of thinking about the ocean as a science fictional milieu that one can physically or imaginatively immerse in. While this past year has leaned more on the imaginative side, I hope that *Wild Blue Media* encourages an expansive sense of science-fictionality across a variety of sensory environments. I would also like to thank Colin Milburn, Kate Hayles, Priscilla Wald, and Gerry Canavan for helping shape and stretch my own science fictional imagination in *Wild Blue Media* and beyond.

## Remarks on the Speculative Fictions and Cultures of Science Book Award 2020



Pawel Frelík

The Speculative Fictions and Cultures of Science Book Award (previously the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize) honors an outstanding scholarly monograph that explores the intersections between popular culture, particularly science fiction, and the discourses and cultures of technoscience. The award is designed to recognize groundbreaking and exceptional contributions to the field. Books published in English between 1 January and 31 December 2020 were eligible for the award. The jury for the prize were Aimee Bahng (Pomona College), Elizabeth Swanstrom (University of Utah), Sherryl Vint (University of California, Riverside), and Pawel Frelík (University of Warsaw), who served as jury chair.

After intense deliberations the jury announce that the ninth annual SFCS book award has been won by Melody Jue, Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (Duke UP 2020). *Wild Blue Media* treats the global ocean itself as both a speculative, science fictional medium and an entity that provokes speculation. In that, the study expands the principal focus of the “ecological” turn by engaging with a wide variety of artistic and cultural objects and practices.

One of the judges saw the monograph as “a beautifully rendered, deeply situated study of underwater mediations from coral mapping to deep-sea photography,” while another described it as helping the readers “think beyond conventional Western epistemologies as it repositions cognitive estrangement and ‘diving as method’ as modes of humanistic enquiry that are embodied, ethically attention to their interactions with their objects of enquiry, and reflexively open to making knowledge anew.” By theorizing the ocean as “a science fictional medium of estrangement,” *Wild Blue Media* provides affordances for new ways to understand kinship and connectivity.

The judges also decided to recognize, as particularly strong runners-up, William O. Gardner’s *The Metabolist Imagination: Visions of the City in Postwar Japanese Architecture and Science Fiction* (Minnesota University Press 2020) and Christopher B. Paterson’s *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* (New York University Press 2020). One of the judges praised the former for “a powerful example of how science fiction imaginaries shape collective cultural ways of understanding and inhabiting urban space,” as it approaches speculative architecture with intertwined questions of technology, media, and environment, while another spoke of the latter as ‘taking seriously the pleasures afforded by gaming, even as it demonstrates gaming’s uncomfortable connections to global exploitation and racism” and “not only calls attention to the limitations of the “freedom” gaming promises but also interrogates the play that eludes game design imperatives.”

## Recipient's Statements for the Mary Kay Bray Award 2020



Virginia L. Conn and Andy Duncan

### Virginia L. Conn:

Thank you so much to the SFRA committee for recognizing my work. Contributing to the transnational, complex, and innovative community of global science fiction scholars is more important now than ever, and I appreciate the opportunity to be part of it. Even as the last year of the pandemic has physically isolated most of us, it's gratifying to know that our science fiction community has continued to develop new ways of connecting people and concepts.

### Andy Duncan:

Greetings from Week One of Clarion West 2021, on behalf of a number of new writers SFRA will be discussing soon enough. I am honored to share the Mary Kay Bray Award with Virginia Conn. I thank the SFRA and the awards committee. I thank Alec Nevala-Lee, whose ambitious and fascinating book gave me something to write about. I thank Dominic Grace, who commissioned, edited and published my piece. And I thank Jeannette Ng, whose August 2019 speech at the Dublin Worldcon, while my piece was still in press, was a watershed moment in the field's reckoning with John W. Campbell Jr.



## Remarks on the Mary Kay Bray Award 2020



Agnieszka Kotwasińska, Jessica FitzPatrick and Rich Horton

The 2020 Mary Kay Bray Award considered all non-fiction, fiction, and media reviews, features, interviews or retrospectives published in the SFRA Review over the past year. In a flurry of email exchanges over the past few months, two names kept reappearing in all of our deliberations, which is why we decided to go with our instincts and recognize two excellent reviewers: Virginia L. Conn and Andy Duncan.

Conn's calm and perceptive voice leads the readers assuredly through complex theoretical and political goals of Anindita Banerjee and Sonja Fritzsche's edited anthology on socialist and postsocialist SF writing in Europe and Asia: *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East*. We welcome the careful contextualization and clear synthesis of this review and Conn's writing has nothing to fault it except being (deliciously) dense and beautifully layered.

Duncan's review of Alec Nevala-Lee's Hugo-nominated book, *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction*, is intelligent and illuminating, both about the substance of the book, and the wider significance of the people the book concerns. We appreciate the way the reviewed text's relevance is put to question and how Duncan acknowledges the field's shift in attention to less-known figures in a way that feels respectful and vital. The clarity, strength of writing, and engaging voice is what makes this piece work so well on many levels.

We strongly feel that the two selections are beautifully balanced in that Andy Duncan's review gives us a very nuanced view of the field's past, and Virginia L. Conn's is an exciting look at how we are growing in understanding of the much broader present.

We would like to thank the two winners as well as all the contributors and the *SFRA Review* editing team for their outstanding work!

### Recipient's Statement for the Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service 2020



Grace Dillon

It is a great honor to receive the Clareson Award for professional service. Looking over the list of previous recipients, I feel deeply humbled. You probably know Mahatma Gandhi's famous observation that "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." I think that ethos explains *why* we serve—whether it's professional service or community service—and why we often understand the potential impact of our own scholarship in terms of service, as the manifestation of a broader mandate involving social justice praxis.

I thought that I would use this opportunity to confess my guiltiest pleasure in attempting to enact the ethos of service.

I started and continue to sponsor and coordinate a writing contest that both empowers emerging authors while bringing them into the fold of *Indigenous Futurisms*, an SF genre that promotes thought experiments about how various futures might look through the lens of Indigenous perspectives that have become accustomed to mitigating the historical effects of colonialism and decolonization on their communities. Standing squarely in the present, Indigenous Futurisms storytellers explore the past in order to inform ameliorated visions of future possibilities. Now in its 12th year, our "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms" annual writing contest awards one thousand dollars to the winning entrant, and it's not too late to apply. Our application deadline is always November First. This year's 2021 contest will be judged by my dear friend and colleague Andrea Hairston. You will recognize Andrea from her robust participation across SF venues and from her many works including *MASTER OF POISONS*, her most recent offering in a long line of wonderful novels.

I think of my Imagining Indigenous Futurisms Writing Contest as the combination I spoke of earlier: as service to the profession because it invites storytellers to self-identify as SF artists and scholars, and as service to communities because it brings Indigenous perspectives into mainstream contexts, just as I am attempting now. So, I'll close by asking you to help spread good words about Indigenous Futurisms—about its potential to shape our thinking about the SF canon, and to expand our appreciation for SF's potential to shape social change. Please consider joining our community via our Facebook page. Simply search Facebook for "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms." You will discover how storytellers—artists, craftspeople, fiction writers, poets, playwrights, academics, and others—now *live* Indigenous Futurisms in ways that I never

SFRA 2021 Awards  
*Recipient's Statement for the Clareson Award*

anticipated when I first introduced the term and began promoting its healing potential so many years ago. Let your students and your colleagues know about Imagining Indigenous Futurisms, both the writing contest that incentivizes it but, more importantly, as a social justice movement that gifts us with opportunities to find ourselves by losing ourselves in the service of others.

Thank you, again, to the Clareson Committee, to my SFRA friends and colleagues, and to you. I am deeply grateful.

## Remarks on the Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service 2020



Sherryl Vint

The Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service recognizes excellence in science-fiction teaching, editing, reviewing, editorial writing, publishing, organizing meetings, mentoring, and leadership in sf organizations. This year's winner, Grace Dillon (Anishinaabe), is an exemplary model of transformative service. It is no exaggeration to say that her work has established a new area of scholarship within sf studies, that of Indigenous Futurisms.

At Portland State University, Grace is a professor of Indigenous Nations Studies in the School of Gender, Race, and Nations. This school brings together work in Black, Latinx, gender, sexuality, and Indigenous Studies and is a remarkable innovation in academic organization within the US system overall. Grace's many contributions to the campus played a role in making it possible to establish the school through her pioneering work in bringing together Indigenous theory and science fiction scholarship. As anyone who has the pleasure of meeting Grace's students at conferences can attest, she is a dedicated and caring mentor who takes seriously the responsibility to nurture the next generation of voices, thus to enable them to build on the solid foundations she has developed. She teaches a wide range of courses, from Native American and Indigenous studies, to science fiction; from Indigenous cinema, popular culture, race and social justice, to early modern literature.

Trained as a Shakespearean scholar, Grace's scholarship on Indigeneity and sf has built a bridge between the fields of sf studies and Indigenous studies. From this space created by her scholarly, editorial, and pedagogical work has emerged some of the most exciting work in the field. From her early generosity in curating and sharing short films created by Indigenous artists at the annual International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, to her two edited collections—*Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (U of Arizona P, 2012) and *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest* (Oregon State UP, 2003)—Grace has introduced the field and the world to previously neglected artists and frameworks. This editorial work is important work of both curation and theorization: it brings into prominence neglected voices and offers a new framework through which to understand how Indigenous cultures and knowledges produce distinctive kinds of science fiction.

Today Grace Dillon is one of the most sought-after keynote speakers for conferences on social justice and activism, futurity and imagination, Indigenous cultures and the arts; these invitations recognize the centrality of her role in creating the conditions for the more diverse field we all benefit from today. With Nalo Hopkinson, Kristine Ong Muslim, Sunil Patel, and Nisi Shawl, she co-edited a special issue of *Lightspeed Magazine* (June 2016): "People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction!"—an issue that celebrates the ever-expanding range of voices and experiences finally

receiving their due recognition as part of sf. Grace's pioneering work in bringing recognition to the work of Indigenous authors and filmmakers through her scholarship, her organizing work of discussion panels and screenings, and her mentoring of artists and students was integral to starting this journey toward a more inclusive and politically engaged sf field.

Many of you probably knew about these accomplishments already because Grace is such a shining star in our midst. But she is also the most generous and modest of scholars, promoting others rather than her own work, smoothing the path for others who follow after her rather than seeking simply to rise. The Imagining Indigenous Futurism Award, now in its 11th year, and the annual competitions that have promoted even more work in the field, can be directly traced to her interventions and support. We all—existing scholars, students, and creators, and those yet to come—inhabit a better and more innovative field because of her transformative contributions.

In short, it is difficult to imagine a more deserving recipient of the Distinguished Service Award than Grace Dillon. She embodies the generosity and care that characterize true service and community building. The Clareson Awards Committee takes great pleasure in presenting this much deserved award to the 2021 winner, Grace Dillon.

## Remarks on the Innovative Research Award 2020



Stefan “Steve” Rabitsch

Over the past three years, it has been my pleasure to serve on the SFRA Innovative Research Award committee, chairing the committee this past cycle. The current committee consists of Ali Sperling, Gerry Canavan, and myself. I guess nobody needs to be reminded of the fact that our field is vibrant and growing in all longitudes and latitudes; what the increasing number of texts eligible for this award shows is that more and more sf/f studies are happening further afield and beyond more familiar venues such as *SFS*, *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, and *SFFT*V.

As the saying goes, these developments might be a sign of the times since we are living in increasingly fantastic, as in strange, estranging, unreal, weird, or outright horrific times. Times where science-fictional, or more broadly perhaps, speculative modes of thinking, telling, showing, and acting are gaining more and more currency. It seems as if the proverbial tools of our trade are the only and most potent tools left to make sense of, and dare I say it, counteract the forces that affect our daily lives—from alternative facts and misinformation to systemic inequality all across the board to the necrotic excesses of late-stage petro-capitalism and the anthropogenetic destruction of our terraqueous globe. It is at this particular juncture that the winner of the 2020 SFRA Innovative Research Award has positioned his excellent and timely work. The goes to Jesse S. Cohn for his article titled “The Fantastic From Counterpublic to Public Imaginary: The Darkest Timeline?,” which appeared in *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 47, no. 3.

Jesse S. Cohn’s essay manages brilliantly the handling of contemporaneity without running the risk of becoming dated anytime soon. The essay demonstrates in thorough and far-reaching examples the importance of the fields of the fantastic, of science fiction studies, or of what he calls the “science-fictional” (448) in striking and urgent ways. The science-fictional and the fantastic have indeed “permeated the public imaginary” (452) to a degree that cannot be ignored, and that must be reckoned with both inside and outside of the academy. If we are indeed increasingly estranged from reality, as Cohn explores, this essay points to the way in which the public sphere is also increasingly structured by SF and the fantastic. Jesse Cohn’s essay exhibits this obvious relevance to the contemporary moment and the way it situates the work *SFS* does as a field as important in a way that we would like more people to see. The article does a terrific job taking a hyper-contemporary issue and read it alongside, as, and through science fiction in a way that is just a great read. Cohn’s article is the kind of work that can and actually should travel far and wide, far beyond the confines of our sf studies community. People should seek it out which is also why we think that is the kind of article that should be made available Open Access. Jesse, congratulations on producing a landmark piece of research!

As was the case last year, we found it incredibly difficult to whittle down the field of contenders to just one. There is another text where we thought that this is a piece that deserves an



honorable mention not least because it puts forth a productive challenge to us who work in the field to re-evaluate and indeed soften up the structures and strictures that undergird our work—things that we simply take for granted such as “traditional” text and publication formats. The honorable mention goes to Adriana Knouf for her essay “Xenological Temporalities in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, Lovecraft, and Transgender Experiences,” which was published in *Studies in the Fantastic* no. 9.

By queering the “traditional” essay form and splicing in personal letter writing, Adriana Knouff points the way to all the social justice labor that we as sf studies scholars have yet to perform to make our community even more inclusive, diverse, and equitable. Traditional formats, she argues, can limit access, including some at the cost of excluding others. The shifting between forms and genres—from the epistolary to the highly technical, to literary criticism—enacts a kind of science fiction *as itself*. It offers the kind of theoretical work that many SF scholars have long been discussing. Adriana Knouf’s piece is both personal and experimental; hopefully an inspiring example for more people to work outside the confines of academic prose and explore sf studies in new ways. It is a really fun and inventive piece, alongside being incredibly smart.

### Recipient's Statement for the SFRA Book Award 2020



Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee

Thank you very much for this entirely unexpected and extraordinary honour. I wanted to quickly mention three groups of peoples and places in gratitude. First, SFRA and especially, the juries, who have been the keepers of the flame in more ways than one during these dark times. The thought of attempting a book like this would not have crossed my mind had it not been for many of you in this (virtual) gathering. Second, Warwick University and Liverpool University Press for being homes to some remarkable colleagues, students, editors, and publishers. Finally, the friends and family who did not survive the pandemic and are no longer here to share the world with me. This is a small and necessarily inadequate way of honouring you.

## Remarks on the SFRA Book Award 2020

Keren Omry

I'm particularly excited to be presenting this award this year since it's only the second year in existence and we all know that last year we weren't able to properly present the award (again my regrets to last year's recipients).

I want to start by extending my huge appreciation and gratitude to my fellow jurors on the committee: Graham Murphy, Ida Yoshinaga, and Pawel Frelik. This has been an incredibly complicated year for each of us for professional and/or personal reasons and yet we managed to pull together and select what I feel is a very worthy winner for the prize.

The SFRA Book Award is given to the author of the best first scholarly monograph in SF, in each calendar year (had some very impressive candidates, each good for different reasons, so we end up having to compare the apples to the oranges. And yet, above these stood one text that managed to both push our understanding of the familiar and to introduce us to realms of speculation that many of us knew less about.

Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Final Frontiers: Science Fiction and Techno-Science in Non-Aligned India* studies the relationship between science fiction, the techno-scientific policies of independent India, and the global non-aligned movement that emerged as a response to the Cold War and decolonization.

The book is a major contribution to world sf studies that intervenes in current discussions on postcolonial science fiction and on the emergence of sf as a global genre and in this way it is part of a larger engine of creation evident in the expansion of contemporary critical interest in Indigenous futurisms, alternate futurisms, and a general pushback at ideas on canonicity and what that means today. What is especially remarkable about *Final Frontiers*, however, is that in its perambulations through a variety of localized media it remains in steadfast dialogue with the kind of sf material and scholarship many of us will be more familiar with. In this way, Mukherjee's book not only shifts our attention on what we read but shows us fundamentally new ways of reading science fiction in the world, that will likely shape the very future of science fiction studies.

### Recipient's Statement for the Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship Award 2020



Veronica Hollinger

My thanks to the SFRA for this honour. Special thanks to the members of the Award committee—my esteemed colleagues Amy Ransom, Art Evans, and Isiah Lavender. I'm deeply grateful for the support of the SFRA Executive—Gerry Canavan, Sonja Fritzsche, Hugh O'Connell, Keren Omry, and Sean Guynes—and of our host for this year's conference, my good friend Graham Murphy. I'm so sorry not to see you all in person. It's been a brilliant conference.

My very first conference where I presented my very first paper was the 1985 SFRA. Although I've strayed from SFRA from time to time over the years, my alter ego and ex-SFRA president, Joan Gordon, has always lured me back. SFRA's recognition of my scholarship is particularly gratifying, as I consider it to be my academic home.

I've always been attracted by the bright shiny concepts of contemporary cultural theory. Over the years I've written about Derridean archive fever, cyborg theory, postmodernism, performance theory, Chinese science fiction, cyberculture, critical posthumanism, the climate crisis, plant studies, and lots about queer-feminist gender and sexuality. Right now, I'm thinking about artificial intelligence. I'm pleased to report that there's just no end to it...

The one thing that all this research has in common is science fiction, which has always been my "object of study" (as we say in my Cultural Studies Department).

I've been blessed by the science-fiction universe, in my academic job, for instance, in the Cultural Studies Department at Trent University. For most of the last two decades that I worked there, I taught an average of two full-year courses on science fiction every year, including a fourth-year honours seminar that was absolutely mine to do with as I pleased. I've had many opportunities to introduce younger students to the amazements of science fiction and many opportunities to talk about science fiction with smart and interested more experienced students. It's been a great gift to have a job where my teaching and my research have so often intersected.

In the same year that I began at Trent—1990—I began my stint as co-editor of *Science Fiction Studies* and, although I've retired from Trent, I am still deeply engaged with that wonderful project. It has situated me at one of the key sites of sf scholarship in English for all of my academic life and helped me to keep up to date on work by a diversity of scholars, all of whom are deeply engaged with their own bright shiny objects, concepts, texts, histories, politics, and cultures. SFS has also given me an academic family of co-editors beyond compare: Art Evans, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Joan Gordon, Carol McGuirk, Lisa Swanstrom, and Sherryl Vint, and past co-editor Rob Latham. I owe them more than I can ever repay for their years of friendship, hard work, and

general all-around brilliance. I also want to give a shout-out to two newer colleagues, Moritz Ingwersen and Brent Ryan Bellamy, whose work has had such a positive impact on my own in the past few years.

Given that we're all posthuman now and we know there's really no such thing as an individual, my achievements, such as they are, are far from being down to me. So many wonderful people have influenced, supported, and co-created my work, including so many of you in SFRA. I thank you very much for this honour, and I hope that you will all agree to share it with me. Thank you.

## Remarks on the Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship Award 2020



Amy J. Ransom

It has been an honor to serve on this committee for the past three years, especially chairing it this year and working with committee members Arthur B. Evans, Professor Emeritus of DePauw University and eminent editor of *Science Fiction Studies*, and Isiah Lavender, III, Sterling Goodman Professor of English at the University of Georgia. So frequently, as attested to by other presenters here, award committee service involves anguishing deliberation over a number of extremely and equally qualified candidates. This year, as Art, Isiah and I looked over the list of past recipients of the award formerly known as the Pilgrim, we noted a glaring absence! Our decision to add **Veronica Hollinger, Professor Emerita of Trent University**, to the list of individuals recognized for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship, as the award has been renamed, for 2021, was quick, easy, and inevitable.

Veronica's work has been on the cutting edge of SF scholarship since the beginning of her academic career, legitimating the genre by connecting it to rigorous theoretical turns, such as Baudrillard and postmodernism. As the field evolved, so did her approaches, feminist and queer theory, poststructuralism and the posthuman, and the anthropocene. Her recent review essay of several volumes on the latest thing in SF, plant studies—one of which was last year's winner of the book award—attests to her consistent ability to identify new theoretical trends. Her several dozens of juried articles and book chapters treat writers and works that span the history of SF from Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Wells's *Time Machine* through James Tiptree, Jr., cyberpunk and Gibson and Sterling, to Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy. Veronica is an essential contributor to reference works, an *incontournable* as we say in French, with key articles on feminist theory and sf, genre vs mode, and postmodernism in major scholarly handbooks. Indeed, one of her more recent texts appeared in *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, and the number of her articles that has been reprinted attests to the ongoing relevance of her work. Her writing serves as a model for emulation, combining clarity and accessibility with theoretical rigour, a sense of humour, and the wry turn of phrase. As an editor, she is precise, thorough, insightful, and, again, rigorous.



SFRA 2021 Awards  
*Remarks on the Lifetime Contributions Award*

In addition to the significant body of scholarship she has produced in her own right, Veronica's roles as an editor—since 1990 a key member of *Science Fiction Studies*'s editorial team—and dissertation director should also be recognized. She has mentored the next generations of SF scholars, including myself. Her ability to “play well with others” is clear in her many collaborative projects, including the several books and special issues of journals she has co-edited. Veronica's lifetime contributions to the field transcend the mere scholarly, as she brings humanity—in the best sense of the term—to all she does and to all she meets and works with. Congratulations, Veronica, and from all of us, sincerely, *thank you*.

# THE REVIEW AT FIFTY



INTERROGATING OUR HISTORY

### The SFRA Review at Fifty: Interrogating Our History



#### The Editorial Collective

The *SFRA Review* has published continuously for fifty years now. SF has grown through this period, accumulating a broad, deep, complex and sometimes problematic history of texts and films, creators, critics, scholars and fans. We here at the Editorial Collective would like to invite the creators, critics, scholars and fans of 2021 to examine, reflect upon, and interrogate the concerns and preoccupations of the year 1971, which was a very different time, especially in SF. The creators, critics and scholars who have been canonized were almost without exception white or male, and usually both;. The Internet did not exist: discourse and publishing were in the hands of a few gatekeepers, who were diverse neither in demographics nor opinion on what was worthy of publication. Things we view as necessary or even take for granted today, were still unthought-of, or inchoate, or sometimes actively suppressed.

Yet the texts and discourse of 1971 are one stratum among many of our accumulated history as creators, critics, scholars and fans of SF: we ought not to dismiss them simply because they're often unrepresentative by our own standards. The texts and discourse of that year influenced those of later years, and thus still influence, though indirectly, the texts and discourse of today. In 1971, Larry Niven's *Ringworld* was the Hugo award winner. In 1971, John W. Campbell passed away while he was still the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, but as recently as two years ago, his name was still on major awards, despite his extensively documented history of problematic beliefs, statements and editorial decisions. In 1971, the SFRA and the *Review* were brand-new: SF as the subject of and respondent to serious scholarly criticism was in its infancy, and most theories of how we might understand works of SF yet unformed.

It is in the spirit of interrogating our history as creators, critics, scholars, and fans of SF that we at the *Review* invite scholars and fans of all generations to consider the history that was laid down for us fifty years ago in 1971: to critique that which deserves critique; to acknowledge that which stands the test of time, even though it may still deserve critique; to bring to light that which was ignored—or suppressed. The call for papers below encourages a wide variety of writers and a wide variety of topics, on purpose, because we wish to expand rather than limit our understanding of our own history as people who love SF. Ultimately, our goal is to create an ongoing conversation about our history: to place different generations and different perspectives at the same metaphorical roundtable, in order better to comprehend the forces and discourses that shaped and continue to shape the much broader, deeper and more complex understanding(s) of SF that we have today.

We urge creators, critics, scholars and fans of all backgrounds to visit the call for papers for this initiative and to submit a paper or abstract. We look forward to an ongoing, frank and fruitful conversation about our history.



## Call for Papers: Interrogating Our History



### The Editorial Collective

The *SFRA Review* requests papers centering on texts, broadly defined, that were considered influential fifty years ago in 1971. As a jumping-off point, we suggest consideration of one or more of the Hugo and Nebula nominees for Best Novel, listed here:

Hugo Award nominees:

*Ringworld* • Larry Niven (winner)  
*Star Light* • Hal Clement  
*Tau Zero* • Poul Anderson  
*Tower of Glass* • Robert Silverberg  
*The Year of the Quiet Sun* • Wilson Tucker

Nebula Award nominees:

*A Time of Changes* • Robert Silverberg (winner)  
*The Byworder* • Poul Anderson  
*The Devil is Dead* • RA Lafferty  
*Half Past Human* • TJ Bass  
*The Lathe of Heaven* • Ursula K. Le Guin  
*Margaret and I* • Kate Wilhelm

While we view as questionable and often problematic the concept of a “canon,” and note that the groups of fans and critics that nominated and awarded the following texts were demographically unrepresentative by the standards of 2021 (as were their authors), these works were, nevertheless, considered worthy of attention and esteem at the time, though most have fallen into comparative obscurity by now. You are free to choose a novel that wasn’t nominated, or a shorter work, or film, television, comics, etc., or a work from 1970 or 1972, if that is where your interests lie. We suggest, but do not demand, one of the following approaches:

**For younger scholars, critics or fans:** Choose one of the listed texts, read it carefully, and write a paper detailing your experience of this work of “classic” SF. This could take any number of formats, including but not limited to a personal memoir, an academic examination, or an examination in light of previous reviews or academic work on the text. If you are a graduate student, or even an undergraduate student, this could be a great opportunity for a first publication.

**For more-established scholars, critics or fans:** Choose one of the texts you have not read and write a paper on it following the above instructions. Give us the benefit of your experience living through times that have changed in terms of literary elements such as plot, style, characterization, etc., as well as in terms of society and politics. Or, alternatively, choose one of the texts that you remember reading and reread it with an eye toward interrogating the nostalgia or memories you have of your previous experience with the text.

**For anyone:** Choose a text not on this list, something more obscure: something you believe was ahead of its time or otherwise worthy of our collective attention. Write a paper arguing why it ought to be included in a “canon” of influential texts. What is it doing or saying that stands out as exemplary, and what might have prevented it from gaining the attention you believe it deserves?

**For EVERYONE:** These papers should include a cogent summary of the novel’s plot as a courtesy to readers; they *must* include close readings of the text of the novel as support for the argument you make. The style guidelines (MLA 8<sup>th</sup> edition) can be found on the *SFRA Review* website. Because this call for papers is intended to spark a conversation, we ask that the papers be kept relatively brief, with a maximum of 4,000 words. You are welcome to send the paper itself or a brief abstract to [sfrarev@gmail.com](mailto:sfrarev@gmail.com). Please use “The Review at 50” as the subject header for the email. While the *Review* is not a peer-reviewed publication, your abstract or paper will be evaluated by at least two members of the Editorial Collective, and you may be asked to make revisions.

We very much welcome participation in this project by creators, critics, scholars and fans of SF from all parts of the world and all walks of life.

# FEATURES



*Image by Henning Sørby*



### The SF in Translation Universe #12



Rachel Cordasco

Welcome back to the SF in Translation Universe! It's been quite a summer (here in America), with people slowly emerging from their homes, blinking in the sunlight, visiting friends, going out to dinner, and sending their kids to camp. Contrast this with publishing during these warmer months, when books seem to slow to a trickle. And yet, and yet, we still have some fantastic new SFT to discuss! Because SFT never quits.

Of the five works of SFT that I'll discuss in this issue's column, four are out in English in July, with the fifth coming out in September (I'm looking askance at you, August!). Three are collections, translated from the Korean, Spanish, and Polish. July 15 brings us Korean author Bora Chung's *Cursed Bunny* (tr. Anton Hur), which includes quite the mix of genres—magical realism, horror, and science fiction. Chung's stories here defy genres and also readers' assumptions about patriarchy and capitalism. The first story in this collection, "The Head," first appeared in *Samovar Magazine* in 2019. It's one of those deliciously-disturbing stories that sticks in your brain.

Of Claudio Ulloa Donoso's *Little Bird*, translator Lily Meyer says "there may be no way to tell which stories in *Pajarito* are fiction, but there's also no need. Each one has the immediacy of a diary entry and the floating nausea of a sleepless night." This quote and an accompanying excerpt from the collection are available on Electric Lit (<https://electricliterature.com/the-successful-candidate-will-not-have-a-dead-bird-in-her-pocket-claudia-ulloa-donoso/>). Like *Cursed Bunny*, *Little Bird* refuses to fit neatly into generic constraints, though the latter focuses more on pushing the boundary between reality and fantasy. One character turns fireflies into men, another vacations in her cat's stomach. Sounds like my kind of book!

And then there's Stanislaw Lem's *The Truth and Other Stories* (tr. Antonia Lloyd-Jones), which represents the most recent Lem published by MIT Press (from which an essay collection is due out later this year). Only three of the stories in this volume have been translated into English before, offering readers a banquet of new science fiction from one of the genre's masters. Darkly funny, as many Lem stories are, these portraits of mad scientists, artificial life forms, and more will surely enthrall both new readers and Lem-loyalists.

The two novels out this summer/early fall include a Chinese story about strange creatures who live alongside humans but remain almost invisible and a work of Swedish horror about an epidemic of suicide. Yan Ge's *Strange Beasts of China* (tr. Jeremy Tiang), set in a fictional Chinese city, tells the story of an amateur cryptozoologist's attempt to learn more about the city's fabled beasts. Their greenish skin, birthmarks, and other characteristics make them stand out from

the human residents, but they've figured out how to blend in...until this cryptozoologists starts looking a little deeper.

Finally, it should come as no surprise that the work of Swedish horror I mentioned is the brainchild of John Ajvide Lindqvist—he of the popular *Let the Right One In* and *Little Star*. Known as Sweden's Stephen King, Lindqvist has a gift for turning a simple horror story into a larger meditation on human psychology. In *I Am the Tiger* (tr. Marlaine Delargy), a journalist tries to understand the rash of suicides plaguing Sweden's underworld and what connection the drug-dealer named "X" has to do with it. When the journalist's young nephew gets pulled into the maelstrom, this search for truth becomes more immediate.

And what of short fiction? The July issue of *Clarkesworld* brings us St. Petersburg-native Leonid Kaganov's "I'm Feeling Lucky" (tr. Alex Shvartsman), an engaging time-travel story about hope and resignation.

Thanks for reading, and I'd love to hear what you're reading now and what you're looking forward to: [rachel@sfintranslation.com](mailto:rachel@sfintranslation.com).

Until next time in the SFT Universe!

### SFRA Country Report: Germany

Julia Gatermann and Lars Schmeink



Coming home from the first international academic conferences we ever attended, incidentally the ICFA, the SFRA, and the Utopian Studies conference—admittedly quite a few years back—we both agreed that science fiction people shared an incredibly warm and welcoming attitude that made it easy to catch fire. Engaged discussions over coffee about books, films, and games, which we all felt passionate about, helped to easily connect and make national and cultural borders seem meaningless. Nevertheless, SF scholarship is also a field where difference is crucial and, at its best, is celebrated as it adds depth and can yield the most productive results—both in the texts we engage with, as well as in our interpersonal, institutional, and academic contexts. SF fascinates us because it can come in so many different shapes and forms. Therefore, we were delighted to read the wonderful country reports from England and India and the last issues of *SFRA Review*, which gave us some insights into engagements with sf from (to us) largely new perspectives. We would like to contribute to this exchange and present to the members of the SFRA, a status report on how research in SF is faring in Germany.

The Science Fiction Club Germany (SFCD), a fan-organization, is arguably one of the oldest institutions of sf engagement in Germany. While it was already inaugurated in 1955, it took until the 1980s to bring enough public attention to the field to establish several national awards recognizing the growing interest in science fiction (and the fantastic more generally). In 1980, the Kurd Laßwitz Preis (named after the German ‘father’ of SF) was established, followed by the Phantastik-Preis (granted by the city of Wetzlar) in 1983 and the Science Fiction Award (granted by the SFCD) in 1985, and finally in 2012 the Seraph Award presented at the Leipzig book fair.

Leipzig has become the central public trade fair for the fantastic, connecting literary publishing with comics and cosplay and becoming a hub for fan engagement, while the Frankfurt book fair’s bigger and more established venue rather caters to the economic (and decidedly more mainstream and highbrow) side of the literary market. In addition, several larger commercial and a whole slew of smaller conventions keep fantasy and SF fans busy during the year, highlights being the German Comic Cons (currently in four different cities), MagicCon (since 2017, larger in scope but following in venue for Tolkien-based RingCon), and the science-fiction themed FedCon.

Research in science fiction—mainly conducted by SF enthusiasts—has been developing since the late 1970s, but due to historically rather rigid and conservative structures at universities and a strong focus on canon in the fields of literary and cultural studies (for the most part in German or English studies), this engagement has, for a long time, mostly taken place outside of academia. It fell to individuals and small institutions to begin early forays into the field. Academic interest in SF and fantasy slowly began to manifest with Suhrkamp (a well-regarded publishing house)

producing a book series of collected essays from both national and international authors (among them Roger Caillois, Louis Vax, and Edmund Wilson) on theoretical aspects of the fantastic: *Phaïcon: Almanach der phantastischen Literatur*, published in five volumes between 1974 and 1982. But a uniquely German research tradition was first institutionalized with the inauguration of the Phantastische Bibliothek Wetzlar, a research library, which began its collection and research work in 1987 and can be credited with establishing the first German-language book series<sup>1</sup> on research in the fantastic during the 1990s.

It took until 2010, though, to firmly anchor the fantastic as a field of university-based academic research in Germany. The Gesellschaft für Fantastikforschung (GFF, Association for Research in the Fantastic) was inaugurated in the fall of 2010 during a conference at the University of Hamburg and has since provided a research network for more than 120 members, establishing an annual international conference in varying locations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Its next annual event will take place as an online conference, hosted by the Universities of Cologne and Bamberg under the title “Speculative Fiction and Ethics” from 23 to 25 September.<sup>2</sup> It might be appropriate to mention here that the GFF does offer small stipends for international students to attend the conference.

Overall, it can be said that, over the last decade, research in SF and the fantastic has become a much more respected and recognized field at German universities and has found its way into curricula. Even at conferences with a more general scope, papers on science fictional topics are no longer a rarity (one example would be the annual conference of the German Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies [GAPS] that hosted four distinct panels dedicated to SF). And as a productive perspective to contribute to diversified interdisciplinary research, the importance of SF has been recognized as well, with ‘third-party funded research projects such as Fiction Meets Science, which has dedicated a subproject to representation of science in postcolonial SF (that one of the authors of this text works for).

In terms of German-language academic journals on research in the fantastic, the *Zeitschrift für Fantastikforschung* (ZFF), established by the GFF, has the honor to be the first of its kind. Since 2011, the journal has published peer-reviewed original articles, German translations of key texts from other languages, introductions to international fantastic literatures, and much more twice per year. In 2019, the ZFF has become the first German-language journal to move to the open-access platform Open Library of the Humanities,<sup>3</sup> establishing new and very successful formats, such as a collection of shorter essays under the rubric “Forum”, which initiates academic debates around new aspects of the fantastic and thus serves as an ideal spark for longer research endeavors, or unusual interviews on the fantastic, i.e. currently an interview with former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis about his book *Another Now: Dispatches from an Alternative Present* (2020).

As for science fiction production from Germany, there is a large field of creatives in SF covering a large range of areas, styles, and genres—ranging from the famous pulp series Perry

Rhodan (established in 1961 and still going strong, putting out a weekly space opera) to high literary endeavors that somewhat shy away from identifying with the genre (historically, SF was stigmatized with a low-brow reputation). Examples are Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti* (2009, *The Method*) or Christian Kracht's *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008, not translated into English, but meaning: "I'll be here in sunshine and in shadow"). One important issue for international audiences is the limited availability of translations of and English-language scholarship on German SF. Some (subjectively) selected texts of SF since the 2000s, which have been available in English translation, include Frank Schätzing's SF-thriller *The Swarm* (2004), Dietmar Dath's posthumanist philosophical novel *Abolition of Species* (2013), and Marc-Uwe Kling's recent social media satire *QualityLand* (2017). But if German SF has ever made a big international splash in recent years, then it is probably due to the Netflix series *Dark* (2017–20) by Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese. The show plays with well-established SF tropes of time travel but connects it with the 1980s nostalgia of *Stranger Things* and a very distinctly German sense of *Heimat* (home) and *Spießigkeit* (roughly translates to narrow-mindedness). It is international in its scope and yet can immediately be recognized as distinctly German—a mixture that is typical of much German SF.

All in all, Germany has a vibrant SF community, both in- and outside of academia, striving to diversify and connect with international perspectives. This feature helps us learn more about SF in other countries, and we are delighted at this opportunity to introduce our own community you. We hope that we can further develop and foster exchange and connections beyond our own contexts.

## Notes

1. Schriftenreihe und Materialien der Phantastischen Bibliothek Wetzlar, edited by Thomas Le Blanc - <https://www.phantastik.eu/images/Publikationskataloge/KatalogSchriftenMaterialien.pdf>.
2. Extending a warm invitation, please do attend: <https://fantastikforschung.de/jahrestagung/jahrestagung-koeln-bamberg-2021/>.
3. <https://zff.openlibhums.org/>.

**Julia Gatermann** is currently writing her dissertation with the working title “The Future is Female: Non-Normative Embodiment as a Site of Resistance in Contemporary North-American Cultural Production.” She works as a researcher at the University of Bremen for the interdisciplinary research project “Fiction Meets Science II” with the subproject “Science in Postcolonial Speculative Fiction: Nature/Politics/Economies Reimagined.” She is a founding member of the Gesellschaft für Fantastikforschung and has served on its executive board for ten years.

**Lars Schmeink** is Vice President’s Research Fellow at the Europa-University of Flensburg and project lead of the “Science Fiction” subproject in the “FutureWork” research network. He is a founding member of the Gesellschaft für Fantastik-forschung and has served as president of its executive board until 2019. He is the author of *Biopunk Dystopias* (2016), and the co-editor of *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture* (2018), *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020), *New Perspectives in Contemporary German Science Fiction* (2021) and *Fifty Key Figures in Cyberpunk Culture* (2022).



### The Science Fiction Foundation at Fifty



Paul March-Russell

On 26 June, at our joint AGM with the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA), the SFF celebrated its 50th anniversary with two events: a panel chaired by Maureen Speller, with Roz Kaveney, Farah Mendlesohn, Andy Sawyer and Graham Sleight, and a conversation between myself and John Clute (the latter is available [here](#)). Much genial and insightful talk ensued, and yet—what exactly *is* the Science Fiction Foundation?

As Clute acknowledges, for much of its life, certainly up until the move of the SFF Collection to the University of Liverpool in the early 1990s, the SFF existed as a nebulous entity without legal status. We are now a registered charity and are reliant, for all our activities, upon the support of our members and the generosity of private donors. Our aims remain the same as stated in the first issue of *Foundation* in 1972: to provide research facilities for anyone wishing to study science fiction; to investigate and promote the usefulness of science fiction in education; to disseminate information about science fiction; and to promote a discriminating understanding of the nature of science fiction. Sounds clear enough, and yet...

Long before para-academia was even a thing, the SFF was a para-academic research center-*cum*-network. The story of its survival, and even more than that, its growth, is not only a victory against the odds but also a tale of how independent research, carried out by full-time academics, postgraduate students, non-affiliated scholars and out-and-out fans, can flourish within the margins of academia.

The origins of the SFF are unclear, even to those who were around at the time. Its prime instigator was George Hay, SF writer and editor, environmental campaigner and self-styled 'futures consultant', a man who, as a teenager, had feasted upon the works of John W. Campbell, and believed that SF offered a blueprint for not only how the world might be but how it *should be*. As reported to Andrew Darlington, Hay created his 'think-tank', the Science Fiction Foundation, in October 1970 with a view to re-educating the planet with the values of SF. I say 'created' but actually it was more like a feat of magical thinking. At this stage, the SFF was no more than a speech-act ventriloquized by Hay in performance with a few, notable friends: James Blish, John Brunner and Ken Bulmer.

The formal establishment of the SFF occurred in early 1971. According to Charles Barren, the first editor of *Foundation*, Hay persuaded George Brosan, an SF fan and the first director of the North East London Polytechnic (NELP), to establish the SFF as 'a semi-autonomous unit' within the Faculty of Arts. A public meeting was held, where Brosan stood aside, and Barren became the first Chair of the SFF. And here the first fault-line appeared. Whereas Hay was driven by a desire

to save the world from itself via SF, Barren had the rather more limited desire of establishing SF as serious literature for writers and critics alike. The flagship of the SFF would be the journal, *Foundation*, and its engine, the SFF Library, initially created by donations from the BSFA. Much myth-making ensued. Hay painted a picture of *Foundation* as being edited and largely written by himself, a *samizdat* publication knocked-out on the polytechnic's photocopiers. Barren recalls that *Foundation* was actually published by a small science press, and that it was he, not Hay, who conceived it as a mixture of academic and literary journal. The snag, as Barren later conceded, was that hopes of selling up to 5000 copies via high-street retailers were drastically misplaced. Furthermore, like other areas of academic publishing, contributors were not paid. Nonetheless, *Foundation* did manage to attract a Nebula-nominated short story from James M. Tiptree and a poem by Marilyn Hacker. When the SFF Administrator, Peter Nicholls, assumed editorship of the journal in 1974, in what amounted to a coup, both the fiction and the poetry were dropped (with occasional exceptions, most notably, the all-fiction *Foundation* 100).

From the contrasting perspectives of Barren and Hay, Nicholls's ascendancy marked the growing academic dominance of the SFF. This is not how Nicholls saw it. The SFF had been formally launched in May 1971; Nicholls joined as Administrator in October, on loan from NELP, where he had been employed as a lecturer. Although physically situated in the polytechnic, the SFF was not fully part of it: its Management Committee was divided between NELP staff and Hay's more revolutionary faction. (The SFF's original patron was Arthur C. Clarke, later to be joined by Ursula Le Guin. Its current patrons are Neil Gaiman, Nalo Hopkinson and Prof David Southwood.) The idea of the SFF appealed to NELP because of its interdisciplinarity: it chimed with values which, in the early 1970s, distinguished the polytechnics from the older universities. However, although SF was taught as part of the University of London's Extra-Mural Studies, it did not become part of the official undergraduate provision at NELP. With few UK scholars working in SF, Nicholls became the genre's academic face: much of his time as Administrator and journal editor was spent writing for newspapers, appearing on TV, and organizing events at the National Film Theatre and the I.C.A. He was supported by professional writers such as Christopher Priest and Ian Watson: although, in 1975, Nicholls wrote a jeremiad attacking the New Wave, he was necessarily reliant upon writers and critics associated with New Worlds. In 1977, as his own position at NELP became economically precarious and *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* was contracted for publication, Nicholls left both UK academia and the SFF. He later declared that *Foundation* is 'not an academic journal, for there is no academic infrastructure to support it'. If SF is often regarded as para-literature, then presumably, *Foundation* is para-literary criticism, somewhere between a prozine and an academic title. (Later editors may have revised that opinion.)

Malcolm Edwards, Nicholls's successor as Administrator, stepped-up to become journal editor but left in 1980. His successor was David Pringle, but now there was no paid Administrator: Barren, Ian MacPherson, Ted Chapman and, most importantly, John Radford all took on unpaid duties. The only paid member of the SFF, and that part-time, was Joyce Day, who fronted the

SFF Collection now held at NELP's Barking campus—the largest, publicly available SF library in the UK with some 20,000 titles. There was, therefore, a massive discrepancy between the size of the SFF's assets and its dwindling infrastructure. Yet, despite this, the platform that Nicholls had established with the journal was successively built upon by Edwards, Pringle and, from 1986, Edward James. The SFF therefore became identified with *Foundation* and the Collection—membership of the SFF, though, has always been more than just subscription to the journal.

An appointed Council lent the SFF the appearance of an infrastructure, but in the late 1980s, the Friends of Foundation was formed to protect it. In 1991, when NELP became the University of East London, it removed its remaining support from the journal and the Collection. The following year, the Council took up the University of Liverpool's offer to re-house the Collection and, in 1993, Andy Sawyer was appointed as both Librarian and Administrator. On 26 January 1995, a charter was signed between the University and John Clute, representing the Friends of Foundation, ensuring the safekeeping of the Collection at Liverpool. Three years later, the Friends were dissolved and reformed as the Science Fiction Foundation, a registered charity with a Committee and Trustees. Only in 1998, therefore, did the SFF become a legal entity, some 27 (or maybe 28) years after it was willed into being.

And yet...

Although, since the mid-1990s, there has been a veritable renaissance with conferences, academic tracks, book publications (in addition to the journal), the annual George Hay Lecture, the SFF Masterclass, Science for Fiction, and a doubling in size of the Collection, the SFF remains something of a phantom. It has no office, no building, and it would be going too far to claim the Sydney Jones Library, which houses the Collection, as its own. The Committee meets twice a year, in addition to the AGM, but currently dispersed and online, from the comfort of their own homes. In other words, legal entity though it now is, the SFF retains its alluring, mysterious, para-academical status. It may be the closest thing to Bohemia that an academic can get.

At the same time, there has been a fluorescence in the UK of younger academic networks, propelled by tech-savvy and socially aware postgraduates. These include Current Research for Speculative Fiction (CRSF) based at the University of Liverpool, the Fantastika conferences and online journal initially founded at Lancaster University, and the London Science Fiction Research Community based in or around Birkbeck College, London. Sometimes these networks, most notably CRSF, overlap with the SFF but mostly they have emerged alongside it. In addition, there are now research centers and research clusters at Anglia Ruskin, Brunel, Glasgow and Liverpool. Although these developments bear witness to the SFF as a pathfinder, it can also become overlooked. It's hard to contemplate a time when the SFF might disappear: its material assets, most notably the Collection, are vast, and Liverpool continues to commit itself via the outreach and MA degree now led by Phoenix Alexander and Will Slocombe. Yet, at some point, the SFF will have to merge with these networks since these younger academics constitute the future of SF studies in the UK.

The other transformative factor is that of digitality. As the events of 2020/21 have shown, we can now pursue several of our educational activities online. For example, this year's Hay Lecture, given by the forensic archaeologist Kirsty Squires, was presented virtually while the next SFF Masterclass is earmarked for online delivery. We are gradually constructing an online archive for the journal, and at some point, we may have to consider whether *Foundation* will continue as a print and/or e-journal. (Past and present issues are already available electronically via EBSCO and ProQuest.) I certainly hope that when we next consider holding a conference, we will do so digitally—the SFF has already sponsored online events such as last October's *Riddley Walker Day*. How we interact with our members will also change through the prism of digitality: the journal's Facebook group currently has 847 members and, as I often remark, if each of those followers became actual members of the SFF, our fortunes would be dramatically enriched.

Which brings me to my final note. As Farah Mendlesohn observed at the anniversary panel, the UK's university sector is going through severe changes with wide-scale job losses and departmental closures. The bankruptcy and merger of whole universities is on the immediate horizon. Due to its para-academic status, the SFF is not only placed to weather these storms but it can also provide shelter. Annual membership remains low, from £15 for a student to £25 for a salaried individual to £50 for a university. In the coming years, there are likely to be more independent scholars as universities contract. *Foundation* has repeatedly shunned the likes of Elsevier to remain as open and as accessible to as many scholars as possible. I hope that you will consider joining the SFF for the greater good of the academic community, whether affiliated to an institution or not.

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### The Life and Work of Bulgarian SF Writer Lyuben Dilov



Andy Erbschloe

In decay, a specimen's constituent parts are revealed, and, with close observation, we earn new knowledge. The twentieth century saw the birth and death of one of SF's most integral discourses, which can be very broadly grouped under the descriptor 'Soviet speculative fiction'. The determination to instill the socialist-realism ambitions of the communists' cultural architects manifested across the republics and its satellite states in degrees proportional to the strength of their respective ties to Moscow, and so it was with SF. Thus, we end up with an array of constituent parts, all of which add up to the whole corpus, and one of which is addressed herein.

In 1990 the modern Republic of Bulgaria directly succeeded the socialist People's Republic of Bulgaria, which itself had succeeded the Kingdom of Bulgaria after World War II only forty-four years prior. The Communist party, in less than half a century of control, the final thirty-three of which were under the totalitarian Todor Zhivkov regime, was able to boast many advancements in industry, infrastructure, and developing technologies, but the dividends were hardly equally distributed. By the 1980s, the computer components being produced in Pravets, the 'Silicon Valley of the Eastern Bloc', were helping Russia get their rockets into orbit, but if you were to leave Pravets and go five miles in any direction, you would leave not only the cybernetic age but the age of electricity and running water.

Amidst the clamor of processors, microscopes, hammers, and sickles, a uniquely Bulgarian speculative tradition arose. Just like the Americans, British, Russians, etc. they built on the foundation of their own national literary heritage and herded the twentieth century's technological stampede through the canyons of their own cultural morality in search of the greener pasture of whatever the future may hold for humanity. Forgive the already extensive backstory, but understanding the deep and complex works in this tradition requires some knowledge about the direction of the lives and works of its creators. Among the best are Agop Malkonyan, Dimitr Peev and Svetoslav Slavchev: remember those names for later.

Lyuben Dilov, the first name in Bulgarian SF, was born in the Kingdom and then raised for a time in Hitler's Germany before returning "home" to the People's Republic and becoming part of its first generation of intellectual elite. Compelled to speak his mind openly from at least his university years, the non-partisan Dilov relates that various obstacles to his free expression led him to expound his humanist philosophies under the thin guise of allegory as a SF writer. He might have been content to join the still developing national literature, a fusion of their own pastoral folk sensibilities with the rationalist, democratic values espoused by the Enlightenment, but in order for him to say what he wanted to say, he found it necessary to say something different. But it would be short-sighted to see only camouflage and aloof estrangement. Like Lem and the Strugatskys,

the Soviet world was his frame of reference and his audience, and besides, his wouldn't be the first stories to have relevance in different places and times.



In Lyuben Dilov's speculative fiction, the mores of socialist realism are delivered without any art, often deployed on the first page and occasionally quoting directly from, or loosely translating, Bulgarian and Soviet state memorandi. The author fulfills what clearly reads as his professional duty, but only just. The rest of the pages are his alone, and whether they are used to rethink the given or to drape something completely unrelated over it, the rest of the pages serve the reader a candid philosophy that speaks, not to the ideal future citizen of any specific nation but to something even more collective, primordial, and difficult to deny. The reader, by the end, isn't turned towards or against any one set of myths or canons, and certainly not against myths and canons in general. Rather, the purpose of having myths and canons is discussed with deferential honesty alongside the very myths the books themselves contain. Dilov spoke often of modern SF as fitting into the crucial human developmental slot traditionally occupied by fairy tales. To borrow a term he wouldn't have been familiar with (although Polish researchers were already describing the concept with the word "stereotypes"), Dilov thought of good stories as the "memes" of a good future, references for doing and speaking good that can be understood as goodness, even among strangers; indeed, especially among strangers. And it is this binding power of commonality, rather than any ideological motifs, that his tech-magic fables invoke to inform all their morals.



The tools of the trades, SF and allegorical literature, are ably employed by the author in chiseling the evasive truth from our common bare stone, variously embracing and completely neglecting the “fourth wall,” reworking the oldest testaments and myths, laughing at our shared fear of the unknown. Motifs recur throughout the oeuvre (drinking, suicide, and pride in one’s craft are examples) and effectively nuance the sometimes challenging discursive passages by tethering each newly birthed narrative to a perennial philosophy. All these years later, we are left with a temporal, dialectic continuum which I will very broadly section up for the purpose of exposition.

But first, I’ll briefly mention a connection between Dilov’s early life and that of many seminal individual contributors to twentieth-century SF: WWII. Lem’s work was impacted by his experience as a blond Jew in Lviv, using fake papers to pass for a gentile during the brutal prison pogroms. Arkady Strugatsky was evacuated from the Nazi seige of Leningrad, not without tragedy. Arthur C. Clarke was billeted in a decimated London, Vonnegut took shelter in the number five slaughterhouse, and Gene Roddenbury flew eighty-nine combat missions. Heinlein, Asimov, and de Camp fixed equipment for the US Navy. Komatsu Sakyō, after Japan’s surrender, worked clearing charred bodies. The Berliner Günther Krupkat was active in resisting the Reich and later became the first chairman of the East German Writers Union’s Science Fiction Working Group. Lyuben Dilov spent six years of his childhood in Berlin. His father evacuated the family from Allied bombing, but upon returning to Bulgaria, he was politically imprisoned in notorious concentration camps like the one on Belene Island. Of course, no segment of society was left untouched by the global conflict, but the flames of burning cities did coincide with the ignition of a new wave of speculative literature.

Dilov’s early non-fiction works and non-fantastic narratives had been well received and earned the young author a reputation, and a dream for the better technology of the future. His first SF novel, *The Atomic Man* (1958), was initially held up at the state publisher, there being no hard-SF frame of reference in the country at that time. The book was unsuccessful, but nonetheless warranted a second printing; the new edition gives the protagonist a nationality transplant from American to Bulgarian. A lesser artist might have despaired at the imposition of obtuse moral coordinates, but Dilov seemingly accepted the challenge and embarked on a decades-long journey to reveal what is truly located at those coordinates.

His next novel, *The Many Names of Fear* (1967), was a detective fantasy lampoon of psychosurgery, but as the space age came to dominate the hearts and minds of many, Dilov’s attention turned towards the heavens. Dilov didn’t live to witness Starlink satellites repainting our night sky, but in *The Weight of the Spacesuit* (1969) we find that he was very much concerned with technology’s encroachments on our world’s sense of wilderness. Following nine cosmonauts’ journey to contact another civilization, the dense imagery is concise and laconic in describing primarily the inhabitants of the cabin, rather than what’s to be seen out the porthole. The spacesuit, and other manifestations of technology, are seen by the author as the vestments of a

death cult that thrusts humanity into the icy cold horror of space, but they also define the physical limitations of existence.

The characters assess important philosophical puzzles, and the human characteristics each of them revealed in discussion accurately inform their later reactions. The result is an unbreakable coupling of human virtue with humankind's eternal pursuit of the unknown and the unattainable. It is a testament to the triumph of human will under conditions of immense strain and a suggestion that such strain actually sharpens some human virtues while blurring the lines between



*Covers by Tekla Alexieva for Double Star and The Weight of the Spacesuit*

them: camaraderie, duty, responsibility and self-sacrifice. Frequent Dilov reviewer Ognyan Saparev called it “the tightest, most complete, cast as if in one breath” of all Dilov’s works.

*The Path of Icarus* (1974), which first earned Dilov international recognition, is a first-rate space opera and a significant literary achievement. Considered by Arkady Strugatsky to be one of a handful of socialist speculative novels that defined the genre, the story follows an intellectually elite space crew piloting a generation ship in search of other habitable worlds. The story follows the young Zenon, first born child of the Icarus society, who has never seen the Earth, but Dilov proves, almost mathematically, that the Earth won’t be so easily left behind. Following family discord and changing human expectations, the novel rests heavily on the saga of a forbidden cyborg/clone and its creator, who is eventually removed from the society for his Frankensteinian ambition. The “child” is destroyed in a hyper-emotional scene that casts doubt on the entire utopian genre. Meanwhile, the enclosed society’s stringent code of conformity is repeatedly battered and invalidated by the never conforming space they encounter, ultimately leading

Dilov to remind us that the “gaping abyss of contradictions between our new knowledge and old views” has always been bridged within the mind of a single person rather than a collective. It’s a masterwork of recasting scientific ideas which were then in their early stages into their potential future forms, not just as shock hypotheses but as a means of examining their socio-philosophical challenges.

Zenon, facing the incomprehensible alien “cloud” on the uninviting alien world, reflects on his part in the narrative of humanity as it will seem to the future colony:

These tales will surely seem like fantasy to them, but let’s hope they love them. And when, after centuries or millennia, their Neanderthals are civilized, they may recognize in their genes the memory of the Earth and follow the tales in search of it. And so it is with us, we will not stop looking to meet our own estranged children, to meet ourselves in space and close the circle of the great unity of the worlds.

In *The Path of Icarus*, we are also introduced to the Fourth Law of Robotics, ostensibly for comic effect. The claim to have produced the earliest known addition to Asimov’s sacred Three Laws is a matter of great pride for Bulgarian SF, but the passage where it is actually stated is somewhat condensed and unassuming. This new law obligates the robot to identify itself as a robot in all circumstances. The cynical justification mentions market forces and the embarrassment of accidentally flirting with an automated female voice on the phone, but the less obvious utility of including, and immediately augmenting, Asimov’s holy commandments is an uncondensed skeptical analysis of robotics, laws, humans, and the soothing nature of small numbers. Lest it be said that Lyuben Dilov was picking on Asimov as a foreign competitor, do note that he used equal diligence in his treatment of Bible stories, apocrypha, Plato, all historians, nationalistic traditions, the socialist-realism he was paid to promote, and his own narrative offerings, which were often as simple as an ordinary Bible story. And in this sense, you could call him irreverent, but, in most cases, you cannot fail to credit the exemplary modesty of his presentation.

In the wake of the resounding legitimacy brought by *The Path of Icarus*, and before his most biting satirical offerings, Dilov wrote a space novel for teenagers, *Niki & Numi* (1980, 1983), released in two parts. Still ever vigilant in his anti-establishment allegory (the school guard in the role of the state), Dilov addresses children with moderation, temperately, and accommodates without compromise, but avoids talking down to his audience, something the author often warned against with regard to children’s literature. Taken in the context of the oeuvre, the saga of the earthly Niki and the extraterrestrial Numi demonstrates Dilov’s consistent motivation to deliver a specific, vital message to a specific audience who needs it, not only to unload his imaginative excesses (a license he also fully utilizes, nonetheless). But perhaps good timely advice can also be universally valid by coincidence. Sometimes framed as familiar Aesopian diagramming, other times stated more directly, Dilov captures the child’s thin distinction between laughter and tears, and he educates the characters and us by having the heroes compare the two different worlds they come from. They discuss the pain of being unjust to others and whether each civilization

has its own truths with equal vigor. Adult readers can rediscover the great historical markers of human civilization through Numi's alien eyes and the various alien beings they meet paint a full image of the possible spectrum of the imaginary. In Bulgaria today, the two Niki & Numi books are probably the best remembered of Dilov's works, owing to the timing; they've already been introduced to the first generation of the twenty-first century.

The best anecdote from Bulgarian SF lore involves the founding of the Biblioteka Galaktika publishing series. In 1979, author and translator Milan Asadurov launched the book series to introduce Bulgarian readers to the top SF and detective-fiction being produced around the world. The imprint went on to release over one hundred books, translated classics alongside the best domestic offerings, all with unique, story-specific original paintings by Tekla Alexieva. It can't be overstated how seminal Galaktika's editions and Alexieva's eye-catching images were in bringing valuable ideas into legitimate competition for the Bulgarian workers' meager beer money. So, as legend has it, Asadurov had tried to bring five-hundred books of American origin into the country. Naturally, they were stopped by State Security, but after negotiating their release for some months, Asadurov eventually managed to prove that the books had actually been translated and published in Moscow. Presenting readily available domestic and Soviet-sphere authors alongside hitherto unread Western giants such as Ursula Le Guin and Ray Bradbury, Biblioteka Galaktika's books would go on to become a cherished commodity, not a small feat for a poor socialist country. But what the State Security didn't know is that these books had gotten the entire editorial board of the Moscow publishing house "Molodaya Gvardiya" fired in the autumn of 1968 for the publication of "ideological diversion." Lyuben Dilov was on the small editorial board at Galaktika, alongside Melkonyan, Peev, and Slavchev, and the "commodities" they produced for a little over a decade are iconic artifacts of the Cold War's more artificial borders and SF's rebellious attempts to thaw them.

Bulgarian SF also got a second boost in those years. Arkady Strugatsky left Russia for Bulgaria on his first ever visit abroad, on Melkonyan's invitation. Strugatsky was an admirer of Dilov's work, especially *The Path of Icarus*, and they became friends. Dilov would fictionalize their meeting in *The Missed Chance* (1981), which with *Unfinished Novel of a Student* (1982), and *The Cruel Experiment* (1985) are grouped not only chronologically but existentially. The ease of the author's narrative direction and, paradoxically, the uneasiness it could lead to had been well exercised in his earlier work. But Dilov had bigger things in mind than Moscow's perfect man and caricatures of despots. Besides, his 1979 story "Even If They Leave", a seething berating of gasping totalitarianism in a small country, hadn't even earned him a proper censor, perhaps because he already had some international awards to his name. But the extent of state censorship in Communist Bulgaria is by no means a settled issue. There were tragedies, state agencies approved publications, and despite widespread destruction of records, ample physical evidence of State Security's political profiling has survived, but prominent voices from the Bulgarian literary community have, in more recent times, characterized the situation as one more driven by the artists' own self-censorship. Dilov certainly writes candidly about one of his former colleague-



informers, “one of those aspiring writers who didn’t ever become a writer, perhaps because he failed to get past the retelling stage.”

So, on the geographic and ideological fringes of the Soviet hemisphere, potentially emboldened by cultural exchange and an increasingly receptive audience, Dilov revisited his own literary path, and that of his nation (and all humanity), through its various forms and genres in *The Missed Chance*. Like Stanislaw Lem’s *A Perfect Vacuum* (1971), this composite work is first and foremost, structured as a literary experiment. *A Perfect Vacuum* is a playful metafictional “anthology” of fictional reviews, that is, reviews for books that don’t exist (unless you count the opening review for *A Perfect Vacuum* by S. Lem). But while Lem’s arguably genius lampoon of postmodern literary self-indulgence efficiently mobilizes the structure against his target, and though the sequence is not inconsequential, it is non-narrative, a fundamental impossibility for Dilov.

In *The Missed Chance*, a true composite novel, the reader gets their metafictional lesson, the value of story and the storyteller’s responsibility to humankind, between interludes detailing a few frustrating work days in the life of SF writer Lyuben Dilov. He has been compelled by the Writers’ Union to switch to the newest model of writing computer, which knows all world literature, recorded history, and data and can produce original works in the style of the author it serves. Dilov need only submit his spoken commands according to the manual. The eager computer effortlessly produces page after page, but the author is offended at the perceived diminution of his craft. Dilov hates all the stories, and as he vainly attempts to vocalize his specific complaints with this “highly-evolved” reflection of himself, the computer’s tales turn more and more bitterly satirical against their human patron and his arrogant self-denial. The effect is so immersive and complete and entertaining that it’s easy to forget what you definitely know: that you’re reading the words of Lyuben Dilov.

But even though *The Missed Chance* is seemingly fully occupied with Dilov’s experimental techno-puppet show format, the author stays true to his penchant for layering multiple textures and softly demanding the reader pay heed to the overlapping connections. Opening with an already solved murder case, Dilov’s facetiously challenging parameters elicit facetious responses from the computer-storyteller: a dragon tale without an end, a “secular” retelling of Cassandra, and a transgender, interplanetary transporter malfunction. The familiar sci-fi themes of time travel, alien encounters, and sex robots also appear, all with quotable comments on their respective spheres of influence. But perhaps the most “subversive” topics pervading the composition are the decidedly un-collective concepts of “self” and “identity.”

For the closing tale, “The Plundered Truth”, let’s look at the cast of characters: So, in a story in a story written for Dilov by his computer, which is also him, we only find the author’s real-life friends, Arkady Strugatsky and Karl Levitin, one Lyuben Dilov confronting another Lyuben Dilov, and a seemingly innocuous cameo by Dilov’s secretary. It is strikingly tempting to draw a parallel from here to Dilov’s initial impression of the computer’s voice in the beginning: “...maybe the

dark-eyed, passionate, and secretly-in-love-with-her-boss secretary. Its voice was well-selected, but I don't yet know whether or not I will love this secret secretary back."

The computer-composer had already been directly accused by Dilov of writing itself into an earlier story, as a martyr for an owl-like alien race being imposed upon by the arrival of humans. And its mischievous, Scheherazade-like voice, which Dilov skillfully delineates from his own, can be detected in some others of its self-produced characters. But this designedly subtle call-back to the secretary, less than ten pages from the end of the book, whirls the reader's cognition back through the ten preceding stories, and upon examination we find that all ten, seemingly hidden in plain sight, are covalently bonded by the shared electron of marital infidelity. Now, if you're imagining Dilov crafting some banal confession to his wife, Milka, the mother of his children, his great love and muse, please try to pay closer attention. This encoded, guilty admission is for unfaithfulness to his own creative influences from bygone eras, to the "tradition of all dead generations," as Marx put it, and for partaking in modernity, as demanded by his own revolutionary era, and his own contrarian whimsy, and his Marxist administrators. Ironically, when critics accused Ursula Le Guin of departing from genre tradition, they called her work "Balkanized."

Nothing in its finishing or function separates *The Missed Chance* from Dilov's other intricate productions, but the full blooming of the central concepts within the limits of the format, itself carefully selected, leaves this piece as one of the most instructive "textbooks" on writing style we have at our disposal today. But be careful not to confuse it with his later short story "How to Write a Science-Fiction Story", which is actually Dilov's comment on "just following orders."

Time travel is SF's flying trapeze. The discerning reader demands a daring spectacle and suspended reality, but every flyer must be skillfully caught and landed safely on the opposite board. And no nets, please! So, why not start the book with its third chapter and go back for its first two? *Unfinished Novel of a Student* (1982), Dilov's contrary foray into the tradition, proclaims its own nonsensicalness from the start with a disclaimer reminiscent of these introductory words from Lucian's *True History*:

...I turned my style to publish untruths, but with an honest mind than others have done: for this one thing I confidently pronounce for a truth, that I lie: and this, I hope, may be an excuse for all the rest... Let no man therefore in any case give any credit to them.

Dilov writes in the introduction, "Let the reader not worry if some things seem unmotivated and unclear, they also seem so to the author", and then later when the unnamed, modern-day historian is considering the career switch to science fiction,

You can shovel all the historians in our country! And besides, our so-called science is making up more than a few things! At least SF isn't telling you the lie that what it's telling you ever really happened!



The historian had learned of his literary destiny by accident after stumbling into the twenty-fourth century. Soon after, but ages earlier, a little too much Corinthian wine compels a careless student of Temporal Flight to prematurely tell the ancient Greeks about their aeorema, the machine used to more convincingly lower the “gods” from above in the theater. Later, the future’s interference in the past is illustrated even more immaculately; a chrononaut’s indiscretion with an ancient Nazarene girl accidentally launches Christianity. (It’s worth remembering Dilov’s audience here: the Bulgarian Orthodox Church had been a vital force in forming the national identity in the nineteenth century, but the arrival of Soviet oversight had forced even Christmas behind closed doors.)

The protagonist of *Unfinished Novel of a Student* is Cyana (named after cyanide), a well-intentioned but flippant aspiring chrononaut. She is vigorous and youthful, the least informed but the most willing. Her superior, the aged Professor of Temporal Flight, warns her about the dangers of time travel with his own tragic testimony but to no avail. Experience cannot silence sanguinity, but it can waylay it; he sends her to the asteroid belt. The central research computer has stopped responding to the scientists there but only after it compiled an unsolicited treatise on human abuse against machines. Tasked with debugging the stubborn computer, Cyana and Dilov check all the familiar boxes of asking where the human and the machine begin and end and so on, but the way Cyana fixes the “broken” computer is purely Dilov. She tells it a story. She recounts her research mission to the Cretan Labyrinth and her run-in with the Minotaur. Dilov often appealed to readers’ familiarity with the Classics, Daedalus’ Labyrinth also supplying the titular metaphor in *The Path of Icarus*. Cyana sums up her framed narrative, “My Minotaur,” a lesson in the subjectivity of truth, with diplomatic platitude:

...they’d been envisioning a being less selfish than themselves, to be objective and fearless in its judgement. Humans have always strived to become that ideal, but when they realized they would never achieve it, they created a computer from metal and energy to have a more virtuous companion on their path. And here again, with these stories of yours, you’re making yourself just that—their fair and fearless judge. Love them in the future, dear colleague, help them because humans are very lonely in the universe and, in this endless loneliness, there’s no one to lead them out of the labyrinth they built.

“Colleague Cyana, you are a cutie,” said the computer beyond the wall that humans had placed between it and themselves.

The “real” Labyrinth was solved using a thread from Ariadne, a detail with symbolic value for which the author doesn’t fail to account, because Dilov, rather than telling the future facing forward, follows the threads back through the endless maze of tragic lies that brought us here, and reminds us that we’ll be looking back on them just as endlessly when the future arrives. But if you haven’t guessed the prime intent that unites all the threads by now, then you haven’t been paying attention. It’s love.

Around the time the Berlin Wall came down, the Eastern Bloc's first generation of speculative masters took a step back. Arkady Strugatsky died in 1991, Lem's final novel had already been written, and Dilov was occupied delivering a specific, vital message to a specific audience who needed it. Bulgarian identity was then, and is still now, actively developing, and I find an apt metaphor in the post-Communism debate over formal personal address. Bulgarian men had called each other "Mr." in the Kingdom, but it had been replaced by "Comrade," then after 1989, a brief reactionary period of "Citizen" before going back to "Mr." (in Bulgarian: Gospodin, Drugaryu, and Grajdantin, respectively) Dilov's characters very often used "Colleague", by the way.

Dilov had released some short stories during the last few years of the Communist regime, notably "Adam's Rib" and "Down by the Spring," and prolifically defended SF's credibility in his articles and interviews, but the next substantial batch of new material that was officially published has been described as the "manuscripts in the drawer," meaning they had been prepared in anticipation of imminent regime change and the freedom of expression that entailed. Among these are a short story collection called *We and the Others* (1990), a brief historical memoir called *Sex Life Under Totalitarianism* (1993), and a difficult to categorize gathering of anecdotes entitled *Impressions from a Planet: Notes of a Science-Fiction Writer* (1990). The "manuscripts in a drawer" nomen was only selectively applied at the time, indicating a perceived distinction between those who were legitimately oppressed and those who didn't have much to say anyway.

Saparaov writes that Dilov "doesn't like categoricity. His skeptical writer's attitude prefers the open discussion, the collision of contradictory points of view without a didactic-unambiguous answer." Such an ambitious Socratic endeavor necessarily employs many elegant, but deliberate, deliveries. Pieces of such intricate devices can be, have been, and will always be taken, quite literally, out of context. So in Dilov's writing, one encounters '-isms' that are considered, at best, dated by today's standards, but the author never digresses (even when he does) from the non-linear and non-dualistic meander that leads the reader straight ahead through a logical circle that tidily reduces to absurdity anything that lacks compassion.

Case in point: In *Impressions from a Planet* we find a chapter entitled "We Feed the Children Lies" which describes Dilov's own experiences with state conspirators and mentions his father's work and imprisonment. He quotes a song, remembered from his father, that perpetuates stereotypes about Romani, the predominant minority ethnic group in Bulgaria. He goes on to compare his poor childhood living conditions, and also the treatment of writers in well-fed nations, to the conditions of "gypsies" (Bulgarians use the word *tsigani* but rarely the endonym *Romani*). The implicit hierarchy of cultures would have been fully relatable to Dilov's audience, not in any way controversial. He then recalls that, after relocating to Germany, the "gypsyism" of their young family, now immigrants living in Nazi Berlin, was even more confirmed. Already, the structure of the allegory is taking shape, but don't count your dimensions before they hatch; Dilov isn't done yet. Over just a few paragraphs, the author exponentially expands his father's "prodigal son" return to Bulgaria into a continuum of moral wisdom extending through time from Homer

to Archimedes, with nods to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jack London, encompassing both the racist song from earlier and his father's own journalistic accomplishments.

Valuable for the historical information alone, *Impressions from a Planet* runs considerably longer than any of the novels Dilov published. But the mindful voice is the same, bright optimism and cold truths are still treated with equal respect, and the simple intent of spreading only good still lends a certain warmth to the reading. In fact, reading this collection of personal musings being shared unencumbered by the more or less state sponsored censorship mechanisms, those familiar with Dilov's fiction work will be most struck by how successfully he had been delivering his "subversive" message in his own open code all along, but from the perspective of the fantastic.

Shortly thereafter, Dilov released another book of anecdotes, this time very easy to categorize. Fellows of the author, all Bulgarian, who had preceded him in death are commemorated with intimate recountings that are united by one purpose: cheer. *For the Dead, Either Good or Funny* is a continuation of Dilov's reflections on the Communist era, and again uses contemporary history, rather than SF, as the stand-in vehicle for the real discussion. In the chapter on Georgi Markov, the dissident journalist assassinated in London under apparent orders from Todor Zhivkov, Dilov writes about an embarrassing social faux pas that the quick-witted Markov had covered up with a joke, and then, abruptly:

By the way, in the same manner, through his death, he covered up the self-delusions of our whole generation and its shameful compromises... His ambitious urge to always come to the fore naturally turned him into the scapegoat for what our generation did not dare do.

In 1991, Dilov established the Graviton award, the first for SF writing and art in Bulgaria (it would later recognize translators, too). Specifically established as an honor "For Good Imagination", Dilov himself clarified its intent further: "for imagination that creates good". Its inaugural recipients were Agop Malkonyan and Tekla Aleksieva. At the presentation of the statuettes, though his own literary credentials were not confined to the genre, Dilov took the opportunity to respond to some of Bulgarian SF's domestic critics. These remarks, spoken on behalf of his fellow fantasists, would have been impossible just a few years earlier:

... our escape was an escape forward to greater space and more air to breathe... we tore our readers away from the absurdities of a poorly organized workday. We made them think about another reality. We prevented a machine, completely built for manipulating thought, from weakening the minds and imaginations of the young people... we reflected the real fears and hopes of our time, encouraged young people to worry about their future, to think about the great and common problems of humanity... It was not pure literature. It was real.

The Graviton award passed away with the author in 2008. I'm reminded of his lament in the preface for his own translation of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*:

...a bookstore was opened in his honor in the Buddenbrook House; Hitler closed it down and it seems that to this day in the Free City of Lübeck, as it's called on the sign, no one dares or thinks of finally reversing this decision.

With the drawers emptied of their manuscripts, Dilov again resumed the voice of the allegorist, crafting narrative fantasy, rebuilding SF's powerful engines to propel his space-age, philosophical vessel ever further into the unknown. For years, his veil of satire had earned him sideways epithets like "under the zodiac sign of SF." But after having forayed into non-fiction in the free new marketplace of ideas, Dilov's waning creative years were spent telling fantastic stories. And perhaps it's not surprising, considering how often he spoke about the power that a good myth or fairy tale has to spread good among people. As far as I know, he never spoke highly of non-fiction.

The novella *Hominiana and Time* (1993) depicts a visit to a world that worships time, brutally enslaved by those who can give it and take it away. An excerpt,

... when you declare something your god, you automatically declare all other gods to be wrong. Meanwhile, the virtuous are constantly trying to expand the boundaries they carry within, to incorporate into them as much of the world as possible, and it is precisely this striving of the human soul that represents its merger with the infinite.

*Lilith's Bible* (1999) is a convincing retelling of the Old Testament that's impossible to decontextualize and warrants many pages more than I have left here. *Bigfoot* (1999), another novella, was released at the same time and follows the activities of an international expedition to the Himalayas in search of the Yeti. The Bulgarian title is also readable as *The Big Step* and the double meaning is intended. Interspersed with the adventure are the conscious thoughts of the Mountain Spirit's true nature.

It's easy to name names from the early days because SF writers were so few. Today, that's not the case; Bulgarian literature, including fantasy and SF, is thriving. But there is a general scholarly consensus that immediately following the fall of Communism, the new republic was producing literature of merit, but nothing of note (save for the authors with "manuscripts in the drawer"). Perhaps emerging Bulgarian authors yielded shelf space to the influx of translated options, with some Western publishers offering vast catalogues of previously unavailable, proven best-sellers, but I'm speculating.

*Maxwell's Demon* (2001) and *Choose Yourself* (2002) are Lyuben Dilov's final two novels. The author was already facing too many obstacles related to Parkinson's disease to continue his writing, but, ever prescient, he had foreseen this and prepared some works in advance for when such a time came. So, perhaps they will someday be retrospectively slid backwards in time to the twentieth century from whence they came, and the 1990s can be proclaimed Dilov's fourth consecutive decade as undisputed champion of Bulgarian SF.

In the very second sentence of *The Missed Chance*, Dilov writes, “I’ve worked with writing computers of all generations to date...”, but in the 2014 edition from Enthusiast, edited and noted by Lyuben Dilov Jr., that page includes a note at the bottom stating that the writer never once used a computer to write, relying always on his old German Erika typewriter. So then, some questions arise: As the robot age draws nearer and our cosmic horizon grows ever more distant, can we really, truly rely on ourselves like you say, Uncle Lubo? And was Arkady Strugatsy really the inspiration for “The Plundered Truth”? Did your father really sing that racist song? Were your thinly veiled barbs at socialist-realism sincere, or were they an absurdly reduced tacit approval? Has this reviewer occasionally quoted directly from, or loosely translated, your own kind words about Thomas Mann to describe you yourself herein? The path to these answers is fraught with difficulty, but it sure is a good story.

**Andy Erbschloe** is a native English-speaker living in Bulgaria. Primarily occupied as a homemaker, Andy pursues a variety of interests including sociolinguistics, labor socialism, comparative religion, mushroom picking, and sequential art. He prefers to earn knowledge in lump gold rather than any debased cultural coinage, with its idolatrous stamping and unfaithful measure. Actively translating Bulgarian texts from the public domain since 2019, the author is presently advocating for what he considers his greatest discovery: the science-fiction works of Lyuben Dilov, virtually unknown in English. Two Dilov novels, *The Missed Chance* and *Unfinished Novel of a Student*, are set for English debut in 2021.



# FICTION



*Image by andrea candraja*



## New Call for Submissions: Fiction



### The Editorial Collective

The SFRA Review welcomes well-written and carefully edited pieces of short fiction that conform to the following guidelines:

- Submissions (stories, poetry, drama, etc.) should be no more than 4000 words.
- Submissions must be original works that have not been previously published; if, for example, a submission has been previously posted on a blog or similar medium, please include a note explaining when and where.
- Submissions should be clearly recognizable as SFF.
- Submissions should not be thinly disguised social or political rants.
- Submissions should be clearly germane to the issue's topic.
- Submit Microsoft Word .docx files only. If you are unable to access Word, please use Google Docs.
- All files must include a brief (100 words or fewer) bio of the author and proper contact information; however, stories can be published under a pseudonym.
- All stories must be sent as attachments to [sfrarev@gmail.com](mailto:sfrarev@gmail.com) with the subject "Fiction Submission: Autumn 2021".

Stories will be read and edited by at least two members of the collective. We will be much more likely to reject submissions out of hand than to request revision, though we may do the latter.

The Autumn issue does not have a particular topic, so feel free to submit stories on whatever topic you desire.

Subsequent issues will have different topics which will be revealed in the issues immediately preceding them.

## Even If They Leave

Lyuben Dilov

Translated by Andy Erbschloe

Edited by Joshua Derke



*This story originally appeared in the collection Double Star (1979). It was also published in "Trakia Alamana" in 1978, under the title "Endless Night of Questioning".*

### 1

Dr. Zentano was undressing when the gong on the front door struck. He looked at his watch—at this hour and without a telephoned notice? He put on his robe, took the pistol from the nightstand drawer, released its safety, and went out into the hallway barefoot. He strode along the wall, careful not to touch it. He stood to the side of the door and slowly opened the peephole, but he couldn't look through it without exposing his chest. It was an ordinary door, not armored like most of the housing in the palace. They had laughed at him when he once suggested that they put an armored door on his as well. Who would shoot the doctors?

After sensing no noise from outside for a long time, he gained the courage to look. And he unlocked the latches.

"Did I wake you?" Dr. Strauss said. "Pardon me!"

"I was in the bathroom," Zentano lied. The midnight guest walked straight into the open bedroom.

"Get dressed, they'll call you. I wanted to exchange a word or two before you get there."

Zentano cursed softly but immediately took off his robe and grabbed the top shirt off the back of the chair. Dr. Strauss looked uneasily at the bachelor chaos in the bedroom.

"Talk, talk! I was thinking it over a while ago," Zentano whispered, buttoning the opal buttons on his cuffs.

"Something disturbing is happening. In the course of an hour, I was summoned by three: Melis, Biko, and finally the boss. The generals, as usual, lied. They didn't tell me exactly what was wrong with them. They were gripped by a fever and they couldn't sleep, although they obviously hadn't been to bed at all. They had the feeling that someone was standing next to them, that something was questioning them. I gave them a sedative..."

"Is it their first time?" Zentano interjected contemptuously.

Melis was the adjutant general, and Biko the chief of security. It was normal that they would face such moments since even he, the psychiatrist, couldn't withstand the fears that were filling the presidential palace; not a palace, but a fortress packed with weapons and fears, as if under a state of siege.

"The boss was more candid, but he wants you to examine him too."

"What's with him?" Zentano groaned, leaning over his shoes.

Despite Zentano's assurances that he had inspected the room for wiretapping devices, the president's personal physician did not switch to the vocabulary they used in their rare meetings outside the palace. The two were forced to have their own plot against the dictator so they could survive when he fell, because few are those dictators who don't fall in the end! Once they had both believed in his ideas, and they became members of his party which he himself later disbanded so as not to hinder him in governing the country. Then they regretted it, but it was too late. A personal physician could not resign with impunity to return to private practice. If Zentano, the psychiatrist, in particular, left the palace before his boss, it would be in a "lethal condition," as they said in their parlance. And it would be caused most cruelly by General Biko's thugs. In this situation, willingly or not, you become a conspirator.

"Auditory hallucinations of a rather strange type," Dr. Strauss said. An internist and cardiologist with a rich medical culture, he possessed all the qualities of a luminary in medicine, but he was also nailed to a single patient, like the ancient rowing slaves to their galley. "Some being from another civilization had been interrogating him, asking him awkward questions, and so on."

Dr. Zentano thought: "The beginning of the end!" Then he thought: "Although, a beginning like this can last monstrously long..." and his smile disappeared.

"Examine him, and let's think about therapy together tomorrow," Strauss added.

The psychiatrist understood his insistent gaze. The two had long since realized that they had the power to speed things up in their country, but they were still afraid to use it. They were not sufficiently acquainted with those forces that would claim the inheritance in the palace, and they did not have the necessary connections.

"Will he call me, or what?"

"Go! I told him that if he doesn't need us tomorrow, we'll go around eleven o'clock for some new medicines, to accept them personally."

Zentano approved of his foresight. That exact message was the reason why Dr. Strauss hadn't called him on the phone—so that Biko's people wouldn't hear it.

"Did you tell him about Melis and Biko?"

Strauss smiled for the first time. "Of course not. Why bother him?!" And he asked suddenly with the same insistent look as before, "Did you give them..?"

Zentano waved his index finger in the negative in front of his nose. Such an option had already been discussed. It would be more than foolish to intensify their madness with medication. In that state the three of them would become even more ferocious.

"Go now!" Strauss repeated.

The psychiatrist reengaged the safety on the pistol before putting it in the special holster under his jacket; he was entitled to a weapon. Then he picked up his bag which stood in constant readiness on the nightstand. In the corridor the two parted with only a wave of the hand.

At the door of the presidential apartment, two of Biko's gorillas with automatic machine guns around their necks stood up sleepily in front of him. Zentano opened his jacket so they could take his pistol. One lazily felt the doctor's body while the other peered into the medical bag. The other two, forewarned of his arrival, were stretched out in armchairs in the vestibule of the bedroom and they didn't pay him any attention. Zentano looked at them, trying to remember their faces. Biko was constantly changing the duty assignments in the palace. Zentano took a breath, softened his facial muscles; it was time to be just a doctor.

The president laid the newspaper beside the whiskey bottle. He wasn't sitting in the huge bed—an imperial style—but in the corner where he received his intimate guests.

The psychiatrist greeted him with restrained dignity. He said, "You shouldn't have been drinking before I examine you, Mr. President."

"I don't think I need you anymore. This is more reassuring," the president responded, slapping the paper with his palm and shifting in his operetta sleek pajamas. His entire bedroom was jammed with the same sleek splendor. "All everyone writes about is how much the people love their president, how loyal they are to him, and how happy they are under his government."

Zentano lowered his head, and pulled the stethoscope out of his bag.

"You don't have any complaints, do you?"

"I'm not interested in politics at the moment, Mr. President."

"You're cunning, you devil! I can't understand why I trust you so much, even though the generals have been driving me to remove you for a while now."

"Maybe that's why," the doctor allowed himself a smile. "Surely, the one who replaces me would no longer be only yours."

"They must be pulling your soul out to make you talk about me, huh?"

"They've never allowed themselves anything reprehensible, Mr. President. I can assure you that they are just as loyal to you as I am. But again, I ask you not to distract me now. A psychiatrist doesn't listen to noises in the abdomen and chest, but..."

"Is there anything in my mind but politics?" laughed the head of state. "Then what are you getting these headphones for? Strauss already examined me and measured my blood pressure. It's normal."

"I need to form my own picture of your general condition at the moment."

"Forget about that! Sit down and talk! A whiskey?"

Zentano sat across from him but flatly refused the drink. "So, what are we complaining about? Wait with the whiskey, please! After the examination!"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. But I was just sitting there with nothing wrong, and I suddenly went crazy..." the president said and vigorously shimmied his small body. Apparently, he had already gotten over his fears. "A voice greeted me politely and asked if it could ask me some questions. It described itself as a being from another civilization. It wasn't possible for it to show itself to me because...I don't remember what its reasons were, but it assured me of its peaceful intentions..."

"Is this the first time?" the doctor interrupted.

"The first. Just a while ago. So, I talked with it. Then I told it to go to hell."

"What questions did it ask you?"

"You can't imagine all the naive and stupid questions! And they're supposed to be another civilization. It was like it was testing a fifth grader in civics. The social structure of humans, how governance is conducted, how and why I was chosen to govern this nation..."

Dr. Zentano nodded amiably, but from under his half-closed eyelids, he was looking with a sort of distracted calculation at the withered face.

"And what did you say?"

"I told it to go find Machiavelli and read it. Things haven't changed much."

"And how did you tell it to go to hell?"

"I told it to get out of my head. And that everything it was asking me about is in books, that there's a whole heap of professors of legal sciences, interrogate them."

"Didn't it ask more intimate questions?"

The president was engrossed in his own memory, his hands waving impulsively.

"After I told it all that, it wanted to ask me some personal questions, how we develop ourselves, humans, and something else I don't remember, but I told it to go see my wife if it wanted to know something intimate about me." The president laughed excitedly and added with even greater pleasure, "Although, between us, Doctor, she's already forgotten my intimacies."

Zentano didn't react to the joke. He was already sufficiently immersed in the private life of this small person, who was constantly trying to demonstrate his self-confidence to as many women as possible, since it wasn't enough to do it before the entire nation.

"So what, the voice is gone, is it?"

"It apologized for the inconvenience and left. It was very kind."

"So it left right away, you say?" The doctor emphasized his distrust. A hallucination doesn't leave just from a command, not even a presidential one.

"If it hadn't asked such idiotic questions, I would have kept it talking. It's interesting to talk to invisible people, isn't it?"

His fingers, however, contrary to his words, were drumming something in morse on the glossy tabletop—an antique item, also from someone's boudoirs.

"And you sensed a presence?"

"Of course. But not in a specific place. There was something there and then it disappeared."

"After the whiskey?"

"I suppose so," the head of state admitted, and a shiver ran across his oversized pajamas, like the shiny surface of a lake blown by a low wind. "But I hadn't been drinking before that."

The psychiatrist got up, though he had no desire to hear the intimate confessions of this ferocious fellow who regularly unburdened his mind before him in psychoanalytic sessions. The president insisted on them like he did his daily massage, his sports workouts, and the always encouraging predictions of his court fortune teller, because he insisted on ruling over the tormented country for at least another three or four decades.

"Lie down, Mr. President. I have repeatedly permitted myself to advise you and your wife to stop these spiritualistic sessions, to banish your favorite astrologers and fortune tellers..."

"I don't need to lie down," the president said in defense of the mysticism that inevitably conquers such people and regimes. "If you know more than they do, tell me now what it is!"

"It is my duty to examine you."

"And you'll say it's nerves, I know that myself. First, tell me what you think!"

Dr. Zentano sat across from him again, smiling professionally.



"There's nothing to worry about, of course."

"Of course," the president mocked him, jumping out of his armchair and stamping the carpet barefoot. "At least, don't start with the de jour reassurances! It's alarming!"

The doctor patiently studied the president's yellowish legs kicking the embroidered oriental slippers away before they stood, then he startled him with a loud and sharp command, "Sit down and put on your slippers!"

The president abruptly interrupted his walk, stared into Zentano's eyes in surprise, couldn't stand their hypnotic power, and obediently returned to the couch. He softened, almost collapsing in his pajamas which were all wrinkled. The doctor grabbed his wrist; it was unnecessary, but measuring the pulse calms the patient and gives the doctor time to dig through their knowledge, or if not, to compose it. What to tell him? Auditory hallucinations are associated with very specific diseases from which the president did not suffer. The easiest thing, really, would be to turn him into a writhing worm, like he had on other occasions, with two or three sentences and the even, glassy shimmer of his green eyes. From time to time, the dictator needed to become a remorseful child in front of his doctor who would wash his guilt away after the mischief had been done. Zentano didn't want to give him any relief tonight, but the president would still insist on an explanation. What to tell him? A psychiatrist is obliged to be able to explain to the patient what they themselves do not know, like the coffee reader who sees all in the tiny black mud at the bottom of the cup.

"Mr. President," he said cautiously, "You're right. It's troubling. It really is troubling! But it is only the onset of something that could be easily overcome, as long as it is well understood. This is a natural crisis for men our age," Zentano delicately grouped himself in, although he was ten years younger. "Don't take offense, Mr. President, but you and I are already beyond the ascent of life, on its opposite slope. There, the rhythm changes abruptly, and this leads to all sorts of jolts. Let me make it clearer for you: picture it as a hill. We make our way up, happy and out of breath, and we hurry to reach the top and our entire organism is subordinate to the struggle to propel itself towards its goal. It usually doesn't turn out how we imagined or wanted, but that's not even the main trouble. Lulled by it, we miss the top without realizing it..." A rather questionable illustration, the psychiatrist told himself, but he had already said it, and everything said must be explained further.

"And so... you see, Excellency, lulled, we fail to stop at the peak, to rest, to look around, to consciously digest what's been accomplished, to prepare for the bitterness of the future. Instead, we keep the same pace, without rest, continuing on without transition, until one day, shaken up, we realize that we are now going down, not up. And going down is different. There our struggle is not to climb to the end but to hold the momentum of the rush, like shifting gears going downhill so the clutch can hold the car, to serve as a brake. But as I was saying, we are unprepared because no one can teach us how to make our way across the hill, and we find ourselves surprised and realize with horror that we are no longer in command of our own labors or our own time, that

the time ahead of us sucks us in like an abyss, and with ever-growing speed, but down there, Mr. President..." Zentano made a pause, in which he skillfully played the dramatics of the doctor who feels obliged to tell the whole truth to his patient. "Down there, Excellency, at the foot of the slope lies another goal, not our goal, not the one from before. Down there we can see, from afar, our open grave."

"Hey," the shiny man snapped. "Is that what you came to talk to me about? Death?"

Zentano squeezed his wrist tightly, calming him with a look.

"I'm answering you, Mr. President, as you should start answering yourself. Otherwise, the questions you heard from that voice will cease to be naive. Besides, they weren't as naive as you thought. These are all existential questions and they're frightening precisely because of their apparent naivete. You've missed your time for asking them, and now, on the opposite slope, it's quite natural for someone else to ask them. They're being asked by the other, which has been dormant inside us all along, while we were deluding ourselves that we knew what we were after, what we were striving for, while we were ascending to the supposedly consciously chosen goal, unlike that one goal we have now, that offends our pride, that makes us equal to everyone else, that we can neither abandon nor circumvent."

"Enough, I told you," the president shouted, pulling his arm away from Zentano's. "I know we're all going to die. Tell me something concrete! I don't have time to ask myself stupid questions. Who will govern this country if I sit down now to ask myself how I'm organized and what I live for?"

"I haven't recommended anything yet," Dr. Zentano said soberly, and he internally mobilized because his patient wasn't stupid. "I'm just explaining to you the intimate conditions of advanced age. Freud says: 'We all know that we will die, but we do not believe it in our subconscious.' I would add: The subconscious is the animal inside us, so it does not believe; the animal doesn't know what death is, but it sometimes anticipates it. However, our subconscious is not as dumb as the animal, when it's scared, it can ask questions..."

"Eh, I'm only fifty-three!" the president said indignantly.

"Exactly! I would say that's the end point of the crisis. Later, you will stop questioning yourself, reconciliation will come. And you surely wouldn't be hearing that voice now if you lived someplace else. You're surging with too much energy to fit in this tiny country where you climbed all the peaks too soon, Mr. President. If you had been born in a powerful and wealthy country, you might have started a war, and you'd still be questing for domination over the continent, over the world. You would aim for the great goal until the end. The larger nations are the active ones; those like us, tiny and poor, are doomed to question themselves and tremble for their own survival."

The compliment on the excessive energy did its job but prevented the president from catching the hint about trembling and asking questions. He shouted almost enthusiastically, "Smart you are,

you devil! That's it. I just have nowhere to go in this damned country!"

Zentano smiled. His patient called it "my blessed mother" in front of the microphones with the same passion.

"What would you recommend?"

"Stand up so I can examine you!" the doctor ordered again sharply, remorseful for his compliment and for all his dubious scientific nonsense. "Remove your clothes!"

Perhaps out of gratitude, perhaps in anticipation that the exam would immediately tell him where to direct his energy, the president readily took off his pajamas.

"Kneel on the couch, back towards me!"

"Are you going to torture me again?" murmured the little man, who made an entire nation tremble.

"Yes, again," Dr. Zentano said relentlessly, taking a long, shiny nail out of his pocket. "I need to check the flow of nerve currents."

In this case, both his answer and the procedure were pointless. A nail or similar spike was used by neurologists to check for skin reactions, but the nerves of the president, who maintained himself with well thought-out diets and a love of sports, were overly strong for his age. But Zentano found in it the possibility for his one small revenge. This nail, which his former neurology professor had jokingly presented to his students as the neurologists' second major tool ("We're worse than carpenters, they have a bunch of other tools and we only have a hammer and a nail!"), had come back to his memory when, a few years prior, he'd had to evaluate his colleague from the presidential prison.

The doctor who worked at the prison, where prominent political opponents were held, had asked to be released for health reasons. The president gave Zentano and Strauss the final decision, and they both found their colleague to be an irreparable wreck. The man who had witnessed the monstrous inquisitions in the presidential prison had for years intoxicated his conscience, not only with alcohol but with some of the opiates used to forcibly drive the prisoners insane or to end the agony of their broken bodies. They recommended him for retirement due to illness, and thus unknowingly signed his death sentence. They hadn't considered that neither the president nor General Biko would leave such a stray witness alive. It was then that Dr. Zentano truly realized that the same thing awaited him as soon as he lost the trust of the dictator.

The same pathetic man who was on the couch now nearly naked, kneeling in front of his own portrait hanging on the wall. Like in front of an icon. The psychiatrist looked in disgust at the fat folds on his back and thighs, the protruding knobs on his shoulders, and the sagging leather pouch on his abdomen. And he slowly poked the nail under his ear, drawing a line all the way down his neck to the end of the shoulder blade. The president groaned and shook.

"Calm down!" Zentano continued to order, but he scratched the president's thigh with even more pressure, so he jumped.

The lines bled instantly, like a scratch from cat claws.

"All right. Very good! I envy you, Excellency!"

Under the guise of praise, the nail drew more and more ferocious scratches on his back, on his emaciated thighs, on his thin calves, and on his tender, yellow feet. The pain was most intense there, and Zentano repeated it several times. The president was shaking on the couch springs, squealing, howling, but he endured. Zentano stood up abruptly. Unexpectedly, for the first time, he wondered if his high-ranking patient was voluntarily allowing himself to be tortured, wanting to empathize with the torments he had inflicted on his opponents in the basement of the palace, if it gave him the pleasure of the masochist. He wanted to drive the nail somewhere with all his strength, the most effective place would be into that hole between the skull and the neck, but he just threw it in the bag.

"Just as I thought, Mr. President. The voice has nothing to do with your nerves. It's only that inexhaustible raging energy which doesn't see itself being utilized enough. Maybe a trip, a romance; but excuse me, a true romance, falling in love, I mean, with a woman, whom you've chosen yourself..."

The president laughed briefly, slipping back into his shiny pajamas with visible satisfaction.

"Where would I get such a love, brother? Should I go to the discos to look for a girl? The president is the least free man in this country. But if you come across one that you think I can fall in love with, feel free to bring her here! You know me better than Biko, who brings me all these whores according to his own vulgar taste. And they're his agents, of course. I don't even need them, you know, I just enjoy checking on his spies without telling them a word."

"Unfortunately, the president's doctor is just as free," Zentano responded restrainedly. Educated in grace and attention to humanity, he took as a personal insult the vulgar jargon with which the dictator sometimes tried to show himself as democratic, close to the people. And every time, Zentano wondered how it was possible and why this life should allow itself to be saddled by such nothingness.

"Excellency, have another glass of whiskey and go to bed! You don't need anything else for now. And I'll think about how, together, we can shut up the mouth whose voice we're uncomfortable listening to. Allow me to leave now."

"Thank you, Zentano," said the president paternally, already clutching the bottle. "You're a wonderful boy!"

The psychiatrist walked the long corridors to his quarters in that unpleasant midnight wakefulness that drives you to ask yourself unpleasant questions. The wonderful boy, Dr. Zentano! At his age, everything wonderful had already gone to hell, but despite being well-read, and though he had just referred to his own age, he continued to deceive himself. He was still soothed by an idea and a belief that the wonderful would return as soon as he managed to escape from this accursed palace where he was imprisoned like the legendary master Daedalus, with his legs broken by the tyrant, in a hopeless labyrinth. And he, like Daedalus, had no choice but to patiently, feather by feather, bind his wings and fly to freedom.

The feathers were the words of his future book. Drawn carefully with stenographic signs incomprehensible to anyone else, they told of the corruption in this palace. With the pleasure of revenge, they depicted the physiological and mental ugliness of the dictator and the people around him. The book was ready and lying in a safe place in the city. He would release it the day after the fall of the regime to buy his freedom. And use it to wipe the stains off his nameplate.

"I'm a doctor," he repeated to himself every time he exited the bedroom of the president or his hysterical wife, "I have no right to refuse help to anyone, the doctor's oath obliges me..." He would say the same to the future jurors of the revolutionary tribunal who were invariably waiting for him in the corridor. But the pathos of unvoiced self-defense wouldn't silence the question that the tribunal would not fail to ask him: "Does the oath oblige you to deprive thousands of people of your competent aid for years, giving it to only two or three monsters?" He made endless speeches in response to this question—in the toilet, before going to sleep, in his dreams.

"And what have you done this time?" Dr. Zentano wondered with his first lonely steps down the hall. "Just look, he turned you into a pimp to look for girls worthy of falling in love with! Or perhaps, possessed by the idea of applying his energy somewhere, he drafts his new reform beside the whiskey bottle. Some of his favorite reforms, which usually sent hundreds of people to prison and stirred up devastation in the country... But doesn't the old maxim apply here: the worse it is, the better it is? And isn't it time now to stop denying Strauss your cooperation? True, he's in a hurry because he hasn't thought or dared to write his own book, but he enjoys the trust of the generals, and you know how to disable them, how to send them to the hospital longer. Why not lead the anti-regime forces yourself? How long will you wait before Biko cashes your check?"

Zentano reached under his jacket, but his hand immediately let go of the pistol grip, pulling the pen out of his inside pocket. The figure that popped out of the alcove near his apartment was familiar to all his senses. He pointed the pen.

"Hands up!"

"Jorge," the young woman replied in a whisper. "Go to the lady, immediately."

"Ugh," Zentano groaned, reaching for her waist. "I thought you were coming for me, and I was happy to see you."

"Run! Run to her because she's flipped again!"

He overcame her resistance and pressed her to him for a second as if seeking support. Then they walked silently to the other wing of the palace. He really was happy to see her. Not that he loved this woman so much; she provided him consolation with her similar destiny.

The first lady, who had gone to great lengths to play the traditional role of muse for all the arts in the country, had abducted this talented artist from the National Theater where she had just begun her career as a set designer. She had given her the title of companion and advisor, but the first lady paid separately for her drawing lessons, which the two of them took together on Zentano's recommendation. He had prescribed for her to paint as a remedy for her upset nerves. The first lady also paid her companion another salary for the position "Head of Palace Wardrobe and décor," and, with all this generosity, had bound her to herself in the same chains of slavery as Zentano. She had sent the woman to him as a mistress, almost as an order, probably to secure the only two other people she trusted. Her astrologer was too old to need such attention.

The two had obeyed and impassively entered the embrace of a comfortable, formal love affair (because it protected them from palace intrigue). They were both guarded for a long time until they finally got tired of it, but they still didn't become completely honest. They were honest with each other in body only, betraying a yearning for warmth, the need for an ally. Otherwise, their lovers' moments, like the one now, passed almost in silence because neither of them yet knew what and how much the other was reporting to their common masters. The most they allowed themselves was to refer to the masters with epithets, but such small audacities in this country were allowed to artists and doctors.

"You come, too," Zentano suggested in front of the first lady's room.

"No. She's all yours tonight."

"Did something happen?"

"The usual hysteria."

"Shall I come see you after?"

"I told you, tomorrow! And she probably won't leave you any strength for me," the girl replied, still combative, and slipped into the opposite door where she inhabited a small, artistically furnished apartment.

The first lady greeted him from the bed, curled up in a bun. She shouted, "Jorge, I'm going crazy! If I'm not crazy already."



He grinned in an exaggerated radiance, "Madam, a Woman who isn't capable of going crazy from time to time does not deserve this holy name."

"Jorge, this time it's serious!" she said, turning over on her back, slipping herself up on the pillow with visible relief at his appearance.

"Of course. Did I ever say it wasn't serious?"

He always agreed with his patients initially, refuting them only with a demonstrative casualness, which actually did have a reassuring effect on them. And he managed to keep that expression on his face now even though, on the inside, he was still boiling from the sting of the artist. As if to prove her right, and as if taking from the master what her slave had refused him, he sat on the bed and unceremoniously threw back the satin blanket, threatening the slave: "No, darling, when this one here is swept away by the whirlwind, it won't save you that you were my mistress, your starving colleagues will eat you along with your paintings. Only I can save you, but I will consider it..."

Above the navel, the first lady's nakedness shined in front of him because her nightgown had twisted around her breasts. He ran a hand over her smooth belly, and her hips were trembling like a tired horse. The thin, faded scars of the cosmetic surgeries which had removed the excess from her abdomen and thighs were also trembling like cobwebs.

"I'm cold!" she moaned.

Zentano's desire, however, had faded at the sight of the familiar, repeatedly cut nudity.

"Madam, why must a magnificent woman such as yourself resort to medical attention to keep her warm?"

"Jorge, leave the jokes! Something terrible is happening. I started talking to myself. Am I getting old?"

Her question was uttered with all the horror of a truly aging woman.

"Let's pray that everyone ages like you, darling." A psychiatrist is obliged to be able to speak gently, even to such thin-lipped and long-nosed faces. He covered her again, affectionately cradling her hands in his. "Is there anything else? Talking to ourselves is not the worst case. After all, who else should a person speak frankly to but themselves?"

He almost let slip, "who else in this country," but the swallowed part didn't disturb his composure.

She looked around timidly and asked in a whisper, "Don't you feel a presence? It's like there's someone in the bedroom."

He looked reflectively around the huge, beautifully furnished room. It wasn't nouveau riche like the presidential bedroom; here was found the skillful imagination of the artist-slave. The first lady didn't sleep like her husband in imperial and royal styles.

"Ma'am, other than the presence of a heightened sense of civilization, I feel nothing."

"Exactly!" she said with another bout of trembling, and he laughed, shaking her hands.

"Aren't you used to it already?"

It was only then she realized that in addition to her furniture, he had in mind the state-of-the-art eavesdropping systems that General Biko had installed in the palace. Whispering, she turned her head on the pillow, "No, no! The voice said just that: another civilization!"

"Wow," Dr. Zentano was merrily indignant. "Television has been serving up too much science fiction lately! You will have to get that under control, ma'am. Just look, the population has begun to rely not on themselves and their leaders but on foreign..."

"Jorge," she interrupted, and he thanked her for her stupidity which allowed him to make sometimes dangerous double entendres. "Do something, Jorge! I want to sleep. I have an important job tomorrow, and I'll be trash."

"Even if you sleep all day, you'll still be trash," he said her words to himself, but otherwise said with his most good-natured irony, "Madam, I would rather not ask you now what you talked about with this other civilization. These things are too intimate. Do you have a specific desire, something that you feel would help you? Because my opinion is that a valium will do the job."

Not only the first lady but most of the grandes dames and rich people in this poor country paid dearly and overpaid for their personal psychoanalysts. The former monks-confessors had been reborn in them, and often they weren't even doctors, just sweet-spoken and quick-witted charlatans. Zentano knew, of course, their enchanting technique, which in some cases did have a psychotherapeutic effect. He was forced to use it so as not to be expelled, but he feared that it might destroy the serious psychiatrist in him. So he usually tried to divert the first lady from the psychoanalytic session, taking the risk that she might want him to lie down next to her. Once every two or three months, she would make him close his eyes and intensely imagine some girl he had once desired so that he could kiss her fishy mouth. That's what the artist had been hinting at, but her mistress, thank God, preferred the fantasy to the actual male embrace.

He had begun, some years before, to try and get to the root of her strong obsession with fantasizing. He would have her writhe and moan for half an hour in an imaginary love act, and she assumed that she was showing appreciation for the otherwise exhausting psychiatric method in a very stately way because it both relieved her sexual hunger and guarded her from reckless adventures. Thus, thanks to her psychiatrist, she was considered among the population to be a

stupid and evil, but otherwise very moral, woman whose name was not associated with any such gossip. And her protégés—artists, writers, actors—could sleep undisturbed.

Zentano had cursed himself for his attempts at that time, and he still regretted it now, seeing her “stateliness” reawakened. She looked around, as if to make sure there were no witnesses, lifted herself, and slid her nightgown over her head in her usual gesture. She pulled off the blanket and lay down in her learned position. There were whitish cobwebs around her chest, as well. Through them, the surgeon-designers had stuffed some of the fat they had removed from her ass to make her breasts as big and hard as an ancient statue.

“You are beautiful, madam,” said Zentano, without looking at her. “One can’t get enough of looking at you. Why must such beauty...”

“Imagery!” she interrupted, taking his words as a self-offering. The psychiatrist swallowed the disgust in his throat. He rubbed his face sluggishly with his hands, rubbed it for a long time, and when he removed them, he met her wide-open eyes. They weren’t, as they usually were, coldly commanding but warmed now by expectation. He carefully stared into them, took her hands again. He didn’t have to do much because she was nearly self-hypnotized by her desire. The man she needed right now must have been in her brain already. Zentano only had to tell her, “Oh, how you love him! And here he is in your arms, eager and strong, and you both throw yourselves into each other with all your passion. Accept him... accept him... he is inside you and you are inside him... and you are infinitely, infinitely happy...” But even though these words were unnecessary, he sometimes did sincerely feel sorry for her and would involuntarily tell her a few nice words to encourage her imagination towards the more human side of the experience.

He did that now but hastened to turn away from the poor thing who was already squeezing her breasts to blue on behalf of her imaginary lover and tossing her outstretched legs through the air. In the past, every now and then, a little of the voyeur’s vicious pleasure would pop up inside him, but since he was a normal man, in most cases, long after these sessions, he could not desire a woman. That’s why he immediately occupied himself with the illustrated magazine from the nightstand, so as not to hear the dog’s whimper of the first lady who was striving for her lonely orgasm.

And at that moment, a quiet, melodic, almost delightful voice asked him with sweet curiosity, “Excuse me, what is she doing right now? Why is she doing that?”

The magazine fell from his hands, but again the voice brought him out of his stupor, “Do not be afraid, we beg you. She told you we are from another civilization. We want to understand...”

The doctor’s duty held him back long enough to interrupt the first lady’s contranatural love ecstasy with two excessively strong slaps, after which Dr. Zentano simply fled.

He set the two latches on the front door, locked the living room door behind him, set the pistol on the drink table with the safety off, and slumped in a nearby armchair. Only then did he realize that he had become ridiculous in his panic. "You're a psychiatrist, damn you. If Biko has decided to drive his masters crazy with some kind of cheap trick, at least don't you get taken in by it! Leave the mystical to them, they can't live without it. But it wasn't a hallucination, although... Here's what it was, the two of them had so insistently suggested that it talked... No, no, it was no accident that the generals had played their trick for Strauss first, to prepare everyone!"

He jumped up again and found himself in every corner and cabinet that could be outfitted with listening devices, or "bedbugs" as the European press had once called them. However, producing sound, as far as he knew the technology, required speakers, and they were always bigger than the microphones.

The voice had come from behind him as clearly and authentically as if its owner were in the middle of the living room. The pistol lay loaded on the drink table, but the voice had seemed created to soothe, not to frighten: soft, warm, something between alto and baritone, neither feminine nor masculine, with evenish intonations in its courtesy.

"Do not be afraid, we beg you!" said the voice, while he was in the middle of searching the living room. "We will just ask you about some things. We understand that you are the person who can best explain to us..."

"Where are you talking from?" Zentano hissed, looking around.

"We are here with you. You cannot perceive us because we are a different type of intelligence, structured differently. We want nothing more than to understand your intelligence."

"If you speak our language, then you know our intelligence too. Language is a manifestation of intelligence."

The psychiatrist was regaining his composure. After all, a voice posed no direct threat. The living room was locked, the gun close at hand. There was no feeling of anyone's presence, as the first lady had felt. He forced himself into a natural behavior, but to support it, he needed support himself. He went to the bar, trying to act like he was alone in the living room. He pulled out a bottle of whiskey and a glass. Overly casual, he took ice from the built-in refrigerator, sat down in the armchair next to the pistol, and prepared his drink intently: first the ice, then the whiskey on top to shatter it, then the spritz of soda. Shake, and the heralding, blissful gong of ice and crystal.

The voice seemed to have gone away, embarrassed by Zentano's objection, but as soon as the glass touched his lips, it spoke, "What is that, and why are you drinking it now?"

"Eh," the psychiatrist was angered by the idiotic joke. "You were going to ask something about intelligence, weren't you? I see no intelligence in this. And it's best to postpone the conversation until tomorrow. It's too late, I'm sleepy."

He still believed he was talking to the undiscovered installation of Biko or Melis, or both, but then the voice made a confession that was beyond the capabilities of their agents.

"We still cannot comprehend what is important to you. You said that language is an expression of intelligence. We have studied it relatively well, but it gives us such contradictory information that it prevents us from grasping the motivation for human behavior in most cases. That is why we came to you, to the most prominent humans here. You are surely the smartest and most knowledgeable since you manage the other humans."

A few large sips of whiskey were already affecting the "motivations for his behavior." Zentano decided to serve the generals a bit of culture. "An old specialist in social sciences, Montesquieu was his name, said two centuries ago: If people only knew with how little intelligence they're sometimes governed..."

"Is that true?" the voice asked with unshakable naivete.

"Uh-huh!" the psychiatrist confirmed casually with a glass to his lips.

"But if he said it a long time ago, then they do know it now."

"They don't know it."

"Here is another one of those contradictions we told you about that are preventing us from..."

"Eh," Zentano again raised his voice menacingly, angry at this silly game, but he restrained himself and decided to keep playing it with the help of his wits. "Has someone sent you to us, or did you decide that we're the smartest on your own?"

"We realized that we needed to come here."

"Then you really don't understand anything about the motivations of human behavior."

For some reason, the invisible kept talking about itself in the plural, apparently missing the very same wits that Biko's agents were. "Well, we do understand that you are the specialist in these issues. That is why we will rely mostly on you. So, be so kind..."

This definitely looked like the beginning of an interrogation, and the psychiatrist interrupted it, "Here, you're wrong again. I'm just a doctor. I can treat five or six abnormal motivations in a person without even being sure if they really are abnormal. If we recognize them as normal, however, our psychiatry would have to close shop, and we don't want that. Look, I can tell you something more specific about the human structure. So, let's start: protein is the basis of all life on this planet. It consists..."

"Pardon me," the voice interrupted in turn with the same even kindness. "The chemistry of life here is already known to us. We want to talk to you about something else. But now you have told us something interesting: you treat illnesses that you claim may not be illnesses. Earlier, for instance, what did you cure those humans from, and why?"

Zentano poured himself another whiskey, took a sip, thinking resignedly that when General Biko brings him before his court in the basement of the palace tomorrow, he will hardly serve him whiskey during the interrogation. And Zentano tried to rehearse how he would behave before him. He knew that no acquittals were issued there, so he had no choice but to preserve at least his dignity. He replied with professional indifference, "From their fears."

"From their fears," the voice repeated in a very human voice, as if assimilating the answer. "Is it abnormal for a person to be afraid?"

"There is a natural, useful fear, but this one is harmful." The psychiatrist would justify himself in the same way, in the other court, after the fall of tyranny. "It damages the nerves, blinds and confuses their minds. This fear makes them cruel and reckless to the people they govern."

"And what exactly are they afraid of?"

"Of the people they govern."

"We do not understand. So you are separated by some conflict here? Are you chosen as a doctor by the humans who are governed to protect them from those who govern them? Is that how we understand it?"

The psychiatrist blinked with desperate gaiety at the clumsily disguised trick. "Eh, you really are some cuties! Why don't you show yourself though? I'm very curious to see you! And it's impolite of you to be invisible to me in my own home."

"We have explained this to you. It is not possible for you to perceive us with your senses. Maybe when we study you well, we will find some way for more direct contact, but for now it is impossible, believe us! We are also troubled by this; it bothers us very much that humans are afraid of us. But at least you, as a doctor and a scientist, are trying to accept the situation. Our future relationship with humankind will depend the most on humans like you."

The doctor laughed, "And you suppose humanity will let you interrogate it like this?"

"But how else can it be studied?!" The humorless invisibility still didn't get it. "Our intelligence does not allow us to apply the methods by which you study other beings."

"They must have hired someone from television," Dr. Zentano thought, "from the scientific-fiction editors. Still, it's such a trite theme—for some higher civilization to start cutting up people the same way people had cut animals..." He didn't finish his thought, however, because he had reminded himself of the methods by which they "study" political opponents in the dungeons



of the palace. The late prison doctor had described them to him in great detail. The trembling courage of the whiskey in his chest melted like a mirage after the passing of the sun. With the last remnants of it, he said, "Then prove to me somehow that you're present! Something to show us that we really are talking to the unseen from somewhere. At least pour me a little whiskey!"

Nothing moved in the room. The air remained just as thick and stuffy, but now there did seem to be something in it, as if a presence could be felt. Zentano smiled ironically, both at himself and at his patients. A person can fill up any space with their own imagination, especially when they're frightened, and they've been frantically racking their brain over what explanations can be extracted. He suddenly pulled away from the table, and sank into the back of the armchair.

The bottle had risen smoothly into the air. There, it tilted over and confidently started pouring its contents into the large crystal glass. It filled the glass up by itself, to the brim, and silently returned to its place. No, it wasn't completely silent. Zentano realized afterwards that he had heard both the gurgling of the liquid and the hollow thud of the bottle's thick bottom against the wood.

In the altered silence that followed the explosion, he leaned over timidly, extended his index finger to the rim of the glass, and examined it. It was wet. No one would fill up a glass like that without leaving room for ice or soda.

"Hey, I thought I was a good hypnotist," he laughed almost soundlessly, losing his voice. "Bravo, Bravo!"

But the other voice hadn't gotten lost, it called out with an unchanged lyric and timbre—not alto, not baritone, not female, not male, "Now allow us to ask you our questions!"

"Let's wait and see if I can drink what you poured!" The straight whiskey choked him, shattered his esophagus, and it shattered his doubts about being hypnotized. "What do you want from me?" He coughed out his question roughly and then went on coughing.

The voice waited for him to calm down. "To understand humans, nothing more!"

"Then go to the humans!" Zentano screamed and jumped out of the armchair with clenched fists.

"But are you not the best, the most knowledgeable..?"

"We are not."

"If you have been chosen to lead..."

"Nobody has chosen us! We elected each other. Go somewhere else!"

"Where?"

He slumped back in his armchair, realizing the powerlessness of his threatening outburst before the invisible woman or man. He moaned, "So this is how we'll be interrogated?"

"We have no other way. Our mission is to describe human civilization," the voice announced, again with an even courtesy.

"And then?"

"Then we will leave. But we did just arrive, and it is still very difficult for us..."

"All right, ask!" Zentano surrendered, and he went for a new glass to dilute some of the whiskey in. And on the way to the bar, it may be that he was also thinking that science-fiction had been doing a good job all along: this little trick with the whiskey and he immediately believed he was talking to an alien civilization and it didn't even astonish him!

"You must be tired already," the foreign civilization unexpectedly took pity on him. "We have comprehended your condition. It will be good for you to rest first so that you can better explain things to us. The important thing is that you have accepted us. Only one more question, we beg you! It is necessary for us to clarify the basics of tomorrow's questions. May we?"

"Please!" the doctor replied officially, as if he were already conducting negotiations on behalf of humankind.

"How should this idea be understood: 'A conversation about trees includes being silent about so much wrongdoing'?"

"Whose is it?" Zentano frowned.

"One Bertold Brecht. As we were told, a writer. He is not alive."

"Who's telling you that? Did someone here tell you?"

"Yes."

"But who?" the psychiatrist insisted feverishly.

The voice seemed not to know discretion either, "A woman, an artist. How can you explain it to us?"

"The meaning is clear. You shouldn't talk to people about trees."

"And why?" the voice asked, still just as melodic and just as unhumanly naive.

"It isn't done! Hardly about trees! Yes, yes, hardly about trees if you want people to talk to you at all!"

"Again there is a contradiction..."

"Ugh," he stood up. "There should be only one! Come on, let me sleep already!"

"Yes, yes, pardon us," the voice hurried to say, but apparently it hadn't mastered the meaning of human intonations either because there was no guilt in it. "Thank you very much!"

Zentano remained standing, expecting to discern some other movement, until his muscles couldn't take the strain and they softly trembled, as if from severe exhaustion.

"Hello," he cried out softly. "Are you still here?"

No one answered him. "They left," he established, but he wasn't relieved. Again he poured straight from the glass they had filled into the other one, diluted it with soda, repeated aloud to hear his own voice, "They're gone!" Indeed they were gone, but now their presence seemed to be quite palpable. It was probably their questions, which continued to lie stratified in the thick air—the asked and the unasked alike. He dared not open the window for them, and he slipped around like a thief under their weighty roof from one wall of the spacious living room to the other. He tried to defend himself with desperate scorn: "Let's really talk about the trees! Don't trees do the same? Doesn't one tree drink the juices of the other? Doesn't the mighty, with its crown, weigh on the heads of the small? Poets and artists have it so easy! A beautiful metaphor, and imagine if it were lost!" But they hadn't come for metaphors or pictures, and that's why they had come to him, from the artist—to him! She had sent them to him, damn her to hell!

He cursed her and at the same moment longed to hide in her embrace. How would he answer them tomorrow? They had come to him, they came to the specialist in humans, and he didn't even know anything about this girl who, for two years now, has been the only person close to him here! A brave girl for allowing herself to quote such ideas in the palace! For not being frightened by their questions and not thinking herself insane like her masters! She truly did deserve to be saved! But would there be any salvation for them?

Passing the table again, he grabbed the glass and emptied it down his throat. From the dictator, perhaps, but from their questions, from this multitude speaking with one voice? They would be back, tomorrow or in an hour, or in minutes. Does this other intelligence know how long it takes for a man to rest before his answers?

Even if the dictator did fall, even if he, Zentano, immediately published his book and broke free from the court, they would still come to him! They would mercilessly ask him, the specialist in humans, their naive and childishly cruel questions! Like his son used to ask him, before he sent him abroad with his mother after the divorce, to break him free of the palace. Once, in the time of their one-hour walk, the boy had asked him eighty-three—Zentano had planned to count them in advance. The last one was, "Dad, who ate this chocolate?" He had found a piece of colorful foil in the street.

His throat bubbled into something between laughter and tears because he could see his boy running with his bowed legs, carrying the foil along with his eighty-third question. Who ate the chocolate! Who's been eating humankind's chocolate!? They too would be asking him about things like that, not about trees. And even if they leave unnoticed, the way they came, their questions will

stay behind, because everything said stays behind. Like that one about the trees. The questions will stay on Earth. Fuck Earth! They will stay in it, beside it, and they will deafeningly resound in his dream private office which is about to open after the fall of tyranny. And he won't be able to ask his healing questions to his numerous patients because he himself will have to constantly answer. Someone witty once wrote that psychiatrists ask so many questions to deprive their patients the opportunity to ask them any back. Indeed, no other doctor is as afraid of their own patients' questions as the psychiatrist. If they're a real psychiatrist, of course, not a charlatan or an ignoramus. And he was afraid, he had always been afraid, but from now on he would be twice as afraid. And nothing would cure him from his fear anymore.

The next time he passed the drink table, his hand caught the pistol grip instead of the glass. Dr. Zentano looked at the raised safety, looked towards the window. The darkness in the nooks behind the curtains had brightened. The hour had arrived when Biko and Melis would gun down the president's opponents. He carefully, as if trying not to damage his teeth, put the short cold barrel in his mouth. He rested it on his palate, in that tiny and thin arch that humans, infinitely naive in their arrogance, had named after the infinite arch above them. And he blew it up.

**Andy Erbschloe** is a native English-speaker living in Bulgaria. Primarily occupied as a homemaker, Andy pursues a variety of interests including sociolinguistics, labor socialism, comparative religion, mushroom picking, and sequential art. He prefers to earn knowledge in lump gold rather than any debased cultural coinage, with its idolatrous stamping and unfaithful measure. Actively translating Bulgarian texts from the public domain since 2019, the author is presently advocating for what he considers his greatest discovery: the science-fiction works of Lyuben Dilov, virtually unknown in English. Two Dilov novels, *The Missed Chance* and *Unfinished Novel of a Student*, are set for English debut in 2021.



A scenic landscape photograph of a mountain valley. The foreground is filled with lush green grass and low-lying vegetation. In the middle ground, a small village with several buildings is nestled in a valley. The background features steep, green mountains under a bright blue sky with large, white, fluffy clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

# **SYMPOSIUM: MORMONISM AND SF**

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### A Critical Introduction to Latter-day Saint Speculative Fiction

Adam McLain



Mormon literature—at least as the Association for Mormon Letters defines it as literature for, by, and about Mormons—began with the very inception of the religion. Mormonism is, at its heart, a literary religion. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, began his questioning of other religions and his search for a “true religion” with reading, or at least remembering, a verse from the Bible: “If any of ye lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not” (King James Version, Jam. 1.5). Years after receiving his first vision (when God appeared to him and told him not to join any of the extant churches; see “Joseph Smith—History”), Smith claimed to be tasked with translating a work of literature, the Book of Mormon, to be used as proof of his divine calling (see Doctrine and Covenants 20.8-12). Mormonism is as much a literary religion as it is an American religion (see, for example, Bloom; Coppins; Coviello, among many others). Criticism of Mormonism and its literature also began early in the development of the religion. For example, Arthur Conan Doyle, in the first Sherlock Holmes mystery, *A Study in Scarlet*, characterizes the Danite Mormons as murderers. Jack London, in *The Star River*, engaged with specific historic Mormon events, in this case, the Mountain Meadows Massacre. And Mark Twain, in *Roughing It*, gave a simplistic critique of the Book of Mormon: “If he had left [and it came to pass] out, his Bible”—his being Joseph Smith’s Book of Mormon—“would have only been a pamphlet” (Twain ch. 16). Outside engagement with and interest in criticizing the new literary religion during its early years in the nineteenth-century was strong and continues to be a strong subfield of religious, literary, and historical studies.

This paper seeks to introduce science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction (hereafter sf) scholars to the history of Mormon literary criticism, especially Mormon sf literary criticism. The purpose of this introductory essay is to explore Mormon literary studies and provide further areas of inquiry at the intersection of Mormonism and sf. Many authors, like Brandon Mull, Shannon Hale, Charlie N. Holmberg, Brandon Sanderson, Orson Scott Card, and Stephenie Meyer, to name a few who are also vocal members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the largest church within the Mormon diaspora), have recently reached the tops of various bestseller lists and won numerous awards in the sf literary community. Because Latter-day Saint authors are part of the most lauded works in contemporary sf, the intersection of the two has become a vibrant and untapped “field . . . white already to harvest” for new critical attention (to borrow a Mormon scriptural phrase, see Doctrine and Covenants 4.4). As such, this paper first examines the history of Mormon letters through an exploration of its criticism and conversations; second, it looks toward the scholarship done on Mormon sf; and third, it offers at least one engagement—that of genre—that connects sf and Mormon scholarship, while discussing the hopeful possibilities of scholarship that can occur at the intersection of Mormonism and sf.

### A Brief History of Mormon Letters and Scholarship

The history of Mormon and Latter-day Saint literature (with some nods to the criticism) has been outlined by many Mormon literary scholars (England; Givens; Burton). The most commonly used assessment of Mormon literary periods is Eugene England's 1982 address to the Association of Mormon Letters, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day," in which he outlined the 150 years of literature up to that time in *BYU Studies*. This address was further expanded in a later 2001 article, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects." A former Brigham Young University literature professor, cofounder of the Association of Mormon Letters, and one of the founders of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, the oldest independent journal in Mormon studies, England was and still is considered one of the best Mormon scholars in the history of Mormon scholarship. In these two essays, he outlines four time periods of the history of Latter-day Saint literature: Foundations (1830–1880), Home Literature (1890–1930), the Lost Generation (1930–1970; see also Geary), and Faithful Realism (1970–present). These time periods have since been used by other Mormon literary scholars to assess the history of Mormon literature (Burton; Harrell). Of particular note is England's end to this periodization, in which he states that the contemporary Mormon literary moment, Faithful Realism, is "good work in all genres, combining the best qualities and avoiding the limitations of most past work, so that it is both faithful and critical, appreciated by a growing Mormon audience and also increasingly published and honored nationally" (England 2001, 8).

While this is a rather optimistic view of where Mormon literature has ended up, England, in general, was optimistic yet pragmatic about the trajectory of Latter-day Saint literature specifically and Mormonism generally. To conclude his "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," England states that "the future of Mormon literature is potentially both bright and vexed" (England 2001, 18). He is hopeful about the creation of new periodicals and presses expanding the scope of Mormon literature, along with the national acclaim of authors like Orson Scott Card (to whom we will return later) and Terry Tempest Williams. Yet he is also wary about the "potentially creative tension between the two poles of Mormons' expectations about their literature—the conflict between orthodox didacticism and faithful realism" which seemed "to be breaking down into invidious judgments, name-calling, and divisions" (England 2001, 18). As Mormon literature has continued beyond England's initial assessment, this hope and this fear were both realized and are still being realized as Mormons continue to write, publish, and argue.

As an area of study, Mormon literature, much like sf literature more broadly, has debated the question of exclusion or inclusion. Both have struggled over what criteria should be used in determining what is considered Mormon or sf literature and what is not. This question has been central to the efforts of Mormon literary criticism; for a literary critic to be a *Mormon* literary critic, one must determine what is and is not Mormon, Mormon literature, and Mormon criticism (and, for the sf scholar, what is and is not Mormon sf).

Although this paper lacks the room to delve into this discussion in depth, it is important to give an example of what I mean. In 1990, Richard Cracroft, a literature professor, reviewed

*Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (1989), in which he analyzed a poem about a Latter-day Saint ritual and deemed it to be non-Mormon. Even though this poem was written by a Latter-day Saint, focused on a Latter-day Saint ordinance, and was published by a Latter-day Saint press, Cracroft deemed this poem to be “a competent, earth-bound (non-Mormon) poem” (123). Earlier in the review, Cracroft describes “earth-bound” as something that “repress[es] and replace[s] soaring spirituality with . . . humanism” (122). Cracroft’s strong words and determination of what is and is not Mormonism and Mormon literature set off a long-term discussion, spanning the next few decades, over what and who could define Mormonism at all.

Defending his views of an “authentic” Mormon voice, Cracroft delivered a 1992 address to the Association for Mormon Letters titled, “Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature.” In his address, Cracroft relies on Hugh Nibley’s separation of mantic Mormons—those who believe in the supernatural parts of Mormonism—and sophic Mormons—those who strive to make the supernatural understandable. By using this binary, Cracroft attempts to show that he believes that the mantic view is the authentic voice of Mormonism—one that wholeheartedly accepts this thing considered “orthodox theology,” even though what is kept in with the orthodoxy and what is left out with the heresy is never fully defined—while excommunicating the sophic Mormons as inauthentic, non-Mormon, earthborn humanists. Mormon literature, for Cracroft, is for the “right-thinking, red-blooded, and sanctified Latter-day Saint” (“Authentic Mormon Voice” 51).

Cracroft’s declaration of an authentic Mormon voice—one that he could tell was Mormon, but others might not—was a response to Bruce W. Jorgensen’s 1991 Association of Mormon Letters address, “To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say.” Jorgensen’s own address was a response to Cracroft’s review of *Harvest*. In Cracroft and others, Jorgensen saw Mormon letters shoring itself up within its own walls, keeping precious what is within those metaphorical walls while spurning any literature and ideas that were without those walls. In other words, Jorgensen saw the culture around Mormon literature forming a homogenous “in-group” that had rules and strictures that allowed others to be accepted as Mormon literature; however, texts that did not follow those rules and strictures (even if the text were created by a Latter-day Saint or Mormon or had similar themes) were excluded from this collective “in-group” of Mormon literature and were considered in some ways lesser or unhelpful to the group efforts. This exclusion worried Jorgensen because it meant that along with all the good that is kept within the “in-group,” so the bad was left to fester since the enclosing of an orthodoxy within an institutionalized or exclusive “Mormon literature” causes those practicing the orthodox to reject the heretical literature that might be helpful in revealing biases and blind spots. Jorgensen saw the best cure for this festering to be reaching out to the Stranger, his word for the “Other” or the literature not accepted in Cracroft’s form of Mormon literature, which would allow the homodox Mormon literature to see itself through other people’s perspectives and views. In allowing the “in-group” to mingle with the “out-group,” Jorgensen offered two opportunities for Mormon criticism to express its Mormon-ness: the first, to be generous and hospitable; or, in other words, to allow space for those who do not fit the exclusive

rules dictated by Mormon literary scholars. The second was to be “patient, longsuffering, kind” (Jorgensen 48) with Mormon literature that might not fit the normative values created by Cracroft and others. In these two lofty goals, Jorgensen saw Mormon criticism enacting Mormon charity, whereas Cracroft sought Mormon criticism to enact an exclusive Mormonism.

In an attempt at mediating between these two polarizing arguments, BYU English professor Gideon Burton, in an essay delivered in 1994 at a conference and later published in an edited collection on Mormon literature for *Dialogue*, uses the Mormon idea of restoration as a metaphor for approaching Mormon literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> He states that “if we will view both literature and criticism within the larger context of the Restoration, then the two positions which Cracroft and Jorgensen represent—fidelity to the Mormon ethos and openness to otherness—becomes complementary and mutually independent necessities in a venture so significant it cuts across lines of Mormon membership: effecting a Zion culture” (36). Burton’s thrust toward Mormon Zionism—a culture “of one heart and one mind” (Pearl of Great Price, Moses 7.18)—allows him to contradict and combine both Cracroft and Jorgensen by seeing benefits in both approaches. One cannot recognize one’s self until one has interacted with someone else (in Jorgensen’s terms, interacted with “the Stranger” or the Other), while at the same time, knowing one’s self can benefit one’s interaction with other authors and views (Burton’s approach to Cracroft’s hermeneutic). Burton views Mormon literature as something that “will always change so long as it is a literature living up to its potential for furthering the Restoration” (41)—a Restoration that is continually happening, as more modern Mormon theology has argued (see Mason).

Burton’s mediation, though, has not improved the conversation about what constitutes literature that is Mormon versus Mormons who write literature. For example, around the same time as Burton’s Zionistic and restorationist middle road, Michael Austin published an article that pushed for Mormon literary critics who were in “good standing” with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be the best representatives of Mormon criticism and Mormon literature. I touch further on this crisis within Mormon letters in the final part of this essay, but suffice it to say here that the conversation in Mormon letters is robust and ongoing and, as I discuss later, has much to offer the same types of ongoing conversations about definition within sf studies.

Scholars of Mormonism have also attempted to define a “Mormon lens” or “Mormon theory” that can be used when approaching literature. Jack Harrell, for example, in both his 2014 article “Toward a Mormon Literary Theory” and his 2016 book *Writing Ourselves: Essays on Creativity, Craft, and Mormonism*, attempted to offer a utilization of Mormonism itself as a way to understand texts; in other words, Harrell wants to use the theology and culture of Mormonism as a lens through which to approach literary analysis. “I propose,” Harrell offers, “a theory grounded in Mormon cosmology; a theory that accounts for the mythic proportions of Mormon thought; that seeks to build culture, specifically a Zion culture; that values language and ‘The Word’ and the redemptive power of art; that utilizes elements of ethical criticism as it assumes an inherently moral force in literature; and that aligns with the current movement called ‘Post-Postmodernism,’ or the ‘New Sincerity’” (22-23). While Harrell’s theorization of a Mormon theory has not been

brought to full fruition, I believe that in it, there are hints of possible engagement between Mormon theological aspirations and science fictional literary realizations.

### **A Brief History of Mormon Sf Criticism**

While I have shown above that Mormon literature is part of a strong and robust conversation, at least within Mormon studies itself, Mormon sf literature has not been subject to as much analysis as one might like (for further engagement with the literary history of sf, see Busby 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Hunter; Parkin; Todd). As I have shown above, one of the main contentions within Mormon literary criticism is what defines it as Mormon. Within Mormon sf literary criticism, one of the main contentions is how sf and Mormonism can cohabitate within literature and media.

To discuss this contention, I turn to a conversation in the 1980s between Michael R. Collings and Sandy and Joe Staubhaar that played out within the pages of *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, two liberal—or, at least, more critical and academic—publications within Mormon scholarship. Writing in the 1980s, Collings firmly lays out his view that Mormonism and sf are antithetical on the basis of prophetic revelation: as much as sf predicts the future, it will fundamentally undermine Mormon prophetic revelation; and, as much as Mormons believe in prophetic revelation, it will fundamentally undermine sf projections. To this point, Collings published an article titled “Refracted Visions and Future Worlds,” in which he showed how many sf texts stereotyped and caricatured Mormons: Philip Jose Farmer, *Flesh* (1968); Robert Heinlein, *Strangers in a Strange World* (1971); Ian Watson, *The Embedding* (1977); Piers Anthony, *Planet of Tarot* trilogy (1979–1980); John Varley, *Wizard* (1980); and Dean Ing, *Systemic Shock* (1981). This article argued that “science fiction and religion—and Mormonism in particular—seem essentially incompatible. One [science fiction] asks the questions . . . while the other [Mormonism] answers them” (116).<sup>2</sup> Collings, then, saw that “in order to assimilate science fiction, Mormonism seems either to subordinate the fictive forms to the larger purposes of salvation and alter the genre into something else” like a parable or “to entertain momentarily and imaginatively perspectives drawn from other worlds” (116).

In a rebuke of Collings’ view that Mormonism and sf cannot align well, Sandy and Joe Staubhaar reacted to Collings’ praise of Orson Scott Card with “Science Fiction and Mormonism: A Three-Way View.” In it, they laud the potentiality of sf, considering it the “perfect milieu for new explorations of these ancient philosophical and religious questions, precisely because the canvas is blank when the author begins” (53). They see sf as a chance to paint the capital R version of religion—the theology, the soteriology, the eschatology, the cosmology—onto a different world and thus interrogate it through the lens of sf: “At the very least [sf] has afforded us a good many hours of harmless entertainment, sometimes mindstretching, sometimes not. At the most it has offered us some moments of transcendent spiritual joy—as well as more concrete food for thought in the transcendental vein” (56). Different from Collings’ approach, which saw Mormonism’s claim to revelation as antithetical to the claim of future prediction in sf, the Staubhaars saw Mormonism as capable of being interrogated by sf.



The Staubhaars' thread of sf as a medium for interrogation reflects what many sf scholars like Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, and others have argued about cognitive estrangement and the possibilities of sf, whereas Collings' article seems to have been influenced by a fundamental belief that Mormonism is the overarching truth and must bend all media to its will. As criticism of Mormon sf has continued throughout the years, many scholars seem to oscillate between these two polarizing sides, either by attempting to be faithful to the religion (as seen in various Mormon-authored reviews of sf, see Straubhaar 1981 and 1988; Curtis; and Busby 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f; see also, Winston) or seeing how the religion might be interrogated by sf (Bialecki; Repphun).

Much of the work within Mormonism and sf has centered around an analysis of the groundbreaking work of Orson Scott Card and Stephenie Meyer, both Latter-day Saint authors who have reached international fame and acceptance within the sf genre. Card's work has been analyzed, first to positive analysis (Collings 1990, 1996; Blackmore; Heidkamp; Doyle; Doyle and Stewart) and then to more critical analysis (Suderman; Campbell; Day). For example, Suderman's article, "Card's Game: The Unfortunate Decline of Orson Scott Card," focuses on the seeming demise of his work's messages in relation to the growing emphasis on identity politics and supporting minority communities (e.g., Card has been staunchly opposed to same-sex marriage, which resulted in a boycott of the movie adaptation of *Ender's Game*). Card's work, like other assessments of Mormon authors, has also been used in the intersection of sf and religion, as seen in Meredith Ross's "House of Card: *Ender's Game* and Speculative Fiction as a Vehicle for Religio-Political Values." Most likely due to his staunch homophobia and antagonism toward same-sex marriage, Card has not been frequently used in studies of the body or gender, even though his earlier work, especially in the later books of the Ender series, has fascinating mediations on the concepts of body, soul, and gender.

Although not all of her writing is science fictional, Stephenie Meyer's corpus of work begs attention as it fits into the broader sf community, the Mormon community, and popular literature of the twenty-first century. *The Host* (2008; an alien invasion and human revolution story) is Meyer's book that most relates to science fiction; however, it, along with *The Chemist* (2016; a thriller adventure), have received little critical attention from sf scholars, even though her books are widely popular. For example, *The Host* is only mentioned in passing in reviews by Jana Riess (BYU Studies, 2009) and Jonathan Green (*Dialogue*, 2009). Most scholarly work on Meyer deals with broader sf studies, including horror and fantasy studies. Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (*Twilight*, 2005; *New Moon*, 2006; *Eclipse*, 2007; *Breaking Dawn*, 2008; *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner*, 2010; *Life and Death*, 2015; and *Midnight Sun*, 2020) has been used, as with Card's novels, to open up understanding to Mormonism and to critique sexual and gender norms within and intersecting with the religious-cultural identity of Mormon. Authors have analyzed the Mormon themes in the series (Riess; Bowman ch. 8), approached Meyer's depiction of love, gender, sexuality, and the family in relation to Mormonism (Silver; Pyrhönen), looked at how Meyer's novels might be postfeminist and representative of a certain form of masculinity (Mukherjea), and

have related Meyer's work to the heteronormative (Budruweit). The emphasis on gender, especially as it relates to Mormonism's seeming emphasis on a conservative binary gender (see "The Family"), is a fascinating and engaging place for Mormonism and sf to generate new conversations and develop improved hermeneutics.

Besides Card and Meyer, little work has been done on other Latter-day Saint authors. Popular and contemporary websites and publications have reviewed or assessed the work of authors, while academic journals have not published articles using Mormon sf authors as a way to engage in broader conversation in sf studies or literary studies. Shannon Hale, for example, has received numerous reviews in various journals (Altiveros, Blasingame, Crandall, Gallo, Pelotte, Whitman); however, her work is only mentioned in passing in broader case studies (Collins, and DiCicco and Taylor-Greathouse), with little or no work done on her texts or how they relate to children's literature and literary history. To use another contemporary best-selling example, Brandon Sanderson's work, an ever-growing corpus of texts that bridge the perceived sf divide between science fiction and fantasy, has mostly been centered in conversations created on fan websites and conventions. A search for Sanderson in JSTOR reveals only one article (Strand) that uses Sanderson's three laws of magic, while a search on Tor.com reveals 1,151 results (which include fan conversations and engaging critical analysis of his work). That search shows that scholarly work has remained relatively silent on Sanderson's work, even though community conversations have been robust; however, in recent years, Sanderson has been discussed at various conferences in paper presentations, including at conferences for SFRA and IAFA. The examples of Hale and Sanderson show that, although the academic conversation seems aware of their writing, no scholar has delved into analyzing their work through the machinations of scholarship and peer-review.

### **The Possibilities of Mormonism and SF**

The intersection of Mormonism and sf, as I hope this introductory essay and the essays contained in the following collection show, is brimming with possibility. The first and second sections show that Mormon studies is currently dealing with and has long dealt with some of the questions that have also preoccupied sf scholars, like the genre of sf (what is sf? who gets to define it? who is in the sf community and who is out?), which can be correlated and assessed with some of the questions Mormon scholars ask about the genre of Mormon literature (what is Mormon literature? who gets to define it? who is in the Mormon community and who is out?). Interesting intersections could occur, for example, if one were to look at Austin's argument, cited earlier, that only good Latter-day Saints can write Mormon literary criticism well. One can easily look at the recent history of what it means to be a good or righteous Latter-day Saint in good standing (a standing that has changed over the years as different commandments have been accepted and rejected),<sup>3</sup> and for example, relate that to current sf and fandom studies that look at what it means to be part of a community of fans that also have an overarching discourse of academic, critical, and supportive literature.

Other formulations can be seen when one takes Mormonism, as Harrell and Austin claim, as a literary theory, or at the very least a literary lens akin to Jewish, Muslim, or Christian studies (Harrell 19–35; Austin 134–6). For example, in the edited collection that follows, the reader will find that Latter-day Saint sf literature can be used to discuss topics like mythpoetic literature, narrative structure, theosis, information science, and the history of the sf canon. Indeed, it is my attestation that Mormon literature should be discussed more in sf scholarship. After all, if Mormonism is the quintessential American religion, as Bloom and Coviello claim, then should it not also be used when discussing, at least, some forms of American sf? Unlike Collings and others, I do not believe Mormon studies and sf literature and studies are antithetical; I argue that the two can be interwoven into a tapestry that is able to forward our conversations towards a more productive and insightful future—one that brings together religion, sf, and the communities, marginalized or not, that find themselves bound up in this galaxy of thought.

## Notes

1. The Latter-day Saint movement is also known as the Restorationist movement because many American churches at the time believed they were restoring Christianity to its original teachings and organizations that Jesus Christ had in the New Testament. Within Mormonism, it is believed that Joseph Smith “restored” the original teachings, priesthood authority, and church organization that Jesus Christ had during his life.
2. Throughout this essay, I use *sf* to connote the broader study of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction. I keep the term *science fiction* in Collings’ and the Staubhaars’ works without the use of *sic* because it was the term they used. I believe, as with any technical definition, Collings and the Staubhaars were using *science fiction* to lean toward more outer-space science fictional works rather than the broader fantasy and speculative fiction elements I use in my own paper.
3. The most recent example of this change on Mormon identity formation is the current Latter-day Saint church president emphasizing the full name of the church over the Mormon nickname and expressing that Mormons should refer to themselves as Latter-day Saints rather than Mormons (Nelson).

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### Information Science in Latter-day Saint Theology

Carl Grafe



“A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge,” said Joseph Smith, founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Nauvoo, Illinois, 1842 (History of the Church 4.588). Nauvoo, which had been a swamp when the Latter-day Saints first arrived, soon became a large city, rivaling the population of Chicago at the time (Black 91-93). In Nauvoo, Joseph Smith instituted the use of local “recorders” to observe and document baptisms performed for members’ deceased ancestors, and he detailed how these records were to be collected and maintained (Doctrine and Covenants 128.1-5). This early exercise in record management eventually led to the creation of the Church-owned nonprofit FamilySearch, which currently adds over 1 million new genealogical records every day (“FamilySearch Hits 8 Billion Searchable Names in Historical Records” 2020). This is but one example of how a foundational emphasis on information acquisition and transmission has continued in the Church, and many early Church doctrines can accordingly be described using modern principles of information science. This essay explores several of these principles, from the Data-Information-Knowledge-Wisdom (DIKW) pyramid to Friedman’s Fundamental Theorem of Biomedical Informatics to Reason’s Swiss Cheese Model to Shannon Entropy, and how they may help explain Latter-day Saints’ active involvement in science fiction.

Information science is a field of study devoted to “the effective communication of information and information objects, particularly knowledge records, among humans in the context of social, organizational, and individual need for and use of information” (Saracevic 2009). In a 1996 interview for the American news program *60 Minutes*, then-Church president Gordon B. Hinckley faced the following comment by reporter Mike Wallace: “There are those who say that Mormonism began as a cult.” Hinckley responded that rather than being reclusive and ascetic, members of the Church can be found “in business institutions, high in educational circles, in politics, in government, in whatever.” The cult question is typical of the many perpetually controversial topics associated with the Church, including the teaching that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to a fourteen-year-old farm boy in New York state in 1820, the practice of polygamy in the Church until 1890, the ban on Black people holding the priesthood until 1978, the stringent health, financial, and social requirements of membership, and many other topics (*Gospel Topics Essays* 2021). Given all of this potentially faith-defying religious baggage, one might ask how the Church has continued to grow year-over-year, almost without exception, since it was first established in 1830, while counting prominent scientists, politicians, artists, and leaders of industry among its members. One possible answer has to do with the Church’s teachings about information accrual and ascertainment—in particular, that God can directly provide reliable information to individuals through prayer (“Praying to Our Heavenly Father” 2011). Hinckley

implies that members of the Church are just ordinary people who happen to believe some extraordinary things, but in order for that juxtaposition to persist for so long, Latter-day Saints have had to learn how to effectively balance information they obtain from faith-based activities like prayer with information they obtain from more conventional sources.

In 2010, Charles Friedman formulated his Fundamental Theorem of Biomedical Informatics as follows: “A person working in partnership with an information source is ‘better’ than the same person unassisted” (Friedman 169-170). The image from Friedman’s paper frequently associated with this concept can be roughly summarized as: *person + computer > person*. If we consider the Latter-day Saint conception of God as an information source, Friedman’s concept has been embodied in the Church since the First Vision in 1820, when Joseph Smith reported that God directed him to join none of the churches on the Earth at that time (Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith—History 1.17). Latter-day Saints view God as a reliable source of current information that may supersede knowledge they obtain from other sources. Thus a Latter-day Saint may treat a perceived answer from God with the same or greater heft as the observations they make in their professional work or other day-to-day activities.

Joseph Smith taught that knowledge might be considered nondenominational:

I stated that the most prominent difference in sentiment between the Latter-day Saints and sectarians was, that the latter were all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members the privilege of believing anything not contained therein, whereas the Latter-day Saints ... are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time. (*History of the Church* 5.215)

According to Shannon’s law of entropy in information science (Shannon 379-423), every piece of potential information inherently has uncertainty associated with it, and the more unlikely that information is, the more uncertainty there is. But once information is obtained and identified, the uncertainty is reduced. Thus, in a universe that originated and is populated by highly unlikely chance occurrences, the amount of knowable information must of necessity be low. But in the Latter-day Saint conception of a universe created and maintained by an all-knowing God, where future events occur with perfect certainty, Shannon’s law would dictate that all information is inherently knowable.

Indirectly, Jeremy Brett explored the concept of an all-encompassing information source in *SFRA Review* vol. 50, pointing out how the “trope of the limitless library or archive” in science fiction often fails to offer more than a cursory overview of how the information in these resources is curated (Brett 2020). Modern religions often adopt a similarly ambiguous view of God as a source of knowledge, enabling fictional archives such as Asimov’s *Encyclopedia Galactica* to fill a similar or even superior role to a deity, perhaps presenting a conceptual threat to religious faith in some readers. But Latter-day Saints make the mechanisms and documentation of information obtained from God topics of special study (e.g., the Come Follow Me program, a weekly curriculum for Latter-day Saints, has devoted much of its 2021 course of study to the process of



seeking and receiving revelation). This is a topic of great personal importance to Latter-day Saints that is seldom visited in fiction. It may follow then, that rather than conflicting with their religious faith, the often underdeveloped archives in fiction may instead inspire Latter-day Saint writers to do a more thorough treatment of such resources, based in part on their detailed understanding of what they believe to be the ultimate source of knowledge in the real world. The Mind Game computer program in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* may be a pertinent example. Rather than a mere plot device to provide information to the characters, the program is almost a character in itself, interacting intimately with the other characters, analyzing them as individuals, and using its seemingly unlimited knowledge to push them—often brutally—to their absolute limits. Rather than as replacements for God, such information sources may instead serve as opportunities for Latter-day Saint writers to explore godlike attributes.

At the same time, this belief in a source of unlimited knowledge might also encourage suspension of disbelief. Michael Collings pointedly argued that Latter-day Saints' belief in revelation prevents the "cognitive estrangement" necessary to appreciate science fiction (Collings 116). But Latter-day Saint theology conflicts with this generalization. While Latter-day Saints believe that all knowledge is available, they simultaneously recognize the limitations of mortal humanity. In the Book of Mormon, a statement of Jesus Christ to the ancient inhabitants of America shortly after his resurrection rephrased his New Testament quotation from "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (King James Version, Matthew 5.48) to "Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (Book of Mormon, 3 Nephi 12.48, emphasis added), suggesting that his claimed perfection was attained only after his mortal life had concluded. Thus Latter-day Saints believe that godlike attributes such as omniscience are not routinely available to humans during their mortal lives. With this understanding comes an increased reliance on the omniscience of God. This is especially true when teachings purportedly from God run contrary to public opinion. Rather than trusting in the wisdom of humanity in aggregate, Latter-day Saints turn to scriptures that teach that, despite our limited perspective, God is just (see Doctrine and Covenants 127.3), and that "man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend" (Book of Mormon, Mosiah 4.9). They have to constantly pivot between the worldly information and requirements of daily living and the often completely incompatible tenets of their faith, ever trusting that the omniscience in the latter will eventually compensate for the dissonance of the former. This certainly requires a high level of cognitive estrangement—consistently applied over a lifetime. Thus Latter-day Saints, well-practiced in setting aside inconvenient contradictions, might—contrary to Collings' contention—be expected to have an increase in ability to accept speculative elements in fiction, rather than a deficit. It is little wonder then that Latter-day Saints might be overrepresented in a field like science fiction (Winston 2017), where suspension of disbelief is among the principal requirements.

In keeping with this conception of God as a source of knowledge that can enhance one's own capacity, Latter-day Saints have long embraced the practice of incremental knowledge accretion. From the Book of Mormon:

For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have. (Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 28.30)

Not only does this passage relate to the Church's emphasis on accruing knowledge through continuing education, but it also suggests an underlying hierarchy of knowledge. A fundamental concept in information science is the DIKW pyramid, wherein data is converted into information, knowledge, and wisdom by adding additional structure and context to each stratum. For example, in information technology this might be accomplished by assigning tags and definitions to convert raw binary data into structured information, conducting statistical analyses to convert the structured information into actionable knowledge, and accruing experience over time to convert that collected digital knowledge into more nuanced practical wisdom.

Furthermore, this conception of higher levels of actionable knowledge that are only available to humanity through divine impartment aligns with James Reason's Swiss Cheese Model of accident causation (Reason 475-484). This model postulates that disasters occur due to individual human actions that are "necessary but singly insufficient to achieve the catastrophic outcome." In the model, higher levels of intervention (represented by the additional slices of overlaid Swiss cheese) are necessary to prevent disasters from happening (i.e., by covering the holes in the lower layers). Once one accepts the possibility of divine consequences for individual actions as taught in the Church, higher orders of intervention become necessary in avoiding individual disaster. Thus for Latter-day Saints (and many other Christians), the need for divinely revealed teachings, an organizational structure or church of believers, and a messianic Savior are all accepted as necessary and natural scaffolds for preserving individual salvation. Rather than tools of cultish oppression, these additional protective layers of "cheese" might be viewed as evidence of responsible divine governance.

It already makes a certain sense that adherents of a religion whose teachings support alternate sources of knowledge and the suspension of disbelief as detailed above might be predisposed to reading science fiction. And it logically follows that if members of that religion were overrepresented among readers of science fiction, then the subset of those readers that choose to write science fiction would be overrepresented as well. But the drive to create science fiction may run deeper than a mere increased interest in the genre. The detailed creation of secondary worlds (or speculative elements of our own world) is a recurrent component of Latter-day Saint theology. Whether in the world of pre-Columbian meso-American Christianity as described in the Book of Mormon or the multi-system cosmology of heaven described in the Church's Doctrine and

Covenants, detailed accounts of largely unsubstantiated alternate civilizations are among the first things taught to children and new converts. It seems reasonable that as Latter-day Saints mature they might try their own hand at such creations.

Latter-day Saint science fiction authors venture deep into the realms of creation and innovation, but they are often constrained by the self-imposition of order and structure on the created worlds—though some may consider these constraints to be what make their creations so compelling. Such constraints may be exemplified by Brandon Sanderson’s *Laws of Magic* (Sanderson 2011) and Orson Scott Card’s foundational *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Card 1990), where universal rules are stated as indispensable even in something as inherently unregulatable as speculative fiction. This emphasis on structure illuminates the importance of rules and order in the Latter-day Saint understanding of worldbuilding. If a perfect repository of knowledge exists in a certain universe, then it stands to reason that every element of the universe may be perfectly understood in the full context of the physical laws, constants, and relationships that govern that universe. Exercises in building theorems to define these laws are certainly found in the fields of science, but the freedom to build these theorems at scale and without the constraints of mortal real-world limitations is certainly greater in science fiction.

Another aspect of Latter-day Saint theology has to do with the scientific method itself. Members of the Church have been commanded to “study it out in your mind” first before seeking revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 9.8), and one prophet in the Book of Mormon taught:

But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.

Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me. (Alma 32.27-28)

A major problem with this type of “experiment” is that it is based on feelings, and thus inherently subjective. Without a concrete way to measure feelings of *swelling* or *enlargement* or *enlightenment*, it is impossible to scientifically verify such observations at a population level, regardless of the study design. But if we were to suspend that initial reason to disbelieve, we might consider that such lack of second-hand verification could be a feature of the doctrine, rather than an invalidator. Latter-day Saints believe that mortal life is a test, and that we—as God’s spirit children—have been sent to Earth to see if we will follow his commandments (“The Purpose of Earth Life” 2000). Much like a math student who has to write out a mathematical proof by

hand on an exam, Latter-day Saints believe we each have to do the work and obtain the “proof” for ourselves. On an individual basis, this process is quite true to a traditional implementation of the scientific method, where “careful, systematic observations of high quality” are used to formulate and test hypotheses (Voit 1-3). The quality of the observations cannot be verified by secondary observers, but from the Latter-day Saint perspective, that just means they have to do the experiment themselves and verify the quality firsthand.

At the very end of the Book of Mormon, there is a related teaching from a prophet named Moroni, speaking to people who would later read his words:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moroni 10.4-5)

This isn't truth that is intended only for descendants of early Church members, or only for Americans, or only for any other limited demographic or grouping of people. The implication is that anyone can repeat the experiment and receive the same information as anyone else from this purportedly absolute repository of knowledge. Indeed, Latter-day Saint theology is very much founded on this principle that individual observations can lead to generalizable knowledge. This foundational devotion to the core of the scientific method continues to underlie everything that is taught in the Church, and it shouldn't be surprising that Latter-day Saints, with their belief that salvation depends on the attainment of such knowledge, would seek to make their experiments as widely replicable as possible, whether that be through science fiction or any other available means.

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## Gods and Monsters in Latter-day Saint Reconciliation Stories

Alan Manning and Nicole Amare



### Introduction

Reconciliation stories portray a main character (or groups of characters) in conflict with another character/group. Conflict is resolved usually by (1) new perceptions or compromises that unite both sides, or (2) one side's victory and the other side's surrender. Such reconciliation stories are typically associated with politics, class division, or religious themes (Thomas 1). Familiar mainstream examples of reconciliation stories include: *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock the Jew is defeated by a radical reading of his own contract; *King Lear*, wherein Lear finally realizes that Cordelia did love him far more than her lying sisters; and *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Elizabeth realizes her first impressions of Darcy were wrong.

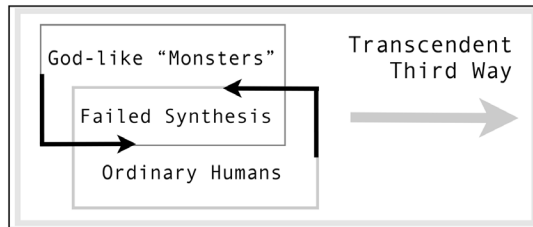
Reconciliation stories commonly evoke allegories of Christian theology. Characters “sin” by their actions and “fall.” Ultimately, they must seek forgiveness and redemption in an arc that parallels the general notion of Christian grace and redemption:

The comedies and tragedies tend to handle forgiveness with a certain moral, even theological, clarity, since, however secular or pessimistic the context may be, the assumptions of a Christian *Weltanschauung* color the action and dialogue, even if, as in *Lear*, they may have to compete with more agnostic or nihilistic attitudes. When characters in these dramas experience reconciliation, wrongs are acknowledged, reparation, if possible, is implied, and healing takes place in an ethos of deepened consciousness. (Forker 289)

We find that works created by Latter-day Saint writers not always, but very commonly, employ a third pattern of reconciliation, distinct from the more common narrative tropes of compromise or surrender. This third reconciliation pattern appears only rarely in stories generally, but it emerges more often when writers have deliberately integrated “Mormon” tropes or references into their material. Notable examples include the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* series (Moore and Eick’s revision of the Glen Larson original) and *The Expanse* series (Corey; see also Pierce).

This third, less-common story pattern portrays reconciliation with a distinctly alien “other,” wherein protagonists form an alien/human hybrid community separate from either of the two original communities. Fantasy and science fiction (hereafter F&SF) provides the ideal venue for authors writing in the Latter-day-Saint tradition to develop this theme. Latter-day Saint Christianity, in all its forms, is neither Protestant nor Catholic, nor is it a compromise between them. It is essentially a third, distinct mode of Christianity, in which religious authority derives

neither from scripture nor from papal authority. Differences between Latter-day Saint and Protestant/Catholic beliefs ultimately translate into a distinct conception of what Christian reconciliation fundamentally is, and thus opens up a distinct mode of allegorical storytelling to represent that reconciliation. A rough overall sketch of this third-way reconciliation plot is diagrammed in Figure 1.



*Two conflicting sides will merge into successful synthesis in typical reconciliation stories: Both sides unify in perception and compromise, OR one side entirely surrenders to the other. The third, less-common pattern portrays both a failed attempt at synthesis and a more successful third way: reconciliation with a distinctly alien "other" by formation of an alien/human hybrid community separate from either of the two original communities. F&SF provides the ideal venue for authors writing in the Restored-Gospel tradition to develop this theme.*

Figure 1: Third-way Reconciliation Plot

Our article will briefly review the essential nature of the third-way plot device as found in the works of Orson Scott Card, Stephenie Meyer, Brandon Sanderson, and Glen Larson, which leads us to the next question: just how common is this plot device among other Latter-day Saint authors? To address this question, we examined the novels of other Latter-day Saint authors with which we had no prior acquaintance, to see whether, and at what rate, the third-way reconciliation motif also showed up as a plot device in stories by these other authors: James Dashner, author of the *Maze Runner* series; Brandon Mull, author of the *Fablehaven* series; Lisa Mangum, author of the *Hourglass Door* series; Ally Condie, author of the *Matched* series; and Shannon Hale, author of the *Books of Bayern* series.

This analysis can improve our understanding of the history of Latter-day Saint motifs in F&SF and their influence on the wider genres they represent. This understanding may also provide us with additional insights to address a longstanding question: what is it, exactly, about Latter-day Saint theology/culture that drives a particularly strong interest in F&SF themes among both Latter-day Saint readers and writers (Morris; Neugebauer; Winston)?

### Third-way Reconciliation: An Overview

In life as in fiction, we often find ourselves stuck with difficult choices, unsatisfactory compromise on one hand, or the brute-force defeat of one side by the other. To have better choices requires some kind of novelty, an invention, an alternative vision, and this is the very stuff of F&SF. Stories in these genres are (or can be) more than a simple-minded escape from reality. Rather, this invention of third ways and higher ways is essentially the substance of real technical and moral progress.

Arguably, effective F&SF by any skilled writer will always invoke the possibility of progress through transcendence of current limitations. Whether authors intend it or not, situations in F&SF stories serve to model problems in the actual world: dystopian worlds and futures to be avoided, or hypothetical worlds and futures where solutions to real problems can be explored and vicariously experienced. What is distinctive about F&SF by Latter-day Saint authors (and more common in F&SF influenced by Latter-day Saint motifs) is not the idea of transcendence per se,

because this idea is inherent in the F&SF as a whole. Rather, we suggest that this common idea of transcendence rather more frequently manifests itself in work by Latter-day Saint authors as a specific strategy of narrative conflict and resolution, where conflict between two community is reconciled by a third community.

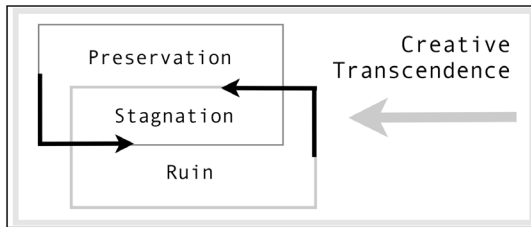
A typical third-way story, in the Latter-day Saint mode, features two or more communities in mortal conflict and protagonists caught in between. More often than not, it also includes a protagonist in dangerous love with a literal or figurative monster from the other side: humans against alien bugs with Ender caught between (Card), humans against vampires with Bella caught between (Meyer), humans against killer robots with Baltar and Six between (Moore & Eick), human agents of Preservation against god-like forces of Ruin with Vin, Elend, and Sazed between (Sanderson).

Individuals or groups in conflict are, of course, a staple of F&SF, as well as fiction generally, and indeed in all of actual history. What is much more typical in fictional endings (and accepted narratives about historical events) is that one group simply defeats and subsumes the other group. The rebels win, the oppressive government is overthrown, the enemy is defeated, etc. (as is evident in classic *Star Wars* or *The Hunger Games* trilogy). Alternatively, each group adjusts its perception of the other, and they merge (*Shrek*, *The Sixth Sense*). Humans alter their perception of ogres and ogres alter their perceptions of both humans and themselves. A boy tormented by visions of the dead finally realizes that the dead just want his help. The warring parties negotiate, misunderstanding is resolved, and peace is restored. Either way, the two conflicted groups, as thesis and antithesis, now become a synthesis in the usual Hegelian sense (Lost and Found 1).

Prominent Latter-day Saint writers usually do something very different to resolve their groups in conflict. One side does not crush the other, but neither do both sides realize it was all just a misunderstanding. There is no epiphany and no compromise that allows both groups to merge in happy or unhappy synthesis. Rather, in third-way reconciliation, some plain human(s) and some being(s) from the opposing side usually join forces and create a third group or way of being, a resolution of conflict which is always emphatically not a merged compromise of the two sides nor the abject surrender of one side to the other (Figure 1).

Brandon Sanderson's first *Mistborn* trilogy nicely exemplifies the general difference between the merged synthesis of two groups and the transcendence of a third way. The *Mistborn* series puts the conflict in terms of cosmic forces. Preservation vs. Ruin are the forces operating through most of the story. The Lord Ruler of the first book specifically embodies a failed synthesis of the two forces; the consuming forces of Ruin threaten to destroy the whole world, and the Lord Ruler does keep Ruin in check with the powers of Preservation, but the result is centuries of stagnation and a tyrannical oppressive government. The Lord Ruler also partly preserves but partly ruins the whole ecosystem of the world: it's hotter, plants are brown instead of green, and volcanic ash falls constantly everywhere. That miserable synthesis is opposed by the heroes of the story, who defeat the Lord Ruler but, in doing so, accidentally release Ruin from its prison. Final victory over

Ruin can only happen when the heroes (Vin, Elend, and Sazed primarily) find a way to transcend the original conflict between Preservation and Ruin. Both sides are encompassed by Creation, a higher pattern that allows “Harmony” between otherwise irreconcilable forces of Preservation and Ruin.<sup>1</sup> Creation contains both sides and yet is a third thing more powerful than either side of the original fight. To create, something has to be put together that endures (preservation), but the pre-existing building blocks must also be moved out of their original places (ruining the original situation).



*Brandon Sanderson's first Mistborn trilogy nicely exemplifies the general difference between synthesis and transcendence. The Lord Ruler of the first book specifically embodies a failed synthesis of the two forces: he keeps Ruin in check with the powers of Preservation, but the result is centuries of stagnation and a tyrannical oppressive government. Final victory over Ruin can only happen when the heroes find a way to transcend the original conflict between Preservation and Ruin: both sides are encompassed by Creation. Creation contains both sides and yet is a third thing more powerful than either side of the original fight: to create, you have to put something together that endures (preservation), but you also have to move the pre-existing building blocks out of their original places (ruining the original situation).*

Figure 2: Mistborn: Stagnant Synthesis vs. Creative Transcendence

Hegelian synthesis may be represented as the overlap between two circles or boxes (Figure 2), but such synthesis often produces an absurdity—something that is unsustainable, logically impossible, or self-contradictory (McGowan 19; Peirce 492). For example, a society can't be both preserved and ruined at the same time unless, for instance, because the so-called preservation is actually ruin in the form of stagnation. In philosophical terms, the situation calls for what C.S. Peirce describes as evolutionary Thirdness, rather than a two-sided synthesis of one idea and its negation (104). We can diagram this Thirdness as a third, larger circle/box, drawn around the first two, smaller regions. That bigger circle/box contains and unifies all the sets, but it is more than either of the enclosed sets. Peirce's model of an evolved, third solution better captures the logic behind the general plot strategy of many successful examples of Latter-day Saint F&SF:

**CONFLICT:** Story conflict emerges from a clash of beings from two communities; one tends to be distinctly alien/other, and one tends to be more generically mainstream or human. Formix vs. Ender, Edward vs. Bella, Cylon vs. Human, The Lord Ruler and his minion nobles including Elend (Preservation/Ruin) vs. Vin and other ordinary Humans (the “skaa”).

**PROTAGONISTS:** Initially, a mainstream (usually human) character is identified as the sympathetic focus, but a member of the alien/other community is eventually portrayed sympathetically and usually becomes a “love interest” of the human protagonist, or at least a close companion.<sup>2</sup>

**ANTAGONISTS:** The love interest/companion and the antagonist tend to be the same, either the exact same being, or at the very least, the love interest comes from the same alien/other community that threatens the protagonist.

**RESOLUTION:** Some individuals from the two clashing communities solve their problems by forming a third, new organization distinct from either of the original groups. The new, third group in one way or another plans to reproduce their mode of being: Ender vows to help the Formix



queen hatch her eggs somewhere, Edward and Bella produce their hybrid who apparently will have more hybrid children with the werewolf Jacob. Likewise, in the *Battlestar Galactica* universe created in the second iteration of the series, the whole current population of Earth is descended from both humans and Cylons, the narrative equivalents of Adam and Eve.

The Adam/Eve story told from a Latter-day Saint perspective is likewise a story of third-way reconciliation between Gods and humans. Adam and Eve's ultimate goal is not a simple surrender to God and return to paradise (a failed synthesis), but they must rather go on to become Gods themselves, beyond the realm of both ordinary humans and their Creator-God.<sup>3</sup>

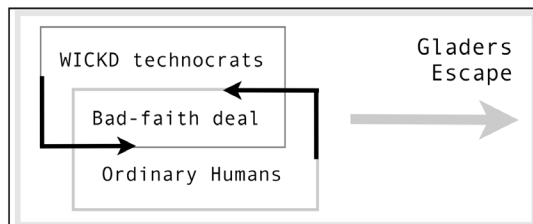
### Further Examples of Third-way Reconciliation

We examined F&SF stories by five other Latter-day Saint authors in a second round of study. Four of those five also developed this same contrast between failed synthesis and third-way transcendence. We'll discuss these stories in general terms, to avoid spoilers for anyone still planning to read any of these.

#### *Maze Runners*

The story begins as author James Dashner's protagonists, the teenage "Gladers," awaken without their memories inside a giant maze world. The maze world is populated by killer cyborg "Grievors" that harass Gladers on a daily basis. Both the maze world and Grievors were obviously constructed by unseen, God-like technocrats. Their motives are unknown, but they clearly intend to impose extreme hardships on the Gladers.

Glader survivors escape the first-book maze only to discover the larger world outside is just another, larger hellscape, full of disease, more danger, and more death. There the Gladers meet other ordinary people trying to survive in that world, and they also meet the God-like technocrats (World-In-Catastrophe: Killzone-Experiment-Dept.) in nominal control of everything that happens. The Gladers are invited to (re)join WICKED, but most Gladers find the deal they are being offered untenable. This is the failed synthesis (Figure 3). Instead, the Gladers strike out on their own, and eventually, with the help of sympathetic WICKED insiders (essentially the love interests from the alien/other community), the surviving Gladers find a way to escape to safety, presumably to begin a new race of humans free from the more-or-less constant threat of death.

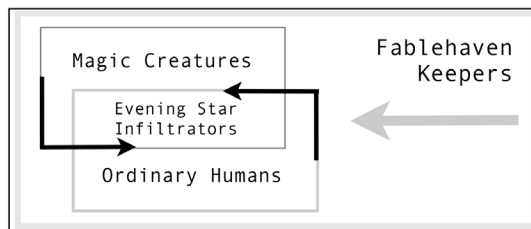


*In the Maze Runner series, Glader survivors escape the first-book maze only to discover the larger world outside is just another, larger hellscape, full of disease, more danger, and more death. There the Gladers meet other ordinary people trying to survive in that world, and they also meet the god-like technocrats (World-In-Catastrophe: Killzone-Experiment-Dept.) in nominal control of everything that happens. The Gladers are invited to (re)join WICKED, but most Gladers find untenable the deal they are being offered. This is the failed synthesis. Instead the Gladers strike out on their own, and eventually, with the help of sympathetic WICKED insiders (essentially the "love interests" from the alien/other community), the surviving Gladers find a way to escape to safety, presumably to begin a new race of humans free from the more-or-less constant threat of death.*

Figure 3: Maze Runner  
Reconciliation Plot

### *Dragon Watchers*

Brandon Mull's YA series *Fablehaven* (followed by the *Dragonwatch* stories) describes its world(s) in somewhat gentler tones, but here again, gifted teenagers are put in more or less constant peril. These are a sister and brother, Kendra and Seth Sorenson, about 13 and 12 years old when the series begins. Kendra and Seth visit their grandparents' farm for the summer, which is surrounded by an enormous, wooded preserve. The youths are told to stay out of the woods (they don't), to not drink unpasteurized milk straight from the farm's cows (they do), to stay in their beds and keep their windows closed during Midsummer's Eve (they don't), and more. Each time they disobey, Kendra and Seth suffer consequences but also gain knowledge about the magical forest surrounding the farm (Fablehaven), which turns out to be one of several magically walled and guarded preserves/prisons for magical creatures. The inmate fairies, witches, demons, and dragons are sometimes friendly but quite often treacherous and/or murderous if given a chance. Kendra and Seth find themselves pulled into the situation shown in Figure 4.



*Fablehaven* protagonists Kendra and Seth gain, through each transgressive act, a bit more knowledge and a bit more magical ability themselves, knowledge and abilities that make them more effective in assisting their grandparents and other Preserve keepers who constitute the third community in this version of the reconciliation plot. This third community restores and maintains reconciliation by keeping assorted magical creatures contained and the human and magical worlds safely separate. The Sorenson's primary antagonists belong to the Society of the Evening Star (SES), which constitutes the failed synthesis in this version of the third-way reconciliation plot.

Figure 4: Fablehaven  
Reconciliation Plot

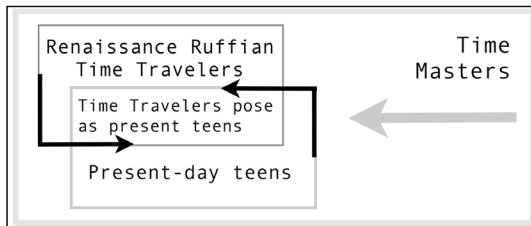
The temptation/fall motifs of *Fablehaven* include the usual "Mormon" twist. The Temptation/Fall of Adam/Eve is viewed by traditional Christianity as an unmitigated tragedy. It is different in the Restored-Gospel telling, as in *Fablehaven*, where Kendra and Seth gain, through each transgressive act, a bit more knowledge and a bit more magical ability themselves--knowledge and abilities that make them more effective in assisting their grandparents and the other preserve keepers, who constitute the third community in this version of the reconciliation plot. This third community restores and maintains reconciliation by keeping assorted magical creatures contained and the human and magical worlds safely separated.

In most of the series, the Sorensens' primary antagonists belong to the Society of the Evening Star, which constitutes the failed synthesis in this version of the third-way reconciliation plot, as shown in Figure 4. The Society includes magical beings who have infiltrated the human world and who intend to overthrow the existing Preserves, unleash hoards of demons, and (by mixing worlds) destroy both magical and ordinary versions of the world.

### *Hourglass Doors*

Lisa Mangum's YA time-travel trilogy begins with *The Hourglass Door*, followed by *The Golden Spiral*, and concludes with *The Forgotten Locket*. The story parallels in some obvious ways the initial setup of the *Twilight* series. A high school girl (Abby, like Bella) is intrigued by a mysterious fellow student (Dante, like Edward) who seems to be keeping some dangerous secrets. Here again we find Temptation/Fall tropes with the usual Restored-Gospel twist. Abby (like Bella) opens the

figurative Pandora's Box of secrets kept by Dante (like Edward) and endangers her life as a result, but she also gains knowledge and abilities in the process that allow her to assist and ultimately save her true love. Abby (like Bella before her) is pulled into the dynamic shown in Figure 5.



The Hourglass Door series parallels in some obvious ways the initial setup of the *Twilight* Series: a high school girl (Abby, like Bella) is intrigued by a mysterious fellow student (Dante, like Edward) who seems to be keeping dangerous secrets. Here again we find Temptation/Fall tropes with the usual Restored-Gospel twist. Abby (like Bella) opens the figurative Pandora's Box of secrets kept by Dante (like Edward) and endangers her life as a result, but she also gains knowledge and abilities in the process that allow her to assist and ultimately save her true love. And so Abby (like Bella before her) is pulled into the same third-way reconciliation pattern.

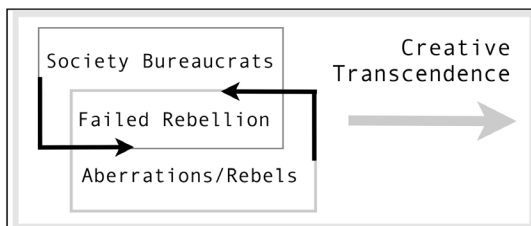
Figure 5: Hourglass Door  
 Reconciliation Plot

Dante (like Edward before him) attempts a failed synthesis between the present-day high-school world of Abby and his secret background as a time-traveling fugitive. It's worth noting that *Twilight*'s vampire Cullens were mostly time-travelers too, by virtue of having been (un)alive for a century or more. Dante and Edward both create an unstable, unsustainable situation by coming from an older time/way of life but trying to pass as ordinary high school students in the present day.

Besides the obvious *Twilight* comparisons, there's also a deep connection between the Hourglass Door series dynamic and that of the Fablehaven series. In both storylines, the antagonists from the magical/time-traveling side are attempting to dissolve protective boundaries between their world and the ordinary human world. In both storylines, human protagonists have to abandon the safety of their ordinary world and enter a transcendent state where they have the power to keep the two conflicting realms separate and safe.

### *Dystopian Matches*

Ally Condie's YA dystopian-romance trilogy begins with *Matched*, followed by *Crossed*, and concludes with *Reached*. The essential dynamic is shown in Figure 6.



*Matched* protagonist Cassia is initially a minor bureaucrat within the Society (tightly controlled by God-like technocrats). She's been "matched" by the Society to Xander, another petty bureaucrat, but then she becomes aware of a system-glitch in the Matching program, and clues suggest that her "true" match is a problematic boy from the "Aberration" class of social pariahs named Ky. Cassia and Ky embark on some quiet acts of disobedience (failed synthesis). The early story prefigures the major, failed synthesis and final transcendence later in the series: the unauthorized couple are found out by Society officials, and both are sent to rehabilitation/death camps. But they eventually escape and eventually find the effective third-way path to true freedom and love.

Figure 6: Matched: Failed Rebellion  
 vs. Creative Transcendence

Main protagonist Cassia is initially a happy, obedient seventeen-year-old girl within the tightly controlled Society. Cassia works as a junior "sorter" for the Society. She's been "matched" by the Society to Xander, a popular and (seemingly) equally obedient boy, but then she becomes aware of a system-glitch in the Matching program, and clues suggest that her "true" match is a problematic boy from the "Aberration" class of social pariahs named Ky. Cassia and Ky eventually meet, and sure enough, there's chemistry between them. Together, they embark on quiet acts of disobedience

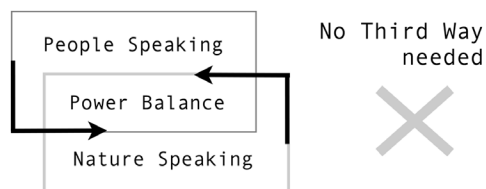
that prefigure the Rising, a movement of stealth rebellion in later books. The early story also prefigures the major, failed synthesis and final transcendence later in the series. The unauthorized couple are found out by Society officials, and both are sent to rehabilitation/death camps. But they eventually find the effective third-way path to true freedom and love.

It's worth noting that Condie's *Matched* series shares a number of structural and thematic similarities with Sanderson's *Mistborn* series. Condie's Official Society echoes Sanderson's various forces of Preservation. The Aberration pariahs are likewise perceived as agents of "Ruin" by the Society that have to be kept in check, and the ultimate solution in both storylines involves the third-way powers of Creativity that ultimately reconcile conflicting processes of Preservation and Destruction.

#### *Reconciliation by Straight Synthesis*

Shannon Hale's Books of Bayern stories prove to be the exceptions among all the Latter-day Saint authors we surveyed in this round of study; Hale's stories consistently used two-way synthesis strategies to resolve conflict, as is more typical in F&SF by writers from mainstream secular backgrounds. That is, Hale's protagonists either defeat their enemies by superior tactics, or they manage to resolve their misunderstandings by negotiation, or they balance conflicting magical forces. No transcendent third way, no third magical force, and no third, outside community ever proves necessary. This by no means should be taken as a criticism of Hale's work. Her stories are interesting and satisfying, and they generally sell. We only note that her plotting strategies do not (by themselves) identify her as a "typical" Latter-day Saint author.

In *The Goose Girl*, for example, the protagonist Ani uses her nature-speaking abilities (talking to animals and controlling the air) to outmaneuver, defeat, and/or negotiate with her enemies who rely on their people-speaking abilities (social savvy and political charisma). Also, the forest people, Ani's allies, are initially outcasts in Bayern society, but are finally understood and accepted as equal citizens as a by-product of Ani's victory, as shown schematically in Figure 7. All Bayern books we examined (*Emma Burning*, *River Secrets*, and *Forest Born*), as well as *Princess Academy*, follow this pattern, creating conflict between two opposing magical forces and/or two opposing political groups, then resolving the conflicts as main characters find ways to balance both the forces and the opposing communities, by victory, by negotiation, or both.



*Shannon Hale's Books of Bayern stories prove to be the exceptions of all the Latter-day Saint authors we surveyed for this study: Hale's stories consistently use two-way synthesis strategies to resolve conflict, as is typical in reconciliation stories by writers from mainstream secular backgrounds. That is, Hale's protagonists either defeat their enemies by superior tactics, or they manage to resolve their misunderstandings by negotiation, or specifically by balancing conflicting magical forces. No transcendent third way, no third magical force, and no third, outside community ever proves necessary.*

Figure 7: *Goose Girl*: Reconciliation by traditional synthesis

The reasons for Hale's more mainstream approach to reconciliation go beyond the scope of this article, but the most straightforward explanation would be that her first Bayern story, *The Goose Girl*, is based on a traditional folktale that achieves reconciliation in the traditional ways, through total victory over an enemy and/or unifying perception/compromise.

## Conclusion

The essential transcendent impulse in all F&SF may best explain why so many Latter-day Saints are drawn to these genres, because of their lived experience as members of a third community of Christians distinct from Catholic and Protestant traditions. This lived experience translates into a specific plot device among Latter-day Saint writers, common but not universal, where a third community heals divisions between two other communities. This third-way plot device is neither better or worse than the more common reconciliation strategies of victory or shared perception, but it does model the transcendent impulse of F&SF in a distinct way. Mainstream F&SF by non-LDS authors only rarely use that third-way device, but the idea of transcendence is always implicit in the F&SF impulse to model alternate realities in which we may find novel solutions to real problems of this world.

To summarize, we propose here that the essential impulse all F&SF stories is not to escape reality but rather to help make our shared reality perpetually a bit better than it was before, by the process of transcendent and novel creation. We therefore discount the common suggestion that Latter-day Saint readers and authors are particularly drawn to F&SF stories because "those crazy Mormons" are already detached from reality, or because Latter-day Saints are already alienated from mainstream culture, like the magical creatures and aliens of F&SF.

Rather, the believing community of Latter-day Saints perceive themselves and their belief systems as the eventual solution to current world problems, as healers-in-training for the world's current divisions, offering what is essentially a third way between, for instance, progressive and conservative thinking, between warring religious sects, or between blind faith and equally blind skepticism. This self-perception tends to manifest in a plot device where a third community solves problems between two other, otherwise irreconcilable sides. Whether this self-perception is correct or not is irrelevant to our larger point which is that all F&SF tends to operate this mode, with or without the third-way plot device, to warn about apocalyptic or dystopian futures and to try out creative new solutions to real-world problems in the realm of imagination.

## Notes

1. To many Mistborn Trilogy readers, Harmony may seem like a simple synthesis, a straight compromise allowing Preservation and Ruin to merge, rather than a third-way reconciliation. However, the harmony metaphor personified by Sazed is precise in its representation of a third way. Two tones interact in a harmonic chord NOT by simply splitting the difference between the different tone frequencies: The basic note A (220 cycles per second) + C (262



cycles per second) is NOT 241 cycles per second ( $262 + 200/2$ ); rather, the separate tones interact by the laws resonance to create a distinct harmonic waveform more complex than the component tone waves. Harmony is NOT the same as balance. SPOILER ALERT: In the final resolution of the Mistborn trilogy, Vin dies because she wields the remaining Preservation power against Ruin and those two can only destroy each other: failed synthesis. When Sazed recognizes that he instead of Vin is the Hero of Ages, and when he becomes Harmony, he transcends the conflict by putting both Preservation and Ruin inside a larger system which is manifest in the process of creation, a cyclical pattern (like the literal harmony of sound) that includes both Preservation and Ruin, but also novelty, all in a recursive cycle: Sazed recreates the world broken by the Lord Ruler's failed balance between Preservation and Ruin; Sazed recreates the world in order to save it, so he NEITHER preserves what what was nor does he destroy what was: it is a third way.

2. We use the term "love interest" precisely in most cases, but rather loosely in some cases. We find that literal romance between two characters, one from each side of a conflict, is typical in our sample of Latter-day Saint F&SF: Bella and Edward (Twilight), Vin and Elend (Mistborn), Baltar and Six (Battlestar Galactica), Abby and Dante (Hourglass Doors), Cassie and Ky (Matched). However, in some cases the love is genuine but not literally romantic between two key characters. Ender loves the Formix Queen but they are of different species. Kendra and Seth are too young for romance in the Fablehaven series but they do have various magical allies throughout the series.
3. Latter-day Saint theology splits from Catholic and Protestant theology most distinctly in its conception of God: the Father, Son, and Spirit form a council of three distinct beings, each with human form, rather than one universe-spanning and unembodied force with distinct manifestations as Father, Son, and Spirit. The Latter-day Saints also believe that humans have the capacity to become Gods, as taught by Church founder Joseph Smith:

"What kind of a being is God?" he asked. Human beings needed to know, he argued, because "if men do not comprehend the character of God they do not comprehend themselves." In that phrase, the Prophet collapsed the gulf that centuries of confusion had created between God and humanity. Human nature was at its core divine. God "was once as one of us" and "all the spirits that God ever sent into the world" were likewise "susceptible of enlargement." Joseph Smith preached that long before the world was formed, God found "himself in the midst" of these beings and "saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself" and be "exalted" with Him. (Gospel Topics Essays)

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### Re-visioning an American Angel: Mythopoesis in The Tales of Alvin Maker



Paul Williams

Since first appearing on bookshelves, Orson Scott Card's *Tales of Alvin Maker* series (1987–2003) has stood out as one of the most accomplished works of Mormon mythopoetic literature. The books portray a fantastical alternate history of nineteenth-century America and focus on the titular Alvin Miller, who parallels Joseph Smith, Jr., founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter “the Church” or “LDS”), and many of the most impressive scenes reimagine crucial episodes from Mormon history and lore within the context of an epic fantasy story. Nevertheless, Card's vision exceeds anything we might term devotional or evangelistic. Rather, Card takes advantage of the fact that “the cultural work that [speculative fiction] performs is aptly suited to a religion in which the sacred and the banal intermingle so indiscriminately” (Givens 321). This intermingling provides Card with the supernatural qualities of fantasy, but outside the strictures of Church doctrine and hierarchy. This article will examine the Shining Man scene from the first two books of the series—*Seventh Son* (1987) and *Red Prophet* (1988)—which reimagines the 1823 visitation of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith. The scene is a potent example of how Card attempts to rationalize and reorient Mormonism as a religious system that exceeds the Church as an institution. Specifically, Card removes the Church and even God from the narrative, and so breaks up the monologic discourse of authority granted from a higher power. Instead, Card portrays Mormon doctrine as the natural product of universal laws acting upon everyday life. This article aims to demonstrate how Card uses a blend of the fantasy and alternate history genres to transform sacred narrative from a monologic tautology into a dialogic and indeterminate narrative about individuals.

When I describe sacred narrative as monologic discourse, I refer to the way institution-based belief is received from a hegemonic source. When Church history is taught from the pulpit, it is monologically defined within the greater context of the Church's narrative. Devotional literature tends to be monologic by asserting a pre-determined structure and meaning into which characters and events are situated in order to affirm belief, often without actually questioning the merits of those claims. I take my notion of dialogic literature from Mikhail Bakhtin, who proposes that some texts pit different worldviews and beliefs against each other within the framework of story to see how those beliefs challenge and reshape each other. Such a dialogic text must be populated by “free people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (Bakhtin, 6, emphasis in original). In a 1985 essay, Card describes his own work in similar terms, claiming his stories require the reader to “accept a causal system that makes every human being completely responsible for his own actions” (“SF and Religion” 13). Such character autonomy is only possible if Card is willing to reject the impulse to allegory,

meaning that even when he directly channels episodes from Mormon lore, the substance of the event must be natural to the character. Therefore, Card removes sources of monologic knowledge—specifically God and the Church—and finds new, non-religious ways of recreating Mormon myth and history.

Thanks to Card's profile as a practicing member of the Church and the ease with which certain scenes related to Mormon lore, some readers assumed the series would align with and reverence Church history, thinly veiling the official narrative behind a glamor of epic fantasy. Early reviewers of the series pointed to the Shining Man and other scenes to justify their expectations, such as Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, who anticipated that the series would culminate in a reenactment of the First Vision, the event in which Joseph Smith claimed that God the Father and Jesus Christ first appeared to him (172). It is more accurate to say that Card complicates his characters and storyworld by negotiating between both religious and secular history, and in this, he defuses the impulse toward allegory balancing the two.

Instead, Card uses the alternate history mode of fantasy to create a complex storyworld that references national and religious history while openly revising both. Alternate history has the ability to liberate historical actors and events from the determinacy of the historical record, leaving them "saturated with unspent potential" and infused with "the vitality of the permanently unfinished" (Gallagher 13). Similarly, alternate history can liberate characters and ideas from the strict confines of religious narrative. Entering into a counterfactual context, characters and settings from history may freely operate as they (or, at least, the author) see fit. In the case of *Alvin Maker*, the alternate-history storyworld reflects our world's nineteenth century, except Great Britain still controls many of its American colonies, some historical actors are recognizable but noticeably changed from their canonical versions, and the folk magic believed to exist actually, demonstrably, works. Such a world can contain the miraculous claims of a Mormon worldview while the new context enables Card to rethink Mormon beliefs in a world without the Church itself to dictate doctrine and meaning.

When analyzing mythopoeic literature it is important to consider how the core narrative changes in the process of adaptation. According to Brian Attebery, it matters less that we identify a relationship between a myth and a fantasy novel because what we should pay attention to is what the new fantasy says through its invocation and reshaping of that myth within its new context (3). Authorial choices of what is kept and repurposed versus what is excised and replaced serve as cultural negotiations, speaking without cultural authority and therefore free to interrogate established, sanctioned belief (21). For Card, speculative fiction becomes a laboratory wherein he can test out the logical extensions of his theology. In books with explicitly Mormon characters—*Saints* (1984), *Folk on the Fringe* (1989), and *Lost Boys* (1992)—he explores the contours of devotion within the Church as a community made up of ordinary people who believe in an extraordinary cosmos. The *Alvin Maker* books offer Card a chance to explore the inverse, imagining a world without Mormonism as a formal entity but wherein the storyworld is theologically charged. Card does not believe he (or any author) can keep his most deeply held



moral and spiritual convictions from influencing his work (“SF and Religion” 12), but by excising the Church from the storyworld, he forces himself to rethink Mormon doctrine so that it arises naturally from the story and its underpinning metaphysics. In this way, Card reorients the goal of spirituality away from devotion to the institutional Church and toward a “self-conformity with laws that are intrinsically transformative” (Givens 39). In LDS scripture we read how “that which is governed by law is also...perfected and sanctified by the same” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88.34). In Alvin Maker, cosmology and commandments from a religious source are transmogrified into the highest expressions of natural law in place of the arbitrary demands of a divine Providence guiding the universe.

The Shining Man scenes are a useful example for how Card overtly draws upon Mormon lore to rethink the story of Mormonism in a rational context, retaining the mythic power of the tale but redirecting its thematic resonance. According to Smith’s account, in 1820 he wanted to know which Christian denomination to join, went into the woods to pray for guidance, and experienced a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ, who told him not to join any then-existent church. Three years later, while praying at his bedside on September 21, 1823, he noticed a light in the room and beheld a figure radiating light, clothed in a white robe. The personage identified himself as Moroni, an angel sent from God to inform Smith of his prophetic calling, and that Smith would obtain a record of ancient scripture buried nearby, which he would translate through a divine gift (“Joseph Smith—History” 1.30-35). The scene emphasizes Smith’s role as the first prophet in a new prophet-led epoch, similar to Moses’ mission to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. It is structured pedagogically, with Moroni declaring a message directly from God, and appearing three times throughout the night to deliver the same message each time. This story, sanctioned as scripture by the Church, is one of its most iconic and is received as archetypal for how God commences His divine work through prophets. As scripture it is monologic: Moroni’s message is not to be questioned, and Joseph passively receives it. By expunging the Church from the storyworld, Card must find a new narrative purpose for the scene. In so doing he deconstructs the monologic discourse into a dialogic event, with two characters who are each transformed within their respective narrative threads.

Card replaces the seventeen-year-old Joseph Smith with seven-year-old Alvin Miller, and the angel Moroni is replaced by a Native American named Lolla-Wossiky, the series’ alternate-historical version of Lalawethika,<sup>1</sup> also named Tenskwatawa. The scene is told twice, first from Alvin’s perspective in *Seventh Son*, in which the events are more sudden and mysterious, and Alvin refers to Lolla-Wossiky as the Shining Man.<sup>2</sup> The second version, in *Red Prophet*, makes Lolla-Wossiky the focalizing character and provides greater insight into his motives and the magical underpinnings of the storyworld. In terms of narrative, Moroni functions as a plot device through which God calls Smith to found the Church. By removing God and angels from the story, Card creates a fantasy world that can symbolically reflect sacred narrative but operates on the human level, with both characters dynamic actors within their individual stories, neither subservient to the other.

To achieve optimal resonance with Smith's account, Card efficiently mimics the staging of Moroni's visit. Lying in his bed, Alvin soon realizes that "There was a man standing at the foot of his bed, a man shining as if he was made of sunlight. The light in the room was coming from his skin, from his chest where his shirt was tore open, from his face, and from his hands. And in one of those hands, a knife, a sharp and steel knife" (SS 60). Alert readers will notice the narrator drawing attention to the parallels with Smith's account of Moroni's visitation: "His hands were naked, and his arms also, a little above the wrist; so, also, were his feet naked, as were his legs, a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open, so that I could see into his bosom" (JS—H 1.31). The Shining Man's knife is the most significant difference from the scriptural version, and it is used to cut his own arm and activate his own magic to grant Alvin visions to teach him about his powers as a Maker. This redirects the supernatural qualities of the story away from divine origins and reinforces the fact that Card is reimagining myth on a mortal plane.

Other important echoes reinforce the connection between the scenes while also illuminating important narrative differences. Smith says he was praying for forgiveness because, "I was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been" (JS-H 1.28). Moroni's visit signals God's benevolence and His willingness to operate through an imperfect—but self-aware—human prophet. In contrast, the Shining Man comes to rebuke Alvin for misusing his powers, specifically when he conscripts a swarm of cockroaches to invade his sisters' bedroom as petty revenge for having teased Alvin. The girls are terrorized, the roaches massacred, and Alvin revels in his vengeance. The first of the visions shown to Alvin reenacts the roaches' dying thoughts. Previously, Alvin's bedroom had provided a space of predictable order and safety, thanks to a social contract between Alvin and the roaches. After Alvin manipulates the roaches, he and his bedroom are deemed "worse than death—there the world had gone crazy, it was a place where anything could happen, where nothing could be trusted, where nothing was certain. A terrible place. The worst place" (SS 62). Whereas Moroni comes to Smith in response to repentance and then to call Smith to his prophetic role, the Shining Man comes to teach Alvin the magnitude of his powers and the importance of wielding them responsibly, with no specific goal or purpose beyond that.

The linear progression of discourse between the characters is central to how Card reworks Mormon myth into a dynamic exchange rather than monologic instruction. Moroni visits Smith three times throughout the night, each time offering roughly the same instruction with slight variations, making it more cyclical. Because Alvin is not called to uncover ancient scripture, establish a church, or become a prophet, Card must find a way to retain the three visits while redirecting the mythic energy back into the story and its themes. The first visit shocks Alvin into contrition and he swears to never use his magic again. The Shining Man realizes that Alvin has learned the wrong lesson, and so the second vision comes as a corrective, first showing a Native American hunter killing a deer, but doing so with reverence and for the purpose of maintaining

life rather than for selfish sport; “Alvin knew that in this vision there wasn’t no sin at all, because dying and killing, they were both just a part of life” (63). The vision then changes to show Alvin himself on a mountain “pressing his hands against a stone, and the stone melted like butter under his hands, came out in just the shape he wanted...and rolled away, a perfect ball, a perfect sphere, growing and growing until it was a whole world” (63-64). This imagery, which evokes Biblical prophecy (see Daniel 2:35&45), teaches Alvin that being a Maker “wasn’t a terrible power, it was a glorious one, if he only knew how to use it” (SS 64). When the Shining Man appears for the third time, he does not offer Alvin any instruction, but waits until Alvin attempts to use his powers to try healing the Shining Man’s eye that was shot out of him in his youth. Although Alvin fails to create a new eye, we learn later that it has healed a different trauma. The dynamic and mutual exchange of instruction and healing invigorates the scene, resulting naturally from the characters’ own personalities and desires, reworking the mythic energy of Smith’s account to empower both characters to progress independently in their own stories.

Not only is the scene dialogic by making it a mutual exchange between human characters, but they dialogue within themselves. Being only human, each character has a limited knowledge about Alvin’s powers and the broader body of magic in the series, and the exchange honors that fact; Lolla-Wossiky shares visions rather than dictate prescriptive rules to Alvin, who must then interpret and internalize the lessons he learns subjectively on his own. Certainty of the laws that govern Making remain elusive, and Alvin struggles to apply these lessons throughout the series, frequently reflecting and testing how he understands each principle.

Finally, because there are two iterations of the Shining Man scene across two novels, the versions become dialogic with each other. The *Seventh Son* version resembles the Joseph Smith account but with important differences. The *Red Prophet* version, told from Lolla-Wossiky’s perspective, is far more disruptive to a devotional reading of the series. Through Lolla-Wossiky, we learn that the magic of the series functions as a connection between humans and the Earth as a whole. Before meeting Alvin, Lolla-Wossiky is beset by “the black noise,” a buzzing mental and spiritual fog that has afflicted him for years and hampers his connection to the land. In a moment of fleeting clarity, he beholds a vision that he interprets as an invitation to seek out his dream beast, a spiritual guide, which he hopes can undo the black noise. Eventually, he comes upon Alvin, and he wonders whether Alvin (who appears to him as a shining figure, prefiguring Lolla-Wossiky’s later appearance to Alvin) might be his dream beast. When he witnesses the incident with the roaches, he realizes that he has insight and knowledge that can guide Alvin, declaring “I didn’t come here to find my own dream beast, but to be the dream beast for this boy” (RP 90). Both turn out to be true, as Lolla-Wossiky’s interventions awaken Alvin to a more responsible sense of his powers, and Alvin, attempting to restore Lolla-Wossiky’s ruined eye, does heal him of the black noise.

The second iteration of the scene connects Alvin’s story to a larger world, with characters who operate independent of one another. Teaching Alvin is Lolla-Wossiky’s own choice, and it is not the end of his story. Freed from the black noise, he goes off on his own and has an epiphany

in which he beholds himself as a spiritual leader to his people and takes the name Tenskwa-Tawa (RP 97). It is unfortunate that Card connects this epiphany (a revision of how the historical Lalawethika became Tenskwatawa, a spiritual leader amongst the Shawnee people) to a white settler healing Lolla-Wossiky of the oppressive buzzing noise. Though Card seems respectful of his indigenous characters by retaining as much of their original stories as his storyworld can sustain, his project does subsume the history and culture of North American indigenous people into the history of white settlers and Mormon lore. Nevertheless, while the novel mainly follows Alvin, Tenskwa-Tawa remains a significant character with his own storyline. Like his historical analog, he establishes Prophetstown [sic], a community for Native Americans where William Henry Harrison leads a military expedition intent on massacre. The story culminates in Tenskwa-Tawa using the power of the land to curse their assailants and declare a line of demarcation, forbidding white settlers from pursuing him and his people west.

It is tempting to read the Tales of Alvin Maker series as a hagiographic allegory in which Card extols his faith and its founder, even without the Church expressly manifest. Instead, readers should recognize how Card complicates his allusions by overlaying the alternate history and fantasy genres. That Card successfully reimagines important scenes from religious narrative without the Church or scriptural canon suggests that his own version of Mormon theology is not merely a cluster of commandments and dictates blindly received from Church leaders. Instead, Card portrays Mormonism as a dynamic belief system that negotiates theological and historical narratives in an effort to identify the natural laws that encompass and direct mortal and divine lives. Doctrines and commandments stem from a universe operating by its own rational (though metaphysical) logic. For Card, at least, Mormon cosmology and spirituality become inevitable and natural, even without heavenly administration or ecclesiastical direction.

## Notes

1. The historical Lalawethika was a Shawnee spiritual leader and the brother of Tecumseh. At one time known as the town drunk, he had an experience in which he claimed he had communed with an entity he identified as the Master of Breath. Thereafter, he promoted cooperation among the Native American tribes and rejected the encroachment of Euro-American settlers.
2. For an analysis of the problematic aspects of Card, a white author, incorporating Native American personalities and magic into his series, see Wereonika Łaskiewicz's "(Dis) empowerment of Native Americans in Orson Scott Card's *The Tales of Alvin Maker*" (*Ilha do Desterro* 74.1, p. 307-326).

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### Soulful Theatre: Mormon Theology of the Body in the Science Fiction Plays of Orson Scott Card



Kristin Perkins

There are many moving parts to this essay—which is only fitting since it is performance analysis, and I am deeply invested in the theological and utopian implications of body, space, and time: moving parts that constitute the essential characteristics of theatre. This is an essay, then, about moving parts as much as it is an essay with moving parts. Since there are several threads I’m attempting to weave, or at least braid, I think it’s worth naming them as clearly as possible. This essay examines how theatre (*Posing as People* directed by Orson Scott Card, specifically) mediates and stages Mormon theologies of the body in the genre of science fiction. In these plays about time travel and body swapping, my understanding of Mormon doctrine of the soul and the import of the body helps parse meaning from the text. These doctrines, in turn, are illuminated in the reflection of science fiction’s speculative mirror.

Theatre is not merely the site for this exploration but a form uniquely equipped to explore the significations of the body in theology and science fiction. Theatre often posits or implies a future using what Jill Dolan calls utopian performatives that have spiritual dimensions, but these performatives remain grounded in materiality and located in the embodied practice of the stage. Theatre is thus a productive site to analyze the convergence of the metaphysical and physical in the Mormon doctrine of the soul. I’ll return later to *Posing as People*, the collection of plays based on Card’s short stories, but first, I want to build out a theoretical framework as the scaffold to my case study.

Doctrine and Covenants 88 is a wide-ranging compilation of revelations Joseph Smith taught while at Kirtland, Ohio, from 1882-83. In it, Smith makes a distinction between “spirit” and “soul” (elsewhere used interchangeably), saying, “And the spirit and the body are the soul of man. And the resurrection from the dead is the redemption of the soul” (88.15-16). This doctrine, that the soul is the unification of both the animating spirit and physical body, is fundamental to Latter-day Saint doctrine and the Mormon worldview. It is evidenced repeatedly from adherence to the Word of Wisdom, Mormonism’s strict health code, to belief in the literal embodiment of God. The LDS church eventually codified this doctrine in correlated educational materials. This concept of “soul” effectively collapses the metaphysical dimensions of the spirit into the physical realm of the body, placing divine import on materialism in general and the human body in particular.

Further Mormonism’s belief in apotheosis, the potential divinization of exalted humans, is contingent on human resurrection into “perfected” bodies.<sup>1</sup> God has a body, and so too, humans must reinhabit bodies after death to become like God. The doctrine of divine embodiment is

almost science-fictional in its orientation towards a future utopia in heaven. How Mormons inhabit their bodies on Earth becomes rehearsal for their own divine embodiment.

In *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan makes an impassioned case for the necessity and relevance of theatre as a space of utopian performatives, a medium to envision and rehearse better futures and new subjectivities. She acknowledges a religious, or at least spiritual, dimension to her project, partly by way of addressing her critics, going so far as to use religious language — calling theatre a “temple of communion” and referring to the messianic quality of performance as a “deferred moment of transformation toward a better future” (135-6). Central to Dolan’s argument is the imbrication of this idealism and the body since “utopian performatives let us *embody* conditions of which we can otherwise only dream” (168). For Dolan, theatre is a uniquely capable tool for utopianism because it grounds idealism and civic transformations in embodied practice. Again using religious terminology, she writes, “Theatre can be a secular temple of social and spiritual union not with a mystified, mythologized higher power, but with the more prosaic, earthbound, yearning, ethical subjects” (137). In her good-natured attempt to defend her work from the critique that it is marked by religious-oriented sentimentality, Dolan emphasizes the importance of the “earthbound” and embodied nature of theatre in the pursuit of a spiritual union—this materiality is key to understanding the spiritual affect of theatre.

Dolan’s framework—the enmeshment of embodied performance and spiritual union—combined with the Mormon theology of the soul is one way to understand how theatre forms have functioned in Mormon cultural and religious life. Megan Sanborn Jones has argued that Mormon Pageants, large-cast spectacles performed outdoors around the United States, used embodied performance practices to invoke spiritual affect for both performers and audiences in their re-creation of the past (13). In the most sacred of Mormon rituals enacted in the temple, theatrical forms have been used for decades, with actors embodying characters to re-perform a speculative mytho-history and rehearse entrance into heaven. All temple participants, officiants or not, embody certain performative acts meant to help envision a future divine embodiment and elicit spiritual affect. Theatre thus becomes a site where the collapse of the metaphysical and the physical, the spirit and the body, the sacred and the profane is realized in Mormon traditions. In the formulation found in Doctrine and Covenants 88, we could say theatre is a soulful space where body and spirit become unified in salvific performance believed to be both effective (accomplishing ritual goals) and affective (invoking emotional responses that confirm religious truths).

Leaving to the side the speculative nature of the Latter-day Saint Temple itself, I’ll move to how this “soulful” theatre can function within the genre of science fiction by turning to a science-fictional case study. *Posing as People*, directed by Orson Scott Card, premiered in September 2004 at the Whitefire Theatre in Los Angeles. It was a collection of three plays adapted from short stories Card wrote early in his career. All three plays, “Clap Hands and Sing,” adapted by Scott Brick, “Lifeloop,” adapted by Aaron Johnston, and “A Sepulchre of Song,” adapted by Emily Janice Card, are faithful adaptations of Card’s work and were edited by Card himself. They include some

added details, but the only major difference in the plot beats and characters are practical—adding theatrical devices to stage internal thought or commentary. The short stories, and thus the plays, like so much of Card’s science fiction work, contain Mormon themes, significantly themes around the theology of the body and the perfecting of the spirit and the body towards a unified soul using science fiction tropes. Yet while the adaptations remain faithful in terms of plot and character, the essential shift from the disembodied page to the embodied medium of the stage highlights and gives depth and texture to key themes of corporeality in the stories.

Card is a practicing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, by far the largest denomination of the religious and cultural category of “Mormon.” Card himself has embraced the term “Mormon writer,” sometimes including Mormon characters in his oeuvre, though he remains agnostic as to Mormonism’s impact on his work, suggesting that, while his moral convictions inform his storytelling, “my theology and institutional membership have no place in [my work]” (Moser 33). That said, Card has acknowledged the essential autobiographical nature of any writing, admitting that Mormonism impacts him and condoning scholars like Michael R. Collings and Alma Jean Porschet who have excavated Mormon themes in Card’s work. As Collings says, many of Card’s symbolic references “only resonate fully in conjunction with an awareness of LDS teachings” (Collings 58). Drawing on this tradition but working with an unexamined subject, I uncover how Mormon theology of the soul plays out in two of the three plays in *Posing as People*, not as the key to the text but as a lens to elucidate one thematic dimension of Card’s work.

“Clap Hands and Sing,” the first play presented in *Posing as People* and written by Card’s friend and fellow Mormon Scott Brick, is adapted from the short story of the same name. In “Clap Hands and Sing,” Charlie, played by Stefan Rudnicki, is the aging CEO of a company that pioneered the time-travel device known as THIEF, Temporal Hermeneutic Insertion into the Everwhen Field, which transports a consciousness into another body to live out a past day. Near death, Charlie remembers Rachel Carpenter (Emily Janice Card), a girl he used to know but never expressed his feelings for. Despite it being illegal to use THIEF in a way that might change the present, Charlie’s consciousness travels back in time to his younger body (Scott Brick) where he has one night together with Rachel. Remorseful that he may have ruined her life, Charlie is despondent when he returns to the present until his computer system, an AI named Jock, reveals that the young Rachel in the memory was also inhabited by her older consciousness. Right before Rachel died, she requested to inhabit her younger body and relive the same day with Charlie. Thus, both Charlie and Rachel were older consciousnesses inhabiting their younger selves, for as Jock says, “There are some things in this world so pure we cannot ruin them, despite our best intentions. Or our worst” (51).

As a writer deeply concerned with morality, “Clap Hands and Sing” is essentially about a pitiless and greedy man’s redemption, but corporeality mediates the redemption arc as the mature consciousness returns to the young body. Reinhabiting one’s own young body is an echo of Mormon beliefs in the final resurrection in which all spirits, retaining experience and wisdom,

will be returned to a perfected body. This unification forms the “redemption of the soul” found in scripture. Both Charlie and Rachel, at the end of their respective lives, are returned with their matured consciousnesses to their young bodies. Using masculine language, Charlie says to himself in the mirror after his consciousness has traveled back in time, “And just like that, you’re young again, Charlie. Flex those muscles. Touch the toes you haven’t touched in forty years. . . . It’s all there Charlie. Your virility, your passion, your hunger” (39).

Theology of the body features beyond the mechanics of time travel reflecting resurrection in the short play. More interestingly, the younger, more perfect body acts as the mediator of redemption. In Mormon theology of the soul, human embodiment is endowed with a moral dimension—the body has a “positive valence in the moral order of the cosmos” (Hoyt and Petrey 539). Before the time travel, Charlie is self-absorbed, describing himself as both “cruel” and “lustful.” His choice to visit Rachel is an entirely selfish one, but when his consciousness returns twelve hours later, he is immediately remorseful, crying to Jock about his fear that he ruined Rachel’s life. It is not merely his meeting with Rachel that changes Charlie, but the mediation of his youthful, beautiful, virile body given the moral dimension of the perfect body in Mormon thought and emphasized in Mormon culture.<sup>2</sup>

Before Charlie even encounters Rachel for the second time, he behaves differently — an innocent demeanor and good-natured intent despite the play being clear that the consciousness is the same between the two scenes. This is made explicit in a moment when Rachel and Young Charlie are walking. The older Charlie, represented by a different actor, asks his younger self why he is nervous and responds saying, “Just a guess here . . . you are not a virgin, but this body does not know that. This body is alert because it hasn’t yet formed the habits of meaningless passion that you know far too well” (44). Embedded in this internal musing is the notion that the younger body has a moral dimension and an ontology unto itself despite the implantation of the older and amoral (not to mention, sexually-experienced) consciousness. The body, not the mind, forms habits and the body that reacts to stimuli without conscious control. For Charlie, the time travel becomes not just a way of inhabiting the younger self and seeing Rachel again, but an essential mediation in his moral arc with his more youthful body possessing moral guidance in its fleshy materiality.

The production choices concerning casting, and thus the presented bodies, drive this point home. Stooped and shuffling, Rudnicki plays Charlie in the opening scene with a grumbling callousness. His interpretation of the character is far from sympathetic, but his scene-partner, the android named Jock played by Scott Brick, serves and cajoles Charlie with good humor and kindness. Even if the audience assumes this is a programmed AI personality, Jock is likable in a way Charlie is not. When it comes time for Charlie to enter the body of his younger self, Rudnicki stands to the side of the stage, and Brick, still as Jock, lies down in the bed. When Brick “wakes” from his sleep he is Young Charlie. This is more than just a fluke born of the little necessities that so often drive double casting in small productions. For one thing, there are many bit parts in “Clap Hands and Sing” that could have been more easily double-cast as Young Charlie. For another, this

casting is written into the stage directions, specifying for future productions that these characters are designed to be played by one actor.

The characters ghost onto each other while Rudnicki as Charlie is free to stand alongside his younger body, observing it. This highly theatrical technique allows for positive associations to accumulate in Brick as Jock and Young Charlie, highlighting the moral dimensions of this individual body. It also clarifies the mediation that happens to Charlie by splitting his character into two parts so that there can be a functional teacher (Brick) of moral affect and embodiment to the embittered man (Rudnicki), completing his character arc in the final scene. And while it makes sense in the plot, it also aligns with Mormon cultural expectations for the morally good character to be young and handsome since youth and beauty are strongly associated with morality and divine corporeality. It is thus the medium of theatre that reveals and concretizes the theologies of the body at play in a time travel and body swapping play.

“A Sepulchre of Songs” was adapted for the stage by Card’s daughter Emily Janice Card, who also stars in it. It is the story of Elaine (Emily Janice Card) as told through the perspective of her unnamed therapist (Kirby Heyborne), named in the script simply “Therapist.” After a gasoline explosion, Elaine, a teenager at the time of the play, is orphaned and left without her arms or legs, confined to a rest home for her life. Despite this event, she is gregarious, funny, and universally loved by the employees in the rest home. The rest home assigns a therapist to her after she talks about her numerous imaginary friends, including a pig made out of ice and a violent young boy. As she describes it, she knows that these friends aren’t real, but they help her occupy her mind and express her emotions. Relieved, the Therapist nonetheless continues to visit Elaine, mostly just enjoying her company and eventually falling in love with her despite a significant age gap. Elaine begins to talk about a new imaginary friend, Anansa, a spaceship that has contacted her to recruit her into becoming a spaceship, insisting that Elaine is “just the right size” for it (131). At the end of the play, Anansa and Elaine have “traded places”—Elaine steering a ship through the stars and Anansa having a human body, although without arms and legs. The Therapist, who confesses his love to Elaine/Anansa, is the only one who knows this secret, and the ending leaves ambiguous whether Elaine is delusional.

Even just in summary, the importance of the human body, the mutability of the body, and the perfectibility of the body are all clear themes in “A Sepulchre of Songs.” Given that body morphology occurs bi-directionally, with Anansa and Elaine “swapping bodies,” it’s worth looking at both instances of change. I don’t take at face value the character’s claim that she has, indeed, traded places with a spaceship. The short story is less ambivalent than the play in this regard—Anansa reads the therapist’s thoughts more than once, implying she is an alien being—but the play intentionally leaves it ambiguous. Ultimately, analyzing the body morphology and its relationship to the soul is less about claiming it “really” happens in the story’s world and more about its representational significance for the characters in the story. As Card says in his afterword to the short story, “Elaine chooses to leave her present life—no matter how you interpret the story” (203).



The move Anansa makes from being a spaceship to an embodied teenager reflects the Mormon doctrine of the three estates; a conceit Card has used in numerous works, as Collings points out about *Speaker for the Dead* (58). The three estates represent the pre-mortal, mortal, and post-mortal existence. According to Mormonism, all current humans chose in pre-existence to have a body and come to Earth. In Mormon scripture, the forces of good and evil battled in pre-mortality, with good triumphing and gaining the right to come to Earth and be embodied. This is yet another Mormon tradition that imbues the body with a moral dimension. According to Joseph Smith, embodiment is the central reason for mortal existence. As he taught, “We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body” (Ehat and Cooke 60). Anansa’s choice to leave her spaceship for a mortal body, even an “imperfect” one without arms and legs, reflects these theological commitments of embodiment.

Elaine’s choice, too, holds resonance in Mormon teaching, and in particular, aligns with Mormon transhumanism. A sub-disciplinary field that has been gaining popularity recently, Mormon transhumanists argue that transhumanism is synchronous with Mormon theology and doctrine. As the group contends, “Mormonism and Transhumanism advocate remarkably similar views of human nature and potential: material beings organized according to natural laws, rapidly advancing knowledge and power, imminent fundamental changes to anatomy and environment, and eventual transcendence of present limitations” (Mormon Transhumanist Association). As Elaine leaves her bedridden body to become a spaceship, she changes her fundamental anatomy and present limitations in the pursuit of bodily autonomy. Despite it being clear that Elaine is, in fact, becoming a spaceship, the language used to describe her transformation is distinctly human. As Anansa says of Elaine after Elaine inhabits the ship, “she sang and danced and swung her arms. . . . She wouldn’t trade her new arms and legs for anything. They were so new” (144). With the help of technology, Elaine achieves body perfectibility, sailing through the cosmos.

It’s worth pausing to critique the ableist language Mormons often employ to talk about the deification of the human body in the uniting of the soul. The implication in Mormon theology is that divine corporeality for all of humanity will consist of eliminating disability to align all bodies with a normative understanding of what a “healthy” or “whole” body looks like. Disability scholar Mandi Eatough has noted that, culturally, “Many are quick to tell disabled folks that ‘in Heaven you’ll be whole again’ or that ‘when you die you’ll be healed’. This relies on the idea that resurrected [*sic*] bodies fit into an able-bodied ideal of perfection/fitness” (@mandieatough). At the end of the play, the Therapist, in one of his narrations, says that he would “like to be God” (147). He then imagines being God for a moment, describing Anansa/Elaine wheeled toward him and saying, “I give her a left hand and then a right hand, and she waves to me. I put a pair of sturdy legs on her, and I see her running toward me. . . . And then, one by one, I take them all away” (148). For his patient-turned-lover, the Therapist imagines a body made perfect through alignment with the standard body, presumably the body “made in God’s image” as Mormons believe. Still, Elaine’s transformation into the spaceship can provide a counterpoint and a narrative

that emphasizes the Mormon doctrines of bodily mutability, agency, and perfectibility through engaging in transhumanist thought.

As in “Clap Hands and Sing,” the genre forms of science fiction take on added meaning when presented in embodied practice. The presence of the body in space re-emphasizes themes, as well as leads the audience to visualize (and perhaps model) the divine body through a highly theatrical technique signaling that parts of the body are “gone” without ever fully obscuring them. At the beginning of the play, on stage and in full view of the audience, Emily Janice Card dons long white gloves that cover from her fingertips to her shoulders and then steps to the hospital bed. As she enters the bed, her legs seem to “disappear,” but the theatrical technique, again done in front of the audience, is apparent. The hospital bed she lies in for most of the play has holes where she can insert her legs to give the appearance of not having any.

The white gloves and the design of the bed together are meant to give the impression that she is missing both arms and legs, but rather than trying to ignore the realities of Card’s body, as the actress representing Elaine/Anansa, the play stages the disappearance of her arms and legs, reminding the audience continually of Elaine’s body’s potential for limbs, and thus the potential for “perfection”—or “wholeness” in the Mormon understanding of the word “perfect.” The limbs are, after all, right there, just “hidden” for the legibility of the story. As Card said in his afterward, “theatrical effects are not limited by realism the way movies are” (149), allowing for theatrical devices that actually stage and continually point toward the potentiality of the body. Indeed, in the final moments of the play, while the therapist describes playing God and giving Elaine/Anansa her limbs back, Emily Janice Card stands and has the white gloves removed by two other actors, staging the “perfecting” (or “making whole”) of her body for the audience, in a gesture of utopian performativity—a gesture only available in the theatre where the artistic medium is the body itself.

To return to the notion of “soulful” theatre as a way of drawing in Dolan’s utopian performatives in conversation with the Mormon doctrine of soul equaling body and spirit, it is interesting to note that “Clap Hands and Sing” focuses on the healing of the spirit, Charlie’s moral goodness, through the mediation of the body, while “Sepulchre of Songs” focuses on the healing of the body through the mediation of the spirit, depicted through Elaine’s bright and hopeful personality. In both plays, the unification of the perfect body to the moral spirit points toward a utopian future of divine corporeality. *Posing as People* gestures toward utopian futures in its redemption of the characters and through the Mormon overlay. Through the plays themselves are not consistently effective, occasionally slipping into sentimentality, ableism, and sexism, they offer a productive site to explore the “soulful” theatre as a convergence of embodied practice with spiritual significations.

Early in the essay, I cited a range of theatrical expressions in Mormon culture and ordinances, but many of the main expressions of Mormon theatre traditions are rapidly disappearing as the church moves to broaden its appeal to mainline Christians. Mormon pageants were discontinued in the last year, and the “live” temple ceremonies performed in the Salt Lake City Temple with

embodied actors playing mytho-historical characters are also ending amid some protest. For many Mormons, these are disappointing or frustrating changes as Mormonism loses a rich historical art tradition that is, if not wholly unique to the Church, notably distinct. If it's true, as I contend here, that theatrical forms are uniquely equipped to signify Mormon theological emphasis on the body, these changes represent more than a loss of a sacred art tradition—they are a loss of the marriage of form to doctrine to illuminate the significations of the body. The intervention of a pair of sci-fi plays might seem an odd place to hunt for resonances of divine corporeality, but in this context, these independent theatre productions might well become the only place to see these theologies of the body in embodied practice. Are these utopian performatives? Not exactly, at least not as Dolan explains the concept in her work, since these plays are not necessarily always successful in evoking the affect Dolan describes, but they do generatively point toward the future in their discourse on the body and toward the utopian promises of the unified soul. *Posing as People* not only finds resonance in Mormon theological tradition in its storytelling, but its theatrical form re-emphasizes these commitments to the human body and its divinity.

## Notes

1. I'll note that there are layers of ableism in how this discourse is formed that I will address in my case study.
2. Mormon culture emphasizes attractiveness as a sign of morality in a host of ways. Two salient examples are descriptions of the "Mormon glow"—a term used to describe how people can recognize Mormons based of physical characteristics that are defined in various ways but include clear skin and bright smiles and are linked to inner goodness—and Arnold Friberg's depictions of attractive/righteous and ugly/evil characters in the Book of Mormon as exemplifying "muscular Mormonism" through depictions of fit bodies (Kimball 564).

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## The Translation of a Mormon Alien in “That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made”



Dale J. Pratt

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints would like to believe their religion would remain vibrant even if their wait for Christ’s Second Coming were prolonged many centuries into the future. SF writers ranging from Robert A. Heinlein (*Stranger in a Strange Land*; “The Menace from Earth”) to the duo called “James S. A. Corey” (the *Expanse* series) make reference to future Mormons who as a people have maintained faith in the Book of Mormon, temple-building, missionary work, and general cultural status as a “peculiar people” (King James Version 1 Pet. 2.9). Eric James Stone’s Nebula-winning novelette, “That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made” (2010; hereafter, “That Leviathan”), depicts how Harry Malan, president of the tiny Sol branch of the LDS Church, serves Neuter Kimball, an alien convert to the faith many centuries from now. Although the setting of the story—a human-built space station near the center of the Sun—presupposes currently inconceivable leaps in human technological capabilities, Harry’s thoughts and conduct are easily recognizable as those of a believably “faithful Mormon protagonist in a high-tech future,” the creation of which was one of Stone’s motivations for writing the story (Stone, “Mentioning Mormons”). The greater triumph of “That Leviathan,” though, is that it produces a believable portrayal of a faithful Mormon *alien*, the solcetacean (“swale”) Neuter Kimball, without explicitly teasing out all of the changes in Mormon theology and practice that would be necessary to accommodate such dramatic otherness. The story takes for granted this momentous evolution; it details neither LDS translation and policy-making, nor missionary efforts, nor swale conversions. Instead, it sketches out how mutual bonds of belief and community unite Mormon humans and already-converted Mormon swales. In the “now” of the story, difficulties in translating interspecies cultural expectations and beliefs fade in the light of mutual understanding arrived at through scriptural storytelling. When the flawed-yet-earnest Harry stumbles into an epic confrontation with an alien “god,” he struggles to translate his strong moral certainty into terms intelligible to non-believing human scientists and aliens alike. Ultimately, Christ’s famous dictum, “greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (King James Version John 15.13), conveys Harry’s motives and meaning: “He [Christ] was willing to die for the least of us, while you [Leviathan] are willing to kill the leas-” (“That Leviathan” 26). In its matter-of-fact acceptance of successful translation, “That Leviathan” celebrates resilience and flexibility in Mormon theology and religious practice, pitting acts of faith, personal revelation, and the fellowship of the saints against programmatic doctrinal rigidity, incomprehension, and hyperawareness of otherness.

Mormonism is replete with translation and translation theory. Founder Joseph Smith claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates shown to him by the angel Moroni.



Within the book itself, we find accounts of prophets translating records from other plates and stones, peoples whose language “has become corrupted” (Book of Mormon, Omni 1.17-20), and an account of a group who maintained their language in the aftermath of Babel. Joseph Smith also reworked portions of the KJV Bible in a process the Church calls “translation” (Matthews, 763-69). When Old Testament prophet Enoch and the people of the city of Zion, as well as Elijah and figures from the Book of Mormon, are taken up into heaven and become immortal, they are called “translated beings” (McConkie 1485-86). The traditional rite-of-passage for faithful LDS young women and men (the eighteen-month to two-year missionary experience) frequently entails learning foreign languages on the fly as they attempt to teach and people from disparate cultures and traditions. Even the monthly testimony meetings have members struggling, very often with clichéd language, to translate their deepest spiritual feelings into words.

The brevity and straightforward plot of “That Leviathan” understate its broad conception of Mormonism. Harry Malan’s congregation includes six humans and forty-six solcetaceans—gigantic plasma beings that live within stars. When Harry learns (through an awkward confessional interview with Neuter Kimball) that smaller swales are often forced to participate in non-consensual sex, he sets out to inform swale “authorities” (7; 16-17), heedless of human warnings about respect for swale culture and Neuter Kimball’s explanation that there is no swale law against such behavior. Accompanied by Neuter Kimball and Dr. Juanita Merced (a “soltologist” working at the station), Harry meets Leviathan, the ancient, original swale who believes herself to be a god. Neuter Kimball worries the encounter parallels the Book of Mormon confrontation between the prophet Abinadi and the wicked King Noah, which ends with Abinadi’s martyrdom. Harry suggests that no, better to ponder another Book of Mormon story, that of Ammon who successfully converts the Lamanite King Lamoni. The proud Leviathan, offended by Harry’s impudent attempt at ethical debate and his intimation that there are greater things in the universe than Leviathan, rebuffs him and condemns Neuter Kimball to death. When Harry and Juanita desperately attempt to rescue their friend, Leviathan becomes curious and questions Neuter Kimball about why aliens would sacrifice themselves for a swale. Neuter Kimball transmits the Bible and the Book of Mormon to Leviathan (swales have the capacity to “read” entire texts instantaneously) (29-30). Finally understanding, Leviathan pardons Neuter Kimball and decrees that Mormon swales are not to be forced into sexual activity. Mirroring Neuter Kimball’s scripture-laden conversations with Harry, Leviathan instructs Harry to remember what King Agrippa said to Paul. Harry explains the biblical reference to Juanita: Agrippa, sitting in judgment over Paul, declares “almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28); Leviathan citing the passage conveys to Harry her acceptance of Harry’s request and also her understanding about the role of scriptures in Mormonism’s view of Christianity.

Throughout the text, understanding does not depend on the semantic charge of specific words, each encased in layers of untranslatable nuance. Rather, overt allusions to scriptural stories function as a verbal shorthand that bypasses normal translation; Harry, Neuter Kimball, and finally Leviathan communicate and reach understanding by merely mentioning each story as an

analogue to their current situations. Just as the phrase “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra” imparts a tremendous amount of information both to Captain Picard when his universal translator proves inadequate, and to fans who know and love the “Darmok” episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,<sup>1</sup> scriptural allusions in “That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made” (including the title itself) facilitate mutual true understanding between the characters and also communicate the authentic “Mormon-ness” of the tale.

The story also illuminates contemporary Mormonism’s sometimes equivocal efforts to overcome semantic incommensurabilities between its discourse and that of traditional Christianity. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints believe themselves to be Christians, but their version of who God is, what God is like, and how God should be worshiped differs immensely from traditional Protestant and Catholic theology and practice. Should they be accepted by the broader religious community as Christian, or shunned (or embraced) as something else? The current institutional unease with the term “Mormon” and how it underscores differences with traditional Christianity (Jarvis 941-42; see Nelson, “The Correct Name of the Church” and “The Name of the Church”) must be balanced against the notion, canonized in LDS scripture, that the church founded by Joseph Smith is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased” (Doctrine and Covenants 1: 30). Mormonism’s *raison d’être* is its difference from mainstream Christianity, but it proclaims that its difference consists in the greater authenticity of its Christianity. Mormonism purports to be “more Christian” than Christianity.

Michael Collings argues that Mormonism cannot be represented well in SF, because the extrapolation and speculation about the future so fundamental to SF often becomes subordinated to doctrinal exposition of a revelatory religion (116). Science fiction (or indeed any fiction) about Mormonism must deal with the inherent strangeness of Mormonism. Despite twentieth-century Mormonism’s quixotic attempt to become a mainstream Christian denomination, Mormonism has dwelt on the frontiers of acceptability since its founding. Its claims of ongoing revelation to prophetic leaders, new canonical scriptures, required temple ordinances for salvation, teachings about polygyny (at least for a time), and its millenarianism constitute doctrinal strangeness from other Christian denominations. Its (now disavowed) proscription of priesthood ordination for Black males and its continued conservative sexual and gender politics cast Mormonism against mainstream advances toward racial and gender equality. Loving acceptance of LGBTQ+ members in the LDS Church, although a stated goal, seems to be a vague, unrealized dream. Here, then, lies a suitable test for Collings’s argument that the cognitive estrangement of an SF story representing future Mormonism is bested by the estrangement accompanying Mormonism in general. If the story can depict future Mormonism without being specifically *about* future Mormonism, then the wonders of cognitive estrangement and extrapolation engendered by good SF become possible. The trick would be to make “future Mormonism” recognizable as Mormonism to contemporary readers (both members and nonmembers of the LDS church), without trudging through a preachy “info dump” or recitation specifying evolutionary changes in doctrine and practice. “That

Leviathan” shows it is possible to translate Mormon practice and discourse to science fiction’s literary page; Harry Malan is convincing as a futuristic (human) Mormon, and even an alien Mormon, a figure embodying multiple degrees of otherness, becomes intelligible.

In Stone’s future, Mormons are still a fringe group; Mormon swales doubly so (or even triply so, because they are queer). The story elicits myriad unanswered questions about how Mormon theology and practice have been translated and expanded to make the swales “no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (King James Version Eph. 2.19). For instance, for swales to be considered official members of the LDS Church, references in scripture and Church policy would have to be retranslated to expand their meaning. When “Adam fell that men might be,” did the effects of the Fall include the swales and the strange new worlds they inhabit? The continuation of that verse—“and men are, that they might have joy” (Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 2.25)—can be taken to include “women,” but does the verse also contain promise for swales? How are swales redeemed through the Atonement of Christ? Are male swales ordained to the priesthood, given that no laying on of hands by those in authority is possible?<sup>2</sup> Are swales, who have three sexes (male, female, and neuter), separated by gender categories during Priesthood and Relief Society meetings, the way human Mormons are (see note 6 below)? What about temple endowments, the covenants required for salvation that currently are administered only in physical LDS temples which swales could never visit? And what of sins that only swales can commit, because of their environment or physiology?<sup>3</sup> Somehow, in the Mormonism of “That Leviathan,” these questions have been answered or made irrelevant. The multifarious queerness of faithful Mormon swales does not in any way isolate them from other Mormons. It presents obvious challenges to Harry as he seeks to serve Neuter Kimball as a member of an exotic, mostly inscrutable alien culture, but not because Harry or his Mormonism of the future is xenophobic or homophobic.

Readers such as Abigail Nussbaum, David Moles and others who have been harshly critical of this story would likely dispute this charitable reading and want explicit answers to the aforementioned questions about how swales fit into (contemporary) Mormonism. David Moles, for instance, fumes about the Nebula awarded to a story that “put[s] forward no fantasy, unless the fantasy that the world is an uncomplicated place populated chiefly by straw men and contrived examples is a fantasy” (Moles, Blog post). Abigail Nussbaum concurs and adds: “The premise of proselytizing to aliens raises a lot of questions, but Stone is more interested in giving definitive answers, ones that shut down all objections to missionary work, among humans and aliens alike” (“The 2011 Hugo Awards”). These critiques share unhappiness with “dodgy politics” in contemporary Mormonism (Nussbaum’s phrasing); “That Leviathan” was published in the wake of the LDS Church’s 2008 campaign in support of California Proposition 8, banning same-sex marriage in the state. But they also share an unwillingness to admit that the story is not about proselytizing aliens nor how future Mormonism came to be.<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum claims that Stone sets up a thought-experiment carefully tailored to avoid dealing with the problematic issues of Christian evangelizing so that he can say “under these conditions, it’s totally OK to impose Christian

values on aliens” (“The 2011 Hugo Awards”). Without mentioning any sort of Prime Directive, Nussbaum seems to project an idealized model of interspecies contact in which cultural exchanges between groups are limited to science and technology, and perhaps art. Anything religious, though, somehow smacks of colonialism or economic exploitation.

Stone recognizes the delicacy of the evangelized aliens and broaches the topic from the start: upon their first meeting, Juanita orders Harry to “stop interfering with my studies...” because “you’re teaching them human myths that have no application for their society” (3). Later, we learn that before becoming a member of the Church, Neuter Kimball had gone by the name Pemberly; Juanita does not seem upset that her swale friend had “read” and enjoyed *Pride and Prejudice* (another swale had transmitted it to them). The objectionable “Christian value” that Harry seeks to impose on swale culture is a prohibition against rape, supposedly a concept that swales do not recognize. Several of the “solcetologists” studying the swales denounce Harry’s attempt to protect the lesser swales from sexual assault; Harry protests: “You scientists who study the swales have strict rules about interfering with swale culture, and you try to avoid offending them. To me that smacks of condescension—you presume that swale culture is weak and cannot withstand any outside influence” (15). While Harry’s headstrong approach to the solving the problem—inform “the authorities” and have them prohibit the behavior—assumes that swale culture follows a human paradigm, his desire to change swale sexual conduct is well-meaning and analogous to contemporary Western abhorrence of voluntary female genital cutting.<sup>5</sup> Moles’s and Nussbaum’s objections to the story are mostly about perceived preachiness and the pervasive silence about the differences between contemporary and futuristic Mormonism. However, the story must not be read as an allegorical heuristic towards achieving open-mindedness in future Mormonism. Instead, that open-mindedness is a given, as a representation of the community all Mormons want to enjoy, despite their differences.

The story’s unwillingness to document the almost infinite evolutionary steps from contemporary Mormonism to its own version of LDS theology mirrors the utopian ideals inherent in Mormonism, but also those of an important strain of SF. Mormon theology includes numerous latter-day missions for the Church: spreading the restored Gospel throughout the Earth, recovering and cataloguing the genealogy of the entire human family, performing baptisms and temple ordinances for all who ever lived, and in general preparing the world for the Second Coming of Christ. Faithful Mormons believe that through faith, energetic discipleship, and continuing revelation (to leaders of the Church but also to individuals), the path towards completing these projects will become increasingly clear. Yet, questions abound. What of the Neanderthals? Does “world” mean “entire cosmos”? Are artificial intelligences, androids, aliens and other members of the posthuman panoply children of God and hence eligible for salvation? Answers to these speculative questions, should their practical need arise, will come through revelation and protracted wrestling with details and with recalcitrant members and leaders. Much SF never deals with the nuts and bolts of achieving the transition from contemporary problems to future ideals. For example, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* depicts Captain Picard debating

the finer points of the ethics of the Prime Directive on numerous occasions, yet it does not detail (at least, on screen) the struggles required for disparate alien civilizations to unite behind the doctrine. The utopian ideals (or the dystopian nightmares) of such SF provide the backdrop for the tale; the achievement of the ideal is a different (and untold) story. “That Leviathan” requires readers to consider if star-dwelling plasma space whales really are more plausible than an LDS Church that accepts them as members. It remains to be seen whether the LDS Church will negotiate its multifarious contemporary struggles, but if the Church can make room for Neuter Kimball, perhaps it holds a place for women with priesthood callings, Black apostles and prophets, and LGBT+ members in loving relationships.

Neuter Kimball’s choice of their name underscores how far the LDS Church has evolved. Harry believes that the alien took the name from “a 20th-Century prophet of the Church” (5)—i.e., Spencer W. Kimball, remembered chiefly for his revelation ending the racist ban against Black men holding the priesthood. Following the story’s logic, it seems likely that the alien once known as Pemberly has “read” a transmitted copy of Kimball’s influential *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. The book contains several chapters sternly specifying numerous “diabolical crimes of sexual impurity” (61), including “The Sin Next to Murder” (sex outside marriage) and “Crime Against Nature” (homosexuality). Concerning the victim of rape, although President Kimball teaches that “there is no condemnation where there is no voluntary participation,” he also declares, in a case of victim-blaming, that “once given or taken or *stolen* [chastity] can never be regained” and that “it is better to die in defending one’s virtue than to live having lost it without struggle” (195; emphasis mine). For President Kimball, chastity equals virtue. At the start of “That Leviathan,” Harry speaks in church on forgiveness, and the following hour’s Sunday school lesson addresses chastity.<sup>6</sup> The next day, Neuter Kimball tries to confess to sexual sin: “a female merged her reproductive patterns with mine” (6) (note that the Neuter Kimball does not transmit “rape”). The conversation illustrates many of the pitfalls of translation: capturing emotional tone, addressing cultural and ceremonial norms, expressing nuances (in this case, distinguishing varieties of sexual behavior), and false assumptions of shared understanding or worldviews. More importantly, Harry summarizes Mormon thinking about swale sexual sin: “In applying the law of chastity to the swales, Church doctrine said that reproductive activity was to be engaged in only among swales married to each other, and only permitted marriages of three swales, one of each sex” (6). This bald declaration of how swales should behave would probably make Moles, Nussbaum, and many other critics of Mormonism gnash their teeth, but the most interesting feature of Neuter Kimball’s confessional interview is Harry’s reaction: he insists that the alien has not sinned, because they were raped. There is no hint of victim-blaming, no intimation that Neuter Kimball is any less virtuous than before. Quandaries may have arisen in the past from the reconfiguration of human theology and religious practices to accommodate alien members, but in the “now” of the story, Harry has no doubt. Whatever the imperfections in today’s LDS leadership, in Stone’s future Mormonism, a young, inexperienced branch president is willing without hesitation to sacrifice his life for a queer member of the Church. Harry acts the way today’s LDS Church leaders ought to act, were they successfully and completely translating Christ’s Gospel into their practices.



In a sense, Neuter Kimball's behavior can be read as "translating" Mormonism into the language(s) of the swales. They chose to become a member of the Church because "I do not want her [Leviathan] as my god" (18). They stand prepared to die for their faith: "I will have faith in God and go with you" (18). Their faith precedes the miracle of Leviathan's mercy (which is ultimately rooted in the native curiosity all swales exhibit), and facilitates communication with her about Mormonism's sacred texts. Humans, too, learn a lot about swales because of Neuter Kimball's faith; Juanita's adventure with Harry and Neuter Kimball gives her an unparalleled perspective on swale behavior. On a broader level, as a faithful Mormon alien, Neuter Kimball makes futuristic Mormonism mean more than some random odd detail in a futuristic story otherwise unconcerned with the religion. When Harry welcomes his congregation with "My Dear Brothers and Sisters . . . and Neuters," the episode opens wide the themes of translation and religion far beyond the silly wink at the possibility of "alienating" one-third of the swales (2). Instead, it trumpets the power of future Mormonism's successful embrace of the queer aliens.

Queerness itself lays bare the high stakes of translation. A queer person approaches the question of their identity (for themselves and for others) through language. They perform their identity through myriad discursive transactions in fields dominated by patriarchal or otherwise ideological discourses. The offensive question "what *are* you?"—meant to underscore otherness—announces the perils of communicating identity through always-already imperfect language. A queer person's translations of their internal experiences as an individual (human) being into language simultaneously constitute their identity, liberate them from the bonds of heteronormativity, and alienate them from their past selves and from many of the persons that surround them. But they also can spark changes in attitudes and behavior in their interlocutors. In a strange yet evocative way, a queer person's journey through contemporary discourse resembles those of young LDS missionaries struggling to articulate in a foreign language the spiritual witness they wish to share. Incomprehension, rejection, persecution, indifference, and sometimes—how rare a possession—understanding and acceptance. Part of the childhood's end of the LDS Church will come when these queer journeys are made intelligible.

"That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made" is a story about the acceptance of queerness that neither denies problems currently faced by Mormonism, nor translates or projects contemporary Mormonism's gender and sexuality difficulties into the future. Rather, it shows that future Mormonism, miraculously, has left those issues in the past; "for with God, nothing shall be impossible" (King James Version Luke 1: 37). The story posits that understanding is based not on semantic content of specific words, but on the nuanced meaning of stories. In his diatribe against "That Leviathan," David Moles admits that "whatever our political and religious differences have been," most of the Mormons he has known are "good-hearted, level-headed people whose unassuming natures often concealed a wry humor and a wealth of well-observed stories" (Blog post). Moles is correct that Mormons, individually and collectively, have a wealth of stories to tell. Today's LDS children sing Primary songs about Nephi, the army of Helaman, Book of Mormon stories, and about pioneer children who sang as they walked and walked across the Great Plains.



Although Moles may never recognize it, Stone created Neuter Kimball, a faithful Mormon alien, to be just such a “good-hearted, level-headed” person of faith. Stone’s futuristic Mormonism is intelligible and compelling, in the same way that stories from different cultures in the distant past can speak to Mormons of today. Someday, perhaps, a real-life extraterrestrial analogue to Neuter Kimball will be translated and immortalized in Mormon story and song, and take its place alongside the scriptural stories of Moses and Pharoah, Abinadi before King Noah, Paul and Agrippa, Joseph Smith in Carthage Jail, and Job before God. Until then, the story of Harry and Neuter Kimball’s audience with Leviathan can represent faith and hope that the meaningfulness of Mormonism can be translated into future, even alien, contexts.

## Notes

1. *Star Trek*’s universal translator almost unfailingly translates the languages of alien races into standard English (and also from English to the alien language). In the “Darmok” episode, however, Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise learns a different way to communicate with a new alien race when he is forced by those aliens to confront a monster alongside the alien commander. Their shared experience unlocks for Picard the language of the aliens, who, instead of using subject-verb-object sentences, communicate by making references to mythological or historical episodes.
2. “We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof” (Articles of Faith 1: 5; emphasis mine).
3. As Father Peregrine, Ray Bradbury’s missionary to the Martians, reminds us: “if there are new senses on Mars, you must admit the possibility of unrecognizable sin [on Mars]” (113).
4. When Einstein asks what the universe would look like if one were traveling at the speed of light, the proper response is not: “no one will ever travel the speed of light.” Stone is no Einstein, but the proper response to his story cannot be merely to denigrate it and insist that Mormonism could never, for any reason, become the Mormonism depicted in “That Leviathan.”
5. Even the adoption of the term “female genital cutting” over “female genital mutilation” displays the thorny problems involved in debating cultural relativism, traditional cultural or religious practices, human rights and ethical imperatives. For a detailed discussion of FGC and cultural relativism, see Cassman.
6. At the time the story was written, LDS Sunday meetings consisted of a seventy-minute “Sacrament” meeting (substituted on the first Sunday of each month with “Fast and Testimony” meeting) involving the entire congregation. During the following Sunday School hour, adult members attended “Gospel Doctrine” or occasional specialized classes, youth attended classes according to their year in school, and children under twelve attended Primary (which lasted two hours). During the third hour, adult and youth members separated

according to gender: adult males attending “Priesthood” and adult females attending “Relief Society” with the youth attending “Young Men” or “Young Women.” Smaller congregations adapt the schedule as best fits their needs (i.e., it makes no sense to separate two or three young people into different Sunday School classes). In 2019, the schedule was shortened to a two-hour block, with Sacrament meeting occurring every week, followed by Sunday School or Priesthood/Relief Society on alternate Sundays (Primary continues on a weekly basis, although it has been shortened to less than one hour each week). In “That Leviathan,” Harry mentions only Sacrament meeting and Sunday School, which could imply that the tiny branch holds both meetings for the entire congregation, dispensing with Priesthood/Relief Society meetings because of the meager makeup of the branch. More likely, and more importantly, the omission of references to Priesthood/Relief Society meetings allows the story to avoid the issue of which meetings the three different genders of swales attend. I recognize that some critics believe this deafening silence controverts the story. However, I find that the story’s silence on this and other gender matters reflects a more upbeat spin on the possibility of Mormonism evolving and adapting to the future.

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### The Most Mormon Magic System: How Brandon Sanderson Turned Agency into Fantasy



Liz Busby

As a prominently religious author, Brandon Sanderson has been frequently asked about how his beliefs influence his work. In a podcast recorded in 2010 for the online magazine *Mormon Artist*, he stated how LDS thought makes its way into his epic fantasy novels:

I don't go into my work actively making any aspect of it LDS, [. . . but] if you look at who I am, and what my mythology is [. . .]—using that in the definitional sense of it, not looking at it as mythology is untrue—what my mythology is, what my belief in how things work is, influences what I do when I write [. . .]. And so I end up making these fantasy worlds that do have some core underlying LDS-style mythology. (Sanderson et al.)

This idea that religious beliefs can be re-embodied into a fantasy novel evokes the concept of mythopoeic literature, popularized by C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. In mythopoeic literature, the author creates a new set of myths, which “influence the spiritual, moral, and/or creative lives of the characters” and “also inspire the reader to examine the importance of mythology in his or her own spiritual, moral, and creative development” (“About the Society”). For example, Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* reinvented Christian mythology in a secondary world. He described his writing process this way: “Let us suppose that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would happen” (Schakel 37).

In writing classes and interviews, Sanderson consciously rejects comparisons between his writings and Lewis’s in favor of Tolkien. Sanderson says, “I’m not setting out to be like C.S. Lewis and write parables of belief. I’m trying more what Tolkien did in that I tell story and setting first, and let theme and meaning take care of itself” (“Barnes and Noble Book Club Q&A”). From Sanderson’s perspective, Tolkien represents the author who lets meaning naturally develop from their work whereas Lewis picks a specific meaning he wants to convey and then constructs the story to bring that point across.

However, this comparison overly simplifies the mythopoeic nature of Lewis’s work and minimizes the strong roots that Sanderson’s own work has in LDS theology. While some of Lewis’s fictional works are strict allegories with a clear message (for example, *Pilgrim’s Regress* and *The Great Divorce*), the *Chronicles of Narnia* are not. Though three of the volumes contain biblical retellings (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* tells the story of the crucifixion and resurrection; *The Magician’s Nephew*, the creation and fall; and *The Last Battle*, the second coming and final judgment), the remaining four volumes do not have a strict correspondence. Instead, these novels

set out to explore concepts important to Christian life by telling a story in which these principles are important.

For example, one possible interpretation of *The Silver Chair* is as an examination of “the complicated relationship between personal freedom and the need for obedience” (Schakel 71). In the beginning of the book, Aslan gives Jill four signs to follow, “which become what the words of the law were for Israel: a source of guidance and direction” (Schakel 72). From there, the plot is driven by the following (and misinterpreting) of the signs, analogous to mortals trying to understand God’s will and mostly getting it completely backwards. It is however not a direct retelling of any story in the Old or New Testaments, nor does it have a clear didactic message on how humans might better interpret God’s will. The most explicitly Christian scene in *The Silver Chair* occurs near the end of the novel when the Green Lady attempts to convince Puddleglum, Jill, and Eustace that the overworld was something they imagined, and Puddleglum presents a sort of “Pascal’s wager” of reasoning for his belief regardless of reality. He says, “Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things— ... in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. . . . I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia” (Lewis, *The Silver Chair* 190). Though there are strong Christian themes, *The Silver Chair* and the remaining *Narnia* books don’t simply retell an existing narrative with new window dressing, but rather explore ideas important to Lewis’s personal mythology of faith in a more wholistic way.

In the following examination of the mythology and magic system of Brandon Sanderson’s *Stormlight Archive*, I argue that its nature appears similar to Lewis’s work in books like *The Silver Chair*, exploring concerns and perspectives unique to the Mormon faith of its author.

### **Roshar and Restorationism**

*The Stormlight Archive* is an epic fantasy series set on the planet Roshar, home to giant crustaceans and violent hurricanes. Long ago, the evil Voidbringers were sealed away by ten heroic demigods known as the Heralds and their armies of magic-wielding Knights Radiant. Thousands of years later, much about the ancient conflict has been mythologized or forgotten, but there are signs that the ancient enemy will soon be returning. As Roshar enters a golden-age of magic-assisted technology, the ancient powers of the Knights Radiant are once again manifesting in unlikely people, including Kaladin Stormblessed, a young slave traumatized by his experiences as a soldier, and Shallan Davar, a bright young scholar with a dark past. Dalinar Kholin, a noble from the warlike Alethi nation, begins seeing visions that purport to be from the Almighty, claiming that the enemies of humanity will soon return. Three gods watch over the planet and the plot: Cultivation and Honor, who are aligned with the human characters, and Odium, who is aligned with the coming enemy. The series follows these and other characters in a story of not only global, but metaphysical, proportions, as they strive to uncover the truth about the past and master themselves in the present in order to fight for the future of the planet. Only four volumes out of a projected ten have been published at the time of this writing.

This Mormon mindset of recovering power through unearthing lost knowledge and receiving divine authority is reflected in most of Sanderson's works; the *Stormlight Archive* is no exception. One of the foundational principles of the Mormon restoration movement was the idea that the true sacraments, or ordinances, of the primitive Christian church had been lost over the centuries, along with the proper authority to perform them. Terryl Givens writes:

[Joseph] Smith believed that in his day neither the proper ordinances nor the authority to perform them was to be found on earth. [...] Restoring this loss of priesthood authority, and consequently of the proper forms of "true order" and "true worship," was the great project Saints understood as the purpose of Smith's ministry. (Givens 28)

These ordinances were seen as critical to the process of human salvation and reconciliation with God. Joseph Smith taught that the problems with his contemporary Christianity could not be corrected by a reformation; the church required a new establishment of authority and power directly from a divine source.

The state of the dominant church in *Stormlight*, the Vorin church, reflects the same sort of decay and corruption that Smith saw in the religious atmosphere of his day. Shallan's studies with her mentor Jasnah reveal that the Vorin church has an authority problem: "the church of this era was suspicious of the Knights Radiant... Yet it relied upon the authority granted Vorinism by the Heralds" (Sanderson, *Words of Radiance* 65). In other words, the current Vorin religion believed that the Knights Radiant had once betrayed mankind, and so it sought to distance itself from them while maintaining the connection to the Heralds. In order to downplay the importance of the Radiants, church scholars "modified copies of ancient texts... aligning history to match Hierocratic dogma" (*Words of Radiance* 65). Parallels can be seen to the Protestant reformation as viewed through a Mormon lens: by distancing themselves from the Catholic church, reformers had lost claim to the priesthood foundation of the Catholic church, leaving the church without a divine mandate. This loss of authority and its accompanying rituals situates the plot of the *Stormlight Archive* in a similar authority crisis to the one felt by Joseph Smith and his followers.

Mormonism's restorationist impulse is embodied throughout the series in the character of Dalinar Kholin. In the final chapter of the first book, *The Way of Kings*, Dalinar receives a vision in which a god-like being called Honor instructs him to restore the Knights Radiant, specifically by restoring their ordinances and rituals: "Speak again the ancient oaths and return to men the Shards they once bore... The Knights Radiant must stand again" (Sanderson, *The Way of Kings* 997). Importantly, the reestablishment of the Radiants does not come through the Vorin church but directly from the divine forces that made the original oaths with men, the *spren* who are fragments of divine power. Jasnah explains to Shallan that "spren are... power... shattered power. Power given thought by the perceptions of men. Honor, Cultivation, and... and another. Fragments broken off" (*Words of Radiance* 308-09). Direct bonds with spren allow the Knights Radiant to access ancient powers without reference to the current incarnation of the Vorin church. This parallels the Mormon belief that Joseph Smith established a church through a new



direct revelation from God, rather than by reforming existing Christian sects. This restoration of the Radiants is as central to the plot of the Stormlight Archive as the restoration narrative is to Mormon doctrine.

### **Honor and Covenants**

As the Knights Radiant are restored throughout the series, we see that the oaths made by the Knights Radiant reflect a similar structure to the “covenant path” in the LDS church. In this practice, a person progresses toward salvation by a series of covenants with God, at each point making more serious promises and receiving knowledge and blessings in return. The first of these covenants is baptism at age eight, regarded as the “age of accountability” (Doctrine and Covenants 68.27), followed by the temple initiatory and endowment ceremonies in early adulthood, and finally the sealing ordinance when married. Each covenant brings greater promises of spiritual guidance for the individual and greater condemnation if the associated obligations are broken.

This linked progression of greater promises and greater power is mirrored by the five oaths of each order of the Knights Radiant. Each oath consists of a promise of right action or intention and is followed by an increase in the character’s magical abilities. The first oath of each order is the same, a baptism-like covenant entering into the path of a Radiant: “Life before death, strength before weakness, journey before destination” (Sanderson, *The Way of Kings* 831). These words express a willingness to focus on the process of living rightly rather than a specific result. Each radiant oath beyond the first takes the form of a principle or belief that will guide their actions: “I will protect those who cannot protect themselves” (926); “I will remember those who have been forgotten” (*Words of Radiancy* 704); “I swear to seek justice, to let it guide me” (*Oathbringer* 882). The LDS temple endowment similarly focuses on covenanting to live by principles—in particular obedience, sacrifice, the law of the gospel, chastity, and consecration (General Handbook, sec 27.2). The order of the Lightweavers is the exception, with a different oath structure that will be addressed below.

Making the magic system dependent on character’s devotion to principles results in a plot that turns largely on when those morals are challenged, just as you would expect from a mythopoeic novel. Once a Radiant has sworn an oath, they are accompanied by a spren, who is the embodiment of their principles and the source of their power. Kaladin, a member of the order of the Windrunners (devoted to the concept of protection), is bonded to an honorspren named Syl. In *Words of Radiancy*, Kaladin attempts to justify his continued participation in an assassination plot against the king by twisting his oath of protection, claiming that removing the king would be protecting the kingdom: “some people—like a festering finger or a leg shattered beyond repair—just needed to be removed” (751). Syl recognizes that his real motivations lie in class resentment and a desire for revenge against the king for sending a cruel nobleman to oversee his village. As a result of Kaladin’s lack of integrity, she begins to lose her sapience. Eventually her bond with him is broken, and Kaladin loses the ability to draw on Stormlight to fuel his magic. When he finally admits his error—“If I protect... only the people I like, it means that I don’t care about doing

what is right.' If he did that, he only cared about what was convenient for himself. That wasn't protecting. That was selfishness" (1014)—and acts to protect King Elhokar from the assassins, only then is Syl able to return and Kaladin able to swear the next oath.

This plotline also reflects Mormon beliefs about priesthood power. The Doctrine and Covenants, a book of early church revelations and part of the Mormon scriptural canon, proclaims that "the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness. . . . When we undertake to cover our sins... behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man" (Doctrine and Covenants 121.36-37). According to this scripture, no outside authority needs to condemn a person who abuses their spiritual power: as soon as that person acts unrighteously, their authority and power disappear. This injunction becomes quite literal in the Stormlight Archive, as Syl withdraws from Kaladin when he fails to act according to his oaths.

### **Cultivation and Agency**

This magic-morality link leads to a widely recognized problem in Christianity, one strongly portrayed in *Oathbringer*, the third novel: the problem of sin. Though human beings might have a sincere desire when making covenants, no person is able to consistently do all the things they know are right. Spren figure much more prominently in the plot of *Oathbringer*, and their common refrain when they meet human characters is that they are oath-breakers. "There is not a man alive who has not broken an oath, Dalinar Kholin," remarks the Stormfather, the largest of the spren of Honor (Sanderson, *Oathbringer* 408). Another spren says, "You are not to be blamed. Betraying oaths is simply your nature, as a human" (944). And yet people continue to optimistically make oaths. When the Stormfather accuses Dalinar's betrothed, Navani, "You have broken oaths before," she replies, "All people have...We're frail and foolish. This one I will not break. I vow it" (62). All the humans break oaths, and yet the characters continue to swear these oaths with the absolute confidence that they will obey them.

Sanderson's solution to this problem showcases a Mormon version of the personal efficacy of Christ's atonement, portrayed through Dalinar's plotline in *Oathbringer*. In this book, readers discover that the upright general, earnest to a fault, who they have grown to love for the first two novels, was once a bloodthirsty warlord. Flashbacks show his crimes escalating until Dalinar burns an entire city to the ground with all its residents, accidentally murdering his peace-loving wife, Evi, in the process. Broken by the realization of his own sins, Dalinar descends into drink before finally seeking out the Nightwatcher, a spren rumored to grant wishes. When he finds her, he wishes for "forgiveness," which stumps the barely sentient spren, and so Cultivation, the second god of Roshar, arrives. She offers him not absolution, but a temporary erasure of his guilt and memories of his wife: "I will not give you the aptitude, or the strength, nor will I take from you your compulsions. But I will give you... a pruning. A careful excision to let you grow" (*Oathbringer* 1078). His knowledge of his guilt will later return, but Cultivation's gift lifts Dalinar's burden and

puts him in a position where he can make choices to grow out of the person who made those sins and into someone who can more clearly comply with Honor's oaths.

In this way, Cultivation is a force for agency and self-determination, an important principle in the Mormon understanding of the purpose of mortality, which is making choices to “prune” undesirable traits and encourage positive ones in order to become as God would have us be. As Terryl Givens puts it, “in LDS thought, only conformity to law can sanctify us, because only conformity to law creates the causal conditions under which our character is transformed in accordance with our choices” (Givens 239). The importance of humanity’s agency is also a major theme in The Book of Mormon, particularly in a sermon from the prophet Lehi where he teaches, “because that they [humanity] are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day” (The Book of Mormon 2 Nephi 2.26). Lehi is saying that because Christ’s atonement has taken away the immediate condemnation for sin, humanity is now free to make choices for good or evil, facing judgment only at the end of their story rather than throughout it. This is very similar to the way that Sanderson asks his readers to judge Dalinar by his final character, rather than the mistakes he has made along the way.

This emphasis on personal responsibility and agency continues to be a major theme in the fourth book in the series, *Rhythm of War*. Several of the characters in this book are limited by their circumstances: Kaladin suffers with crushing depression and PTSD, Venli struggles with her prejudice against the humans who enslaved her people, and Shallan uses her multiple personalities to hide the truth from herself about her past sins. In spite of these limitations, each must accept responsibility for their actions to move the plot forward. Shallan, in particular, is an interesting case. The oaths of her order of Knights, the Lightweavers, are made not by committing to follow a principle but by admitting an uncomfortable truth about themselves. Over the course of the previous three books, Shallan’s inability to accept her traumatic past has fragmented her personality into three personas, Shallan, Veil, and Radiant. To progress and reintegrate herself, Shallan must admit that she has broken her previous oaths, killing her first spren. When she is finally able to recover this suppressed memory and admit to her guilt (“I killed my spren. My wonderful, beautiful, kindly spren. I broke my oaths, and I killed her” [*Rhythm of War* 1017]), Veil becomes a part of Shallan once again, reminding her “that escape wasn’t strength,” but her mistakes and difficult circumstances would help her to grow stronger (*Rhythm of War* 1017). In this way, her journey mirrors Dalinar’s: she must accept responsibility for her sins and change because of them.

### **Odium and Satan**

This growth through responsibility is opposed by an enemy, both on Roshar and in LDS thought, who seeks to deny human agency by removing accountability. Odium, the third god on Roshar, is the god of divine hatred and strong emotions. In the dramatic ending of *Oathbringer*, Odium tries to turn Dalinar against humanity, inviting him to give into his war-filled past and

become his champion of destruction and retribution. When tempted, Dalinar draws strength by reclaiming all of the guilt Cultivation took from him, as well as the growth that sprang from it. “You cannot have my pain,” he cries to Odium (1132). Odium attempts to absolve Dalinar of his sins by blaming his circumstances—“I was there, influencing you”—but Dalinar insists on claiming accountability for his actions: “I did kill the people of Rathalas... You might have been there, but I made the choice. I decided!” (1134). Odium serves as a tempter to Dalinar not by tempting him to evil, but by tempting him to absolve himself of responsibility for that evil. This type of temptation echoes the Mormon doctrine that Satan’s fall from grace was that he “sought to destroy the agency of man” (*Pearl of Great Price* Moses 4.3). The LDS version of Satan invites people not just to do evil, but to refuse responsibility for their actions, just as Odium does throughout the *Stormlight Archive*.

Superficially, Odium’s solution for Dalinar seems similar to Cultivation’s—both desire to remove the burden of guilt for his sins—but with one critical difference, which reflects a Mormon perspective on Christ’s grace. Cultivation’s plan requires that Dalinar grow into someone who can keep his oaths, who can behave ethically despite past mistakes, whereas Odium wants to excuse Dalinar’s actions without any requirement of change. The LDS view of Christ’s saving power emphasizes the importance of personal change as a result of divine forgiveness. Givens states that “salvation itself in Mormon doctrine is not a gift that God can bestow or a reward that humans can earn or merit. . . . Salvation is a natural consequence of compliance with law . . . which eventual compliance is made possible by the gift of Christ’s atonement” (238). From a Mormon perspective, Christ’s grace exists not to simply wash away all mistakes, but to lighten humanity’s burden of guilt while individuals continue to progress towards perfect righteousness. In other words, it is an atonement that, like Cultivation’s gift to Dalinar, exists to enable personal agency rather than to release humanity from accountability.

Clearly, Sanderson’s *Stormlight Archive* does not just incidentally parallel many aspects of the Mormon theory of salvation; rather, the series is largely about these concerns. The corruption of the Vorin church and the need for restoration rather than reformation portray a uniquely Mormon conception of the world, expressed through the person of Dalinar Kholin. The gods of the planet, Honor and Cultivation, reflect the pillars of the LDS conception of salvation, covenants and agency, and the plot advances as the characters deal with these concerns. Odium, the divine antagonist of the series, acts similarly to the Mormon version of Satan, taking away responsibility and agency, while characters are redeemed when they instead take responsibility for their faults and move past them.

The *Stormlight Archive* is intrinsically about Mormonism in the same way that *The Silver Chair* is about Christianity: not by parable but by creating a new mythology with the same underlying worldview. Sanderson has taken elements that are familiar to Mormons and turned them into a magic system that conveys this perspective perhaps more effectively than any missionary text. In this way, his stories fulfill CS Lewis’s perspective about the function of myths: “The value of the

myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity’” (Lewis, *On Stories* 196–97).

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### Building on the Vision: Mormon “Humanism” in *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009)



James H. Thrall

Ronald D. Moore, developer and co-executive producer of the 2004–2009 *Battlestar Galactica* remake, has said he was not inclined to expand the strong Mormon themes in Glen A. Larson’s original 1978 series (BSG 1978), given his lack of familiarity with Mormonism (Leventry).<sup>1</sup> Even so, the framework of Larson’s Mormon vision undergirds the later series’ premise and execution, especially through the continued centrality of religion. Elements of the new drama, furthermore, suggest parallels to Mormon beliefs that can have particular resonance for Latter-day Saints. By viewing the series through a Mormon lens, the epic conflict between polytheistic humans and monotheistic Cylons can illuminate Mormon principles of theodicy, free agency, and spiritual evolution. In addition, as boundaries between humans and Cylons blur, the initially central question of “What does it mean to be human?” gives way to the more urgent question, “What does it mean to be humane?” Similarly, the distinguishing issue of religious identity, “What do we believe?” is preempted by religion’s more foundational concern, “How shall we live?” The resulting narrative can be seen to illustrate Mormonism’s distinctive form of religiously framed “humanism,” with its assumptions of infinite human potential.

Other than the controversial move of turning the cocky, cigar-smoking male fighter pilot Starbuck into a cocky, cigar-smoking woman, the most significant innovations by Moore and co-executive producer David Eick in recasting BSG 1978 were to make Cylons the creation of humans (rather than the unexplained legacy of an alien race), and to give them the ability to appear as humans. As Cylon Caprica Six (Tricia Helfer) puts it, Cylons are “the children of humanity; that makes them our parents, in a sense” (“Bastille Day”). This becomes especially true when, in the process of their further evolution, Cylons model themselves on their creators (“No Exit”). In addition to the original metallic Centurions and Raiders (organic/mechanical flying fighting ships that are Cylons in their own right), the most disturbing iterations are seven numbered android models (there had been eight, but one was destroyed), and an unnumbered group called the Final Five, who developed the others. Following a SF trope dating back at least to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and including such prime examples as Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and the associated *Blade Runner* franchise, the “human-likeness” of Cylons poses vexing pragmatic challenges to the real humans’ self-preservation, and even more vexing existential challenges to assumptions about what it means to be a “real” human. As recently as Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2021 *Klara and the Sun*, SF has explored the unsettling potential for androids to “pass” as, or—generating a different anxiety—to surpass humans. Though technically machines, Cylon androids are, as D’Anna Biers/Number Three (Lucy Lawless) observes, remarkably similar to humans physically, at least in how they bleed (“Exodus I”). Furthermore, as the lascivious

scientist Gaius Baltar (James Callis) experiences in his pleasure with various versions of Number Six, in other important ways they also function like humans. In their ability to be endlessly cloned and resurrected, Cylons might even be considered improved humans. At the same time, until the conception of Hera, a human-Cylon baby born to Karl “Helo” Agathon (Tahmoh Penikett) and Sharon “Athena” Valerii/Number Eight (Grace Park), and of a Cylon-Cylon baby by Colonel Saul Tigh (Michael Hogan), one of the Final Five, and Caprica Six that is miscarried, they lack the human ability to reproduce biologically.

As humanity’s absolute “other” draws uncomfortably close, at least in appearance, the most intriguing aspect of Cylon “humanness” is their acquisition of religion. Religion for humans was always a subtext of the original series: Larson’s narrative of space fugitives drew directly on his LDS background (Ford) in ways that color the later series as well. Both series, for example, have a Council or Quorum of Twelve governing twelve human colonies, as in the Mormon Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (Nelson). Their use of the name Kobol for humanity’s mother-world reworks Kolob, Mormonism’s name for the star nearest God’s dwelling place (Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 3.2-3). Even the idea of a remnant of humans fleeing near-genocide to follow a lost tribe to Earth echoes the Book of Mormon, in which descendants of Israel’s Tribe of Joseph make their way to America after escaping Jerusalem’s imminent destruction (Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 2.1-4; 5.14; 17-18). Moore made his Cylons monotheists to contrast with the humans’ polytheism, based loosely on the Greek/Roman pantheon (Leventry). Although the monotheistic/polytheistic divide adds another point of conflict, the development of Cylon spirituality itself contributes to the erosion of distinctions between human and non-human that so disconcerts the colonials. The Galactica’s crew, for example, assert that they are fighting “toasters,” not people, and, in a nod to *Blade Runner*, derisively call android models “skin jobs.” The Cylons, meanwhile, decry “toaster” as a racial epithet, and, in an echo of Frankenstein’s monster (see Thrall, “What the Frak, Frankenstein!”), assert that they, in fact, possess souls. Some Cylon models express little or no interest in religion, it is true. Though at times adopting the role of clergy, John Cavil/Number One (Dean Stockwell) rejects the idea of Cylon souls (“The Ties That Bind”), and advocates what might be called an “andro-ology” (rather than a theology) that denies God any active influence at all (“Lay Down Your Burdens I and II”). But in an echo of other SF explorations of religious robots (e.g., Isaac Asimov’s “Reason”), even Cavil’s ability to parse such questions represents the achievement of spiritually self-aware artificial intelligence predicted by such futurists as Ray Kurzweil (153).

In a further examination of SF tropes, Cylons and humans share in the fraught role of “God-like” creators of other beings. Just as the humans on the twelve colony planets created Centurions as a slave race that eventually rebelled, humanoid Cylons from Kobol who settled as the Thirteenth Colony on a planet they called Earth created their own mechanical slaves, who likewise rebelled (“No Exit”). This process of successively generating races is reinforced with the series’ conclusion, which indicates that humans and Cylons, in combination with indigenous tribes they discover on the planet that is our Earth, are together the progenitors of contemporary humanity (“Daybreak

II"). Thus, perhaps none of the "human-like" creatures in the series are exactly human in the way audiences assumed. This fluidity in what constitutes a "human" is extended by the existence of human-appearing cyborg Hybrids able to control Cylon basestars, and by the presence of "Messengers," also referred to as "angels," who appear in the forms of individual humans and Cylons, who are capable of having sex (as Messenger Number Six does with Baltar), and seem to be eternal ("Exodus II"). Although it is not stipulated that they were formerly embodied, that possibility is suggested by the indeterminate nature of Kara "Starbuck" Thrace (Katee Sackhoff), who, in her mysterious reappearance after her death ("Maelstrom," "Sometimes a Great Notion") and her final "winking out" disappearance in the series' conclusion ("Daybreak II"), might be a Messenger. Her sometime guide/sometime sparring partner, Leoben Conoy/Number Two (Callum Keith Rennie), at least points to a progression in her state when he notes how she has changed after her return from death: she is an "angel," he says, whose "journey can finally begin" ("The Road Less Traveled"). Starbuck herself distinguishes her former physical state from her current possibly spiritual condition, referring to her post-death body as "just this alien thing" ("The Ties That Bind").

The variety and shifting states of characters who at least appear as some form of human invite comparisons to the LDS concept of "infinite and divine human potential" that is based on founder Joseph Smith's claim that "God and humanity were essentially members of the same species" (Mason 160, 159). While the LDS church has no official position on Darwinian "organic evolution," which it considers a matter of scientific study and not revelation (Evenson), the "innovative notion of theosis or deification in which humans are on a path of eternal spiritual progression" provides a dramatic form of spiritual evolution, explains Patrick Q. Mason in *What Is Mormonism?* (159; see also Adams, Ricks). In a "premortal" state, the spirit children of the Heavenly Father, an embodied, yet all-powerful being, and the Heavenly Mother, who is divine but not worshiped as the Father is, prepare for life as embodied humans on Earth (Gospel Topics: Premortality, God the Father, Mother in Heaven). During "mortality" or the "second estate," embodied spirits have "opportunities to grow and develop in ways that were not possible in . . . premortal life" (Gospel Topics: Mortality). After death and entry into "postmortality," humans return to a spirit state to await final resurrection and reunion with their physical bodies (Gospel Topics: Postmortality). With Mormonism's near-universalism when it comes to salvation, there is a level of heaven available to all except Satan and his angels (Mason 165). The "celestial kingdom," or highest tier, is where "God and Jesus reside, families are united for eternity, and eternal progression toward godhood is possible." The "ultimate goal" for Mormons, therefore, Mason states, "is not merely salvation but rather exaltation—that is, becoming gods themselves, though never supplanting God the Father" (160). This possibility of becoming divinities invites claims that Mormons are "not monotheists," Mason adds. "[S]trictly speaking, this is true as Mormons not only acknowledge the existence of innumerable gods in the cosmos but also insist that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, all of whom they worship as members of the Godhead, are three separate persons" (163). Given the centrality of God the Father, it would be a step too far to call

Mormons polytheists, he argues; rather, they entertain a complex intermingling of monotheistic and polytheistic ideas.

BSG 1978's two-part episode "War of the Gods" evokes this doctrine of spiritual progression directly when technologically advanced, angel-like creatures called Seraphs restore the human pilot Apollo (Richard Hatch) to life after he sacrifices himself to protect a fellow pilot, Sheba (Anne Lockhart), from the Satanic figure Iblis (Patrick Macnee). Brought aboard the Seraphs' Ship of Lights, Apollo, Sheba, and Starbuck (Dirk Benedict) find they are, like the Seraphs, clothed in white. The Seraphs explain that they chose to help the humans in general and Apollo specifically because "as you are now, we once were; as we are now, you may become," a paraphrase of the claim by Lorenzo Snow, Mormonism's fifth president, "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become" (Mason 159, Ford 86). The Seraphs also explain that they are interested in those, like Apollo, "who have the courage to grow beyond the limitations of the flesh." The later series is not so explicit as to quote a Mormon president, yet Starbuck's post-death return to Galactica in a gleaming white Viper fighter seems a nod to the earlier resurrection scene.

Mormons may find more extensive resonance with the principle of spiritual progress in the series' attention to the closely allied matter of "free agency" (Mason 166), a core contributor to the humanistic flavor of LDS theology. By "humanism" I mean both the broadly inclusive term for preoccupation with human reason, actions, and motives, and the more specific reference to Renaissance endorsement of the dignity and potential of human earthly existence ("Humanism"). Although it might seem odd to associate Mormonism with the often secular concerns of humanism, LDS theology elevates human free will in its approach to theodicy, or the challenge of reconciling the idea of a good and omnipotent God with the existence of evil. Rather than assume that Original Sin imparted by the fall of Adam and Eve explains human participation in evil, the doctrine that "all humans—excepting young children and the mentally impaired—are accountable for their own actions, according to their capacities and the degree of their moral instruction" is as foundational for Mormon thought "as predestination was to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Calvinism," explains Mason (166). Although other branches of Christianity endorse moral living, Mormonism stands apart in the degree to which it assumes a human role in bringing about good or evil by properly or improperly exercising moral agency (Ford 84–86, Mason 124, Warner). Calling human agency "existential" for Mormons, and "inherent in their very being," Mason observes that the interplay of theosis and "free agency" places extraordinary emphasis on the responsibility to advance spiritually. "Most substantially, it makes humans active co-participants with Christ in their own salvation and exaltation" (167).

A choice by pre-mortal spirits to either follow God and Christ, or Lucifer (Satan), who rebelled and "sought to destroy the agency of man," gives human agency cosmic significance (Mason 124; Pearl of Great Price, Moses 4:3). Notably, in BSG 1978, when the humans of the fleet are tempted to accept Iblis as their leader, the enticement he offers is freedom from moral responsibility ("War of the Gods I & II"). While again not presenting such an explicit reference, the later series consistently foregrounds struggles of conscience and decision-making for both

colonialists and Cylons. As the Renaissance rejected medieval assumptions that inherent human sinfulness was inescapably limiting (“Humanism”), so the series matches its deep study of human and Cylon imperfection with attention to the potential for achieving some fundamental decency, if not transcendence, through active choice. A major plot point, in which a Cylon faction decides to join forces with the humans, is propelled by another faction’s choice to remove Raiders’ ability for independent thought, and leads to granting free will to Centurions (“Six of One”). The division of Cylon factions itself presents the kind of crossroads experienced by Mormonism’s pre-mortal spirits, especially since the malevolence of Cavil, leader of the group lobotomizing Raiders, has a Satanic flavor. Other episodes repeatedly return to the question of choosing correctly among difficult alternatives, and of taking responsibility for choices made. In one tightly wound juxtaposition early in the series, shots of Colonial President Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell) protecting the fleet by destroying a nuclear-laden ship that may or may not be carrying 1,300 humans are interspersed with shots of Baltar evading responsibility for having betrayed all of humankind when he gave Caprica Six access to the humans’ defense mainframes (“33”). At a later critical moment, Roslin presents choices by *Galactica*’s crew and passengers to join or resist a treasonous coup in stark terms: “Who do you want to be? Who do you want to be?” (“Blood on the Scales”). This focus on personal responsibility thus joins the question of “what is a human?” with the broader religious question of “how shall a human live?” or, more specifically, “how shall a human live humanely?”

Although the answers to that last question are as diverse as the circumstances in which characters must consider it, Moore’s series favors gestures of mutual support and solidarity in particular. From the opening miniseries, calls of then-Commander William Adama (Edward James Olmos) for the humans to hold together in the face of the Cylon onslaught are punctuated with the colonials’ version of a unified Amen, “So say we all” (“Miniseries”). The strongest statement of what the audience is invited to value in human/Cylon behavior comes, however, when such ties are extended, even tentatively, across lines of division. Besides the romantic linking of Number Six and Baltar, the mutual love of Athena and Helo overcomes Cylon infertility with the production of Hera. The promise of this new horizon of hybridity, as well as her attachment to Baltar, pushes Caprica Six to question whether a God of love would mandate genocide, and to use her status as a hero of the cause to urge her Cylon colleagues toward détente with the humans (“Downloaded”). Starbuck displays her hatred of all things Cylon by torturing Leoben when he is her prisoner (“Flesh and Bone”), and repeatedly murdering him when she is his (“The Occupation”). Even so, she is moved to pray to her gods on behalf of his soul, and her incorrect belief that they have produced a daughter together momentarily offsets her antipathy (“Precipice”). Significantly, in her later mystical revisit of her past at the point of her death, it is an apparent Messenger in the form of Leoben who serves as her guide (“Maelstrom”). These connections are often accomplished in spite of religious identifications, as what is presented as the right thing to do is what is most caring of others, with the caveat, repeatedly asserted by Roslin, that “right” must be balanced with “smart” (“No Exit”). It is right, for example, to see the imprisoned Athena as worthy of trust and respect, as Adama does eventually, and wrong to torture Gina Inviere,



another Number Six clone, as Admiral Helena Caine (Michelle Forbes) and the Pegasus crew do (“Pegasus,” “Resurrection I”). It is wrong for Tory Foster (Rekha Sharma), one of the Final Five, to murder Calandra “Cally” Tyrol (Nicki Clyne), even if Tory thinks it is smart because Cally had discovered the Five’s identities (“The Ties That Bind”). It is seemingly right, but not smart for Galen Tyrol (Aaron Douglas) to help the “Boomer” version of Number Eight escape captivity, because it leads to Hera’s kidnapping (“Someone to Watch Over Me”). Finally, it is clearly right in general for Cylons and humans to overcome their mutual hatred to join forces for their shared survival. Resurrected among other Cylons on Caprica, Boomer distills this distinction between religious belief and something more basic when she waves a photograph of her *Galactica* crewmates at Caprica Six and shouts: “Do you think I care about your God? . . . This is love. These people loved me” (“Downloaded”).

In a manner reminiscent of Mormonism’s acceptance of some element of “both/and” in their approach to single or multiple Gods, even the division between monotheism and polytheism weakens by the series’ end. Small moments along the way point to fluidity in the concepts, as when a Colonialist oracle gives D’Anna a message from her Cylon God (“Exodus I”), or when Roslin and another cancer patient discuss whether it makes sense to identify that God as Cylon (“Faith”). In part because of Baltar’s preaching to his cult of mostly female followers, a number of humans “switch sides” to worship one God rather than many. Later, united in their loss even as they engage in different rituals, monotheists, polytheists and Baltar’s followers come together in an ecumenical service of mourning after a deadly breach of *Galactica*’s hull (“Islanded in a Stream of Stars”). The specifics of religious difference thus fade, replaced by a sense that, whatever the individual level of perception, “something more” is providing support for human-like creatures responding to the call to be better. As Baltar asserts in a final confrontation with atheist Cavil, “There’s another force at work here. . . . We’ve all experienced it. Everyone in this room has witnessed events that they can’t fathom, let alone explain away by rational means” (“Daybreak II”). In the face of that experience, limiting language becomes meaningless: “Whether we want to call that God or Gods or some sublime inspiration or a divine force that we can’t know or understand, it doesn’t matter.” What does matter is the responsibility to exercise agency in ways that set aside the destructive power of conflict: “Good and evil, we created those. You want to break the cycle? Break the cycle of birth? Death? Rebirth? Destruction? Escape? Death? Well, that’s in our hands, in our hands only.”

Given the series’ richly developed religious backdrop, which includes references to reincarnation as in Buddhism or Hinduism, to circular history that echoes Aztec cosmology, and to the quasi-religion of the Zodiac, among others, a Mormon reading of these themes of human potential and agency is, of course, only one possibility. Even elements of the series particularly recognizable to Latter-day Saints, such as Roslin’s vision of being greeted by her deceased family members in heaven (“Faith”), or the presence of guiding Messengers similar to the angel Moroni who led founder Joseph Smith to the Book of Mormon (Hardy), may connect with other religious traditions as well. As different viewers “see” the series in different ways, however, perhaps all might respond to the proffered pattern of a better way for “other” to relate to “other.” To repurpose



President Snow's maxim, perhaps the upward striving to live humanely, which leads at least to a more fully realized humanity, if not divinity, is the best work of whatever might be called "religion," Mormon or otherwise. That may add an element of hope to what might otherwise be despair in the oracular assertion: "All of this has happened before. All of this will happen again" ("The Hand of God").

## Notes

1. Portions of this article draw from James H. Thrall, "The Religions of Battlestar Galactica: Making Human, Making Other," *When Genres Collide: Selected Essays from the 17th Annual Meeting of the Science Fiction Research Association*, edited by Thomas J. Morrissey and Oscar De Los Santos, Fine Tooth, 2007, 141-9.

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**“Mormons” in *Leviathan Wakes*: Applying the Church/Sect Typology**

Rebekah Call



Popular perception of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has changed over the last two hundred years. The portrayal of Mormons in science fiction can serve as a window to understanding outside conceptualizations of the church in real life. This essay examines popular social perceptions of the church through the lens of the book *Leviathan Wakes*, the first volume in the *Expanse* book series by James S. A. Corey. In doing so, it utilizes a religious studies approach, with sociologist Max Weber's church-sect continuum as a framework (which classifies different types of religious groups) as seen elsewhere in Armand Mauss's work, *The Angel and the Beehive*. I argue that the portrayal of “Mormons” in *Leviathan Wakes* illustrates the fact that in some ways, the Mormon movement functions both as a church and as a sect in popular imagination. Some of these imaginative features include segregation from the larger society through a pioneering exodus to a new frontier, family values that differ from the norm,<sup>1</sup> and administrative and economic structures capable of supporting the creation of a new nation (or world, in the case of *The Expanse*). Through this examination of science fiction, one can see that elements of Latter-day Saint history continue to reverberate through the popular perception of Mormons.

In his book *The Angel and the Beehive*, Armand Mauss builds on Max Weber's church-sect typology, which set the groundwork for decades of sociological research regarding the development of Christian religious movements. The church-sect typology describes a continuum, at one extreme end of which are “churches”—large-scale institutions that exist in little or no tension with the outside society. On the opposite extreme of the spectrum are “sects.” These are small, often splinter groups, that exist in a state of high tension with the outside society. As such, sects are often viewed as threatening and can evoke negative reactions in the larger society around them. While tension with society is a key element of identity building in a sect, if the level of tension becomes too extreme, the sect must assimilate into the larger society to survive. As a movement assimilates and becomes more mainstream, it tends to gain more recruits, become institutionalized, and can eventually swing to the other side of the continuum. In short, a sect can eventually develop into a church, existing in little or no tension with the mainstream society.

Using this typology as his backdrop, Armand Mauss argues that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints underwent periods of assimilation (e.g., following the 1890 abolishment of polygyny) followed by periods of retrenchment (e.g., during the ERA movement). In assimilating, the movement grew, gained many converts, and became better known in American society. However, the periods of retrenchment preserved the strong sense of identity held by members of the church by retaining (or even building) tension with mainstream society. Thus, Mauss illustrates how the Latter-day Saint movement has encompassed the benefits of becoming a

“church” while simultaneously retaining many of the traits of a sect (Mauss x-xi, 198-199). This essay explores how popular perceptions of the “Mormons”—as represented in *The Expanse*—reflect Mauss’s evaluation of the LDS movement.

Science fiction provides a unique window for looking at the contemporary cultural view of Latter-day Saints—it is an alternate reality, built on semi-truths, that requires enough resonance with the real world to feel authentic. In the case of *The Expanse*, it is a potential future that presumably builds on a past that is largely the same as that which we know. Therefore, Corey, the author of *The Expanse*, is projecting his own imagination of how society as he understands it might develop in a space age.<sup>2</sup> Thus we can analyze elements of how Corey views members of the movement now through his treatment of Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes*. In building his Mormons of the future, Corey heavily draws upon the early history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as more modern history, to create an image of a people that feels recognizable in his alternate reality. In order to achieve this narrative feat, Corey pulls from the exact elements that might be used to classify the movement as a sect—the areas in which Mormondom had (or has) tension with the outside society. Although Corey does not expend many words on the group of people, what little he does write is telling, and allows the reader to flesh out the group in their imagination through analogy to Latter-day Saints in our present reality.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began serious assimilation into American society during the events surrounding Utah’s acquisition of statehood in 1896. The road to statehood proved to be a battleground, owing to the perceived threat that the church posed to American society more broadly. There were three main ways in which the church threatened the notion of “Americanness” and in which the church had to compromise in order to be considered “American.” These were polygyny (sexual and familial norms), communal living (financial structure), and theocratic government (political structure) (Alexander 4, 307-308; Flake 20-22, 61-62). These three elements were threatening enough that many nineteenth-century Americans could not coexist with the Saints. The ideological friction only escalated with time, to the point that for its own survival, the church essentially abandoned these three elements. They abolished the practice of polygyny in 1890 (Flake 30), liquidated the majority of their communal holdings (Alexander 6, 182), and embraced the American democratic political structure through the process of Utah’s 1896 acquisition of statehood (Alexander 35-36). In short, the church assimilated into American society politically, financially, and socially/sexually. Corey leans on two of these assimilation techniques (sexual/familial norms and financial structure) in constructing his narrative, and it can be argued that the presence of the third (political) is at least implied. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, Corey’s depiction resonates with current as well as historical church activity. Throughout the entire narrative, he employs the pioneer heritage of the Saints as a framework for his depiction.

The first mention of Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* comes early, in the second paragraph of the book: “One moon of Uranus sported five thousand, the farthest outpost of human civilization, at least until the Mormons finished their generation ship and headed for the stars and freedom from

procreation restrictions" (ch. 1). With a single sentence, Corey establishes a group preparing for a massive migration into an unexplored frontier. They are motivated by continuing pushback on religious procreative norms, to the point that the community has chosen to leave the dominant social order altogether rather than make concessions to it. This narrative echoes the history of the church's early Mormon migration to Utah and also their alternative family and sexual norms. These included the practice of polygyny, which was cited as a means of bringing more children onto the Earth, thereby keeping God's commandment in the Garden of Eden to "multiply and replenish the earth" (Doctrine and Covenants 132.63). Decades after abandoning polygyny, the church's stances on contraception and abortion appear to have continued to reflect this concern with multiplying and replenishing. This idea remains current in the church today, as evidenced by this statement in the 1995 touchstone document, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World:" "We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force" (Hinckley, et al.). So far as we know, the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* do not practice polygyny (which ironically would have fit well with the multi-person relationships depicted in the books).<sup>3</sup> But they do manifest serious concerns regarding governmental birth control measures and family size control, reflecting the church's historical anxiety regarding the Edenic edict. While the idea of polygyny eventually led to violence in nineteenth-century America (Mason 63), in *The Expanse*, the alternative family ideal merely marks the community as eccentric but harmless. This image harmonizes well with the idea of a church that has managed to maintain some of the social tension expected of a sect, while still existing to an extent within the mainstream. In *Leviathan Wakes*, reproductive ideals clearly separate the Mormons from the larger society. This very separation is one of the factors that marks the movement as a sect.

The depiction of Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* also aligns well with the church's current relationship toward family and sexual norms. There are several areas in which the church has run counter-culturally with regards to family and sexual ideals. Many of these have coincided with church political action. The church has consistently engaged in political discussion surrounding family structure, gender roles, and sexual norms, beginning with its extensive lobbying for women's suffrage (Madsen 129-130, 348-351) and promotion of polygyny (Flake 43-44; Gordon 18-19, 202-203). In more recent years, the church aggressively lobbied against the ERA in the 1970s (Mauss 117-118; Bradley-Evans Introduction, Appendix 5) and against marriage equality, especially in the early twenty-first century (Prince; see also McKinley and Johnson). The church's attitude toward sexual behavior differs from that of the national norm to the extent that if a player on a Brigham Young University sports team engages in sexual relations outside of marriage, he or she will face disciplinary action from the school. This discipline almost always includes a loss of playing privileges for at least one athletic season and may even result in being expelled from the university. These proceedings historically have attracted media attention, perhaps due to their contrast with national attitudes toward sexuality (Ioselevich).

While *Leviathan Wakes* does not overtly discuss Mormon political efforts to gain reproductive freedom, it does presume the confidence to form a new political (potentially theocratic) system.

Granted, we can't know all of the details of Mormon history in this alternate universe, but their space exodus conveys a sense of disempowerment in Mormon life—the inability to live by their beliefs in the face of larger political powers. This disempowerment reflects the early history of the movement, especially the migration of Latter-day Saints from Ohio, to Missouri, to Illinois, and finally to Utah. Moreover, it is entirely possible that while unmentioned, the movement in the book had attempted to find other alternatives to their solution through political recourse. This is not a foreign idea to any who are familiar with the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as discussed above.

Moving beyond family and political norms, while the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* clearly do not see eye-to-eye with the majority of the population of the solar system, they are a large enough group to have the labor force and the finances necessary to carry out their plan. When *The Expanse's* main characters first see the starship *Nauvoo*, they comment: “Ballsy bastards. No guarantee there's even a planet worth a damn on the other end of that hundred-year trip.’ ‘They seem pretty sure,’ Holden replied. ‘And you don't make the money to build a ship like that by being stupid. I, for one, wish them nothing but luck’” (Corey ch. 17). *Leviathan Wakes* does not present the church's wealth as being necessarily negative. But it is not surprising that church finances make it into the depiction of Mormons. Throughout its history, the church's financial state has garnered attention. In the early days of the church, the communal nature of ownership led to immense church holdings, which mainstream Americans found to be a threat to the capitalist-protestant work and financial ethic. Under the Edmunds-Tucker Act, this led to the government seizure of most communally held church assets (Alexander 4-6) and culminated with the disincorporation of communal holdings in the 1890s (Alexander 6, 182). During this time, the church began to strongly emphasize the payment of tithes and offerings. Today, all members in good standing donate ten percent of their income as tithing to the church, and many donate even more in other offerings. This practice paved the way for the church to become financially solvent in the early twentieth century (Alexander 4-6). Church finances continued to be a source of curiosity and conjecture, particularly once the church stopped publicly releasing its financial reports in 1959 (Walch). In 1996, Time Magazine speculated the church's holdings to be at least \$30 billion (Van Biema 51, 54), which the church denied as an over-exaggeration (Hinckley). Thus, while the church's exact financial status was (and is) unknown, society viewed the church as being exceptionally well off,<sup>4</sup> much as the Mormons are depicted in *Leviathan Wakes*. Granted, perhaps Mormon membership in *Leviathan Wakes* has diminished, and the church is merely enjoying the leftovers of more popular and prosperous days. However, even if such were the case, having the ability to construct the most massive starship to date would seem to indicate that at one point, the organization either had sufficient membership to amass enormous financial holdings, or else had a small membership of the extremely wealthy. This would signify that at least for a time, the movement could have been classified as a church, since sects are generally small in membership and tend to attract members of lower socio-economic status; growth in numbers or in wealth characterize movement towards a church (Koehrsen 320-321).



The final way in which Corey capitalizes on Mormon separation from society is the way in which he describes the starship *Nauvoo*. He utilizes temple-centric imagery, reflecting an understanding of the importance of the temple in LDS doctrine. Shortly before commandeering the starcraft, one of the main characters muses:

The structure echoed the greatest cathedrals of Earth and Mars, rising up through empty air and giving both thrust-gravity stability and glory to God. It was still metal bones and woven agricultural substrate, but Miller could see where it was all heading. A generation ship was a statement of overarching ambition and utter faith. The Mormons had known that. They'd embraced it. They'd constructed a ship that was prayer and piety and celebration all at the same time. The *Nauvoo* would be the greatest temple mankind had ever built. It would shepherd its crew through the uncrossable gulfs of interstellar space, humanity's best hope of reaching the stars. Or it would have been, if not for him.  
(Corey ch. 46)

This passage does more than merely depict a people devoted to their faith. In a sense, the temple-starship imagery serves as a focal point for the key ways in which the Mormons of *Leviathan Wakes* continue to function as a sect. They maintain tension with society and retain a distinct identity from the rest of the solar system through constructing an ideological and, eventually, physical separation from the world around them. Their willingness to leave human civilization—to migrate to a different planet—in order to maintain their familial ideals is directly embodied in their starship. Moreover, their temple-craft demonstrates both financial power sufficient to achieve their commitment and a confidence in their ability to create a new Mormon empire.

Temple building has been a continuous and central part of Latter-day Saint devotion. Joseph Smith first articulated the vision of building a temple in 1832, less than three years after the church's initial organization (Doctrine and Covenants 88.119). The construction of temples initially required significant sacrifice on the part of the Saints. However, in more recent decades, the church has hired professional construction companies to undertake the building of a staggering number of temples: as of May 2021, there are 252 temples worldwide, including those announced or under construction (Temple List). Similar to their function in *Leviathan Wakes*, temples are not merely monuments to the financial status of the church. They are considered to be a physical and ideological separation from the rest of the world. Temples physically separate Latter-day Saints from the world due to their entry requirements: any who enter must be current members of the church in good standing. Temples also serve as an ideological separation from the rest of the world. They are a place where Saints encounter the divine and where families transcend time: according to Latter-day Saint doctrine, temple rituals overcome death's power to separate spouses, parents, and children from each other. Thus, Corey's choice of temple imagery completes his construction of an authentically "Mormon" people—a people who, much like in our current reality, function both in a large-scale, institutional church, while still maintaining the strong sense of identity and the tension with the outside society that characterize sects.

My analysis in this article focuses solely on the Mormons as depicted in *Leviathan Wakes*. However, the Mormon starship *Nauvoo*—which is commandeered, renamed *Behemoth*, converted into the Medina Station, and is never returned to the Mormons—continues to play a significant part in the later books as a colossal battleship and then bridgepoint to new worlds. This development presents opportunity for further investigation, perhaps regarding the nature of Latter-day Saints' pacifism and militancy, their response to confiscation of property, or even their reaction to anti-Mormon sentiment, and whether members of the church (or the church as a whole) are viewed as standing up for themselves, or whether they can simply be trodden upon without repercussion. History provides examples of a spectrum of Latter-day Saint responses. Moreover, the seizure of the temple-ship may play upon anxieties regarding the desecration of the sacred and the danger of the government encroaching upon separate, holy space. The confiscation of the ship also invites an analysis of ways in which Mormon beliefs have fed into outside groups' political agendas. Such questions are beyond the scope of this article, but they underscore the ways in which Corey's authentic depiction of the Mormons and the *Nauvoo* provides rich fodder for discussion.

James S. A. Corey's treatment of the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* depicts a people who are large enough to be considered a "church" by Weberian standards. This is based on their implied political confidence and on their financial ability to build the mammoth starship *Nauvoo*. Such financial ability suggests a relatively large member base at some point, due to the practice of gathering tithing from church members. This in turn points to a movement that is mainstream enough to attract and retain converts. However, the Mormons' counter-cultural family ideals and intense level of piety indicate a movement that still maintains a level of tension with the outside society, which is an important part of maintaining identity as a group. Thus, much as in Mauss's assessment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in real life, the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* function simultaneously as both a sect and a church. Corey's astute characterizations of family values, financial stability, and temple imagery draw from accurate representations of Latter-day Saints and allow him to generate an authentic portrayal of a potential alternate reality.

## Notes

1. The norm varies by context. For example, in nineteenth-century America, strict monogamy was the norm, which the church challenged through polygamy. This contrasts with *The Expanse*, in which multi-person relationships are the norm, but having numerous children in a single family unit is not the norm.
2. James S. A. Corey is a pseudonym for two male authors. I use he/him pronouns to refer to the authorial unit.

3. *Editor's Note*: The "alternative" family arrangements depicted in *The Expanse* are democratic and gender-equal (and often gender-fluid), and are thus quite different from patriarchal polygyny.
4. This perception was not necessarily incorrect. A former employee of Ensign Peak (the church's financial firm) leaked the financial reports of the church in 2020, prompting some to decry the ethics of maintaining secrecy around what some might consider to be an obscene amount of money (\$100 billion). Discussion also centered around the usage of largely donated funds, with some calling for a revocation of the church's tax-free status. See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-mormon-church-amassed-100-billion-it-was-the-best-kept-secret-in-the-investment-world-11581138011>. *Leviathan Wakes* (2011) predates the 2020 leaks and steers away from any discussion on financial ethics. It focuses precisely on the repercussions of that wealth for the storyline, namely that the church is using its enormous wealth to promote Mormon family values.

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### Sex, Attachment, and the Quest for a Universalist Ethic in Mormonism and *Star Wars*



Ian McLaughlin

#### Introduction

Post-Lucas *Star Wars* media has continually sought some way around or through the prequel Jedi (Golding 8). Where the original trilogy merely outlined the contours of a nearly vanished religion, the prequels, set during an era of Jedi power, put meat on the bones. While these Jedi still claim to fight for an impartial good, their claim is seemingly undercut by their strict allegiance to the Republic; they were now portrayed as arrogant adjuncts of political power, not rebels or wandering monks. Their tenet of chastity, while arguably implicit in the first trilogy, was drawn out, its oppressiveness dwelt on at length. While Lucasfilm sought to marginalize the prequels entirely in the early days of the Disney acquisition, more recent projects have begun to engage with—and even rewrite—the rich but fraught prequel text, often in ways critical or dismissive of the Jedi Code (Golding 8-10, 194-5; Asher-Perrin). As several announced and in-development projects, such as the High Republic series (prequels to the prequels) and Ahsoka (a live-action television series focusing on Anakin's former apprentice), deal directly with the Jedi Order, the debate over the Jedi and their controversial doctrine of non-attachment promises to continue for years to come.

This paper argues that the prequels do not condemn their version of the Jedi Code. All the Jedi beliefs and practices in the prequels, from their doctrine of non-attachment to their political entanglements, are structured around meeting the demands of the light side of the Force. In the *Star Wars* mythos, the Force is an “energy field created by all living things” (*A New Hope* 34:43-45) and therefore, those who claim to serve it must put aside local commitments and prejudices to protect “all” living things. This is even more true for Force-users who choose to take on a political role as counselors of the Republic, the representative body of all intelligent life. In the prequels' telling, it is Anakin's refusal to abide by this universalist ethic, along with the hypocrisy of Jedi leadership in its administration, rather than that ethic itself, that brings about the Republic's downfall. When the Jedi Code is seen in this light—as a declaration of war against particularity, an attempt to combat the self-serving corruption associated with power—its cohesion as a religious system, as well as its shortcomings, comes into better view.

In fact, the Jedi Code can be helpfully illuminated—in both its appeal and pitfalls, its logic and contradictions—by analogy to another radical and sometimes troubling religious system. Early Mormonism (1830-1844), like the Jedi Order, was designed to build a people of bigger, more encompassing ethical commitments than the familial structures around them allowed

for. Mormonism's founding prophet, Joseph Smith, built a radically communitarian faith by demanding sacrifices from his followers and by offering new spiritual rituals to bind the community together into a single network of the saved (Brown 203-47). Polygyny (alternately referred to as polygamy, plural marriage, or "The Principle"), Smith's most controversial doctrine, fulfilled both purposes at once: participation required the sacrifice of social propriety, preexisting beliefs about monogamy, and the health of existing marriage relationships (and, for single women, any hope for future monogamous pairings) while offering new rituals of "sealing" that multiplied kinship ties, subsuming family units into the religious community (Brown 239-43). Where the Jedi prohibited attachments, Smith sacralized them.

Unlike the Jedi Order, the Mormon Church has not collapsed: however, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the largest successor organization to Smith's Church, did retreat from more extreme attempts to turn the marriage relationships towards communitarian ends. From the beginning, Smith's position as sole messenger of the divine will entailed unequal power dynamics in his own marriage proposals and in his invitations to subordinate male leaders to take additional wives (see Bushman 120-1, 151, 437). It also brought into question his claims to share in his followers' anguish and sacrifice, since he was the one who introduced The Principle and could effectively dictate the terms by which it was practiced (Bushman 437-9). Ultimately, Smith's insistence on practicing polygyny drove away some of his closest followers and led to his death at the hands of an angry mob. In a similar way, the extremity of the Jedi Code, and the arrogance of those who administered it, drove away adherents of that Order. In both cases, defections brought near-fatal harm to the organizations.

Understanding the similarities between the Jedi Code and the early Mormon Church—in both belief and practice—helps us understand something of the challenge the prequels pose to current and future *Star Wars* writers and fans. While the prequel Jedi might not have alighted on the perfect implementation of their ideals, and while Smith almost certainly did not, both took seriously the responsibility to escape the constraints of human (or alien) partiality, as each thought the Force/God demanded. As much as some *Star Wars* writers seem ready to leave the prequel Jedi behind (Golding 194-5) and/or write attachment into the Jedi code ("The Legacy" 22:32-22:54), Anakin's fall from grace, the product of his persistent self-centeredness and inability to abandon attachment (in short, his refusal to abide by the Code), invites a more complicated appraisal of the Jedi project.

### **The Shaping Power of the Universalist Ideal**

Near the beginning of Anakin's guardianship of Padme in *Attack of the Clones*, he explains Jedi philosophy to her. Over a meal in a spaceship cafeteria, Padme observes that it must be hard to live under the strictures of the Order. Anakin agrees, citing his inability to visit loved ones (presumably an allusion to his mother). "Are you allowed to love?" Padme retorts. "I thought that was forbidden for a Jedi." Anakin smiles out of the corner of his mouth. "Attachment is forbidden.



... Compassion, which I would define as unconditional love, is central to a Jedi's life. So, you might say ... we are encouraged to love" (*Clones* 35:06-35:46).

This is the most direct rationale for Jedi policy that the trilogy offers. Usefully, Anakin frames the prohibited behavior (attachment) in terms of the positive value from which it would detract (compassion/unconditional love). The most likely meaning of "unconditional" in this context is not that of continuing to love someone despite their transgressions but something more like "universal" or "impartial": there is no precondition of mutuality or particularity before a Jedi will love or serve. The implication of Anakin's account is that specific attachments are forbidden because they interfere with a Jedi's more important (central) attachment to the universe at large. In a conversation with Palpatine, Anakin elaborates on Sith ideology, the mirror of the Jedi Code, explicitly linking selfishness and passion (which in both the original and prequel trilogies is the gateway to the Dark Side): "The Sith rely on their passion for their strength. They think inwards—only about themselves" (*Revenge* 45:43-45:48).

Even the Jedi's role as political adjuncts of the Republic fits within the project of impartiality. Because the Force is universal and material—"an energy field created by all living things" (*A New Hope* 34:43-45) regardless of their moral desert or the particular will of a divine being—the Jedi must seek the Good of the whole universe. Unlike the Israelites, whom the Old Testament designates God's chosen people, the Jedi are not justified qua protagonists (see Wright 27-32). In the absence of a personal god who picks favorites, in *Star Wars*, the Force requires its servants to weigh the interests of all life forms and civilizations equally. The Republic is the only political formation that can plausibly claim to embody the interests of all sentient life, and, therefore, the Force—unlike the Empire, it represents, rather than simply rules, the galaxy. The Republic is as an ideal vehicle for channeling Jedi energies, endowing them with authority and resources through which they can act as "keepers of the peace" (*Clones* 4:48-4:51) or "guardians of peace and justice" (*A New Hope* 33:58-34:01). The opening sequence of the trilogy highlights the Jedi role as ambassadors and mediators (*The Phantom Menace*, 0:00-4:24). The mutually productive relationship between Republic and Jedi only begins to go awry at the end of *Attack of the Clones*, as the Order allows itself to be co-opted as generals and abandons negotiation with dissenting groups.

Unlike the Jedi, Joseph Smith did not deliberately structure his religious system to root out attachment, but he did seek to disrupt or overpower particularist attachments where they interfered with his radical, all-encompassing communitarian vision. Smith cultivated loyalty to the "Zion" community both by demanding sacrifice and by introducing new rituals that bound the Church together. Of the first tactic, he taught, "A religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things, never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation" (Smith 6:7). In its early days, Mormonism was a religion that required a lot of sacrifice. Converts from across the United States, Canada, and England were commanded to pull up roots and "gather": first to Ohio, then Missouri, then Illinois. Men were called upon to leave their families and serve missions in far-flung places or to assume time-intensive leadership positions (Bushman 254-6).

But Smith gave as well as took away, introducing an extensive liturgy of community-building rituals to his followers. Members had their lineage traced to a tribe of Israel in “patriarchal blessings”; baptisms for the dead connected the body of Saints throughout time (Brown 213-8). All this helped forged what Samuel Brown terms Smith’s “Great Chain of Belonging.” The ideal Mormon society was not a collection of isolated nuclear families but a single network of the saved (223-8).

Polygyny functioned on both levels—as a terrible sacrifice that built faith and as a welding link that forged new ties across the community. Smith probably felt called to “restore” Old Testament polygyny in 1831, but due to opposition to his early attempts to implement what he called “The Principle,” he only began to practice it in earnest in the last three years of his life (1841-1844) (Bushman 437). In that time, he married somewhere around 33 women, ranging between 14 and 58 years in age (Compton 1, 3-6). He attempted to keep the practice secret from the world and from most of the Church, but he revealed it to his closest male associates and asked many of them to take on plural wives as well (Van Wagoner 50-55). Due to the secretive and contentious nature of early Mormon polygyny, the sources for it are few and contradictory. While some observers have seen little more to it than sexual predation, others have found in the emerging practice tantalizing hints of a broader theology of community and covenant. For purposes of this paper, I rely primarily on Samuel Morris Brown’s framework from *In Heaven As It is On Earth* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), supplemented by Richard Bushman’s classic biography of Smith, *Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005). Brown situates polygyny within the context of Smith’s other community-building rituals and his theology of adoption and community. Bushman also emphasizes the communitarian valence of polygyny and speculates that the traditionally posited motives of sex and reproduction were less important to Smith (“He did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin” [440]). Readers may consult Fawn M. Brodie’s Smith biography *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Knopf, 1945) or Peter Coviello’s *Make Yourselves Gods* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2019) for framings more attuned to polygyny’s undeniably sexual aspects.

While it should be noted that women and girls bore the brunt of the cost for Smith’s social experiment—they were the objects that spread familial ties throughout the community (Coviello 94; Van Wagoner 89-101)—the sacrifices required of men also played a role. Men as well as women recounted experiencing extreme psychological and spiritual distress as they considered Smith’s new doctrine. Members of both sexes sacrificed the health of existing marriage relationships, pre-existing beliefs about monogamy, and their social standing in embracing the practice (Van Wagoner 41-49, 89; Bushman 439-41). The universality of sacrifice gave polygyny its power to radically retool the private nature of the marital relationship and turn towards communitarian ends.

Both the self-sacrificial and community-building aspects of polygyny are on display in cases—of which there are about a dozen—where Smith asked women who were already civilly married to marry him in religious ritual. One of these women, Zina Diantha Huntington, accepted the call with her husband Jacob’s acquiescence. He remained faithful to the church, but never stopped

pinning for Zina. For her part, Zina later told the New York World that polygyny had exposed marital love as a “false sentiment” (qtd. in Brown 243). Similar to Anakin’s formulation of the Jedi Code—eschewing individual ties to preserve universal commitments—faithful Mormons sacrificed particularist ties in order to build loyalty to the cause of Zion. The difference is, where the Jedi avoided attachment, Smith appropriated it. Rather than encouraging celibacy, he subordinated coupling to the cause of Christ. As Brown says: double marriages like Zina’s “served as a strong reminder that marriage was not primarily to protect exclusive pairings but to create a heavenly network of belonging” (243). In crafting his vision of holy community, Smith was influenced by a trend within American Protestantism away from a “theocratic” conception of heaven (oriented around the worship of God) to a “domestic” heaven where God’s followers would continue to associate as a community (205-8). He was also influenced by the idea that unbelievers are spiritually “adopted” when they join the community of God: he expanded the concept in far more literal directions, introducing ritual after ritual to link Saints to each other and even to the 12 tribes of Israel (208-220). Ultimately, his rituals and the Jedi Code served a similar role, placing adherents in an ethically neutral position by creating loyalty to an abstraction—the universal love demanded by God/The Force. As Smith once wrote to his apostles, “a man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone but ranges through the world, anxious to bless the whole human family” (qtd. in Brown 240).

#### **“Failed, I have”: Power and Its Abuses**

Ultimately, both approaches to reining in the power of particularist attachment failed. The Jedi, and the Republic they served, collapsed. While there were compounding factors—Anakin’s disobedience, Palpatine’s power—the films are clear that the Order, by dint of its arrogance, was complicit in its own destruction. The demise of polygyny is a more complicated story. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the largest successor group to Joseph Smith’s organization, gradually abandoned the practice between 1890 and 1906 under intense pressure from the U.S. government (Van Wagoner 153-63; see also Quinn). However, polygyny as a tool for breaking down romantic attachments—and thus building universal community—failed much earlier, as male leaders reframed the practice as a means of expanding individual patriarchal households. While this framing was latent in Smith’s original revelations and teachings, it did not always predominate in his lifetime (Brown 227, 246). The two systems broke down in similar ways: by driving away adherents with their extreme ethical demands and cultivating self-righteousness and spiritual blindness among the faithful, the faithful.

The Jedi Order failed Anakin because their interpretation of the Code led them to be emotionally unavailable for the turbulent adolescent. Obi-Wan generally kept himself aloof, trying to model the duty-driven, attachment-free style with which his Padawan struggled. In *Attack of the Clones*, a key driver of Anakin’s courtship of Padme is his master’s refusal to give him the validation and approval he craves (28:14-29:16). By the time of *Revenge of the Sith*, Palpatine has come to fill this void. Compare Anakin’s relative equanimity in the face of Palpatine’s request to spy on the Jedi Council with his fury at Obi-Wan’s mirror-image request that he spy

on Palpatine for the Council. “But that’s treason!” Anakin exclaims, listing his objections in seemingly ascending order of importance, pausing as he gets more honest: “You’re asking me to do something against the Jedi Code. Against the Republic. Against a mentor ... and a friend” (38:52-40:15). For Anakin, the abstract goods of the Code and the Republic fall below personal relationships. That Palpatine is spared a similar outburst (see 35:55-36:43) suggests that Obi-Wan is not a mentor or a friend—or at least, far less of either one than the Chancellor. Certainly, Mace Windu, who constantly expresses mistrust of Anakin, is no friend of his (1:08:09-41). The only other prominent member of the Council in the series, Master Yoda, does at least show intermittent compassion for the Chosen One. When Anakin’s mother dies on Tatooine, Yoda feels it all the way from Coruscant: “Young Skywalker is in pain, terrible pain” he tells Windu (*Clones* 1:21:02-38). However, when Anakin comes to him for advice about his nightmares of losing Padme, Yoda’s ideological rigidity prevents him from saying anything that might be useful to a person who’s strayed as far from the Code as Anakin has. “Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose,” he offers lamely (*Revenge* 33:21-34:40).

Just as the Jedi went too far in depriving Anakin of normal friendships within the Jedi Order, Smith’s insistence on polygyny strained his community—already built on ritual and sacrifice—to the breaking point. In the face of intermittent opposition from his first wife, Emma, Smith frequently went around her back to marry other women (Bushman 490-9); in 1843, he dictated a revelation promising God would “destroy” her if she continued to resist (*Doctrine and Covenants* 132:54). In the same document, Smith warned that all members to whom polygyny was revealed must “abide the law ... or be damned” (132:6) and revealed the so-called “Law of Sarah,” which taught that husbands should first seek their first wife’s consent before practicing polygyny—but were free to proceed without consent should their wife refuse (132:61-65; Van Wagoner 83-4). Ultimately, Smith’s refusal to give up polygyny broke the Church apart. By 1844, many members had left the Church over the new doctrine, including some of Smith’s closest advisors (Van Wagoner 31-33); some of them founded a newspaper, *The Nauvoo Expositor*, to draw attention to the still-clandestine practice (Bushman 539). Smith’s order as Mayor to destroy the paper’s press was one of the largest contributing factors to his imprisonment and assassination (539-46; Van Wagoner 63-71). After his death, the Church split up. Emma refused to follow the largest faction West and her son eventually led a “Reorganized” branch of Mormonism that denied Smith had ever taken additional wives (Van Wagoner 73-7).

Despite his general insistence on polygyny, Smith often demonstrated leniency in face of reluctance or opposition. Belying the harsh rhetoric of his revelation, he rarely issued reprisals when someone refused to accept the doctrine’s divine provenance (Bushman 491). He generally asked participants—prospective wives, their family members, and male leaders—to receive their own spiritual witness. While he promised them great blessings if they complied, he did not punish them if they did not (Bushman 439, 491-3). Several Church members later told versions of the same story: that Smith had asked for their his wives and that they, after a day or three of mental anguish, acquiesced; but, at the last moment, Smith claimed that the proposal was an Abrahamic

test of faith and he did not require the claimant's wife after all (Van Wagoner 41-3). In these stories, told decades after the fact by members advancing a faith-promoting narrative, Smith is portrayed as though he had planned for the interactions to play out that way all along. It seems quite possible that he did not, given that he did marry ten already-married women—that, rather, in these cases, he relented from his original intention after beholding the haggard and distraught state of his friends.

There are signs of similar tactful fudging in the prequels. When Obi-Wan tells Yoda he cannot kill Anakin (“He is like a brother to me”), Yoda responds, not with a lecture on attachment or a command that Obi-Wan “let go of everything [he] fear[s] to lose,” but with a clever reframing of the task. Anakin is already dead, he says. “The boy you trained, gone he is, consumed by Darth Vader” (*Revenge* 1:37:47-1:38:18). When it comes down to it, Yoda fears that Obi-Wan cannot straightforwardly live by the Code they have both been inculcating in Anakin all along (and, indeed, Obi-Wan subsequently fails to dispatch his former apprentice). Perhaps similar tacit allowances could have been granted to Anakin if he had confessed his love for Padme or his fears for Shmi.

In addition to driving initiates out, leaders in both systems became arrogant and self-centered, falling short of the potential for radical selflessness in their systems (see Coviello 93; Brown 227). Polygyny became more about aggrandizing clannish patriarchal households than merging all saints into a single Household of God. Far from asking top leaders to surrender their one and only spouse, leaders now in the Utah period of polygyny (1847-1906) married many spouses and never gave up any. Through their inflated progeny, they expanded their personal postmortal “kingdoms” until these were supposedly among “the largest” in heaven (Brown 227). While there were some features of Joseph Smith's original revelation on (and practice of) plural marriage that facilitated this result, perhaps even made it inevitable, a fulsome discussion of the evolution of polygyny over time is beyond the scope of this paper (for further information, see Danes; Ulrich; and Van Wagoner). As polygyny became a more established aspect of Mormon practice and identity, and as the Church left the Midwest and isolated itself from American society in the Mountain West, men were now spared much of the sacrifice of social standing and the wrenching surrender of prior beliefs about monogamy (Van Wagoner 92-93, discussing how plural marriage came to be seen as a “model lifestyle” among Mormons in Utah). Plural marriages continued to adversely impact the health and intensity of individual spousal relationships, however (91-94).

The Jedi became arrogant sitting in their palatial temple towering over the capital city of Coruscant. In one noteworthy instance, their librarian tells Obi-Wan that a planet he has inquired about cannot exist because “If it's not in our archives, it doesn't exist” (*Clones* 34:31-34). The larger example is the Jedi's inability to perceive events around them--namely, Palpatine's identity as a Sith (*Revenge* 1:01:25-54) or the creation of the Clone Army (on the latter, see *Clones* 57:28-58:55). In a further demonstration of arrogance, they deflect responsibility, blaming the Dark Side for clouding their judgment (4:25-5:08).



Although the Jedi fell short of their high ideals, their behavior is at fault, not the ideals themselves. This is brought home by the implicit foil between the rest of the Jedi and Anakin. Anakin's short-sighted approach to life is consistently highlighted: in scenario after scenario, he is unable to put the abstract Good over whatever good is immediately in front of him. While on a mission to save the Chancellor, he nearly pulls away to rescue a couple of random Republic fighter pilots; Obi-Wan keeps him on task. To save Obi-Wan on Geonosis, he betrays his mandate to keep Padme safe. On Geonosis, he almost abandons his pursuit of Dooku to tend to an injured Padme; Obi-Wan has to scream "Come to your senses!" at him (*Clones* 2:03:52-4:06). Finally, to keep Padme safe from his own nightmares, he betrays the Republic and the Jedi. For all the Jedi Order's flaws, it is Anakin's failure to abide by the principles of the Code, rather than the Code itself, that precipitates his downfall.

**Coda: "Into exile, I must go"**

As the *Star Wars* franchise expands, its new custodians continue to grapple with the complex legacy of the prequel Jedi. Dave Filoni, one of the lead creatives behind the seven-season TV show *The Clone Wars* (a midquel meant to fill the gap between Episodes II and III) and *The Mandalorian* (a spin-off set after Return of the Jedi) recently offered a negative interpretation of the Jedi Code. In his reading, Qui-Gon Jinn, a vaguely unorthodox figure in *The Phantom Menace*, understood something the Jedi Council did not: "Jedi are supposed to actually care and love and that that's not a bad thing. The rest of the Jedi are so detached and become so political that they've really lost their way" ("The Legacy" 22:41-22:45). Charles Soule, author of a novel in the new "High Republic" project (a prequel to the prequels), offered a more nuanced interpretation: "It's very easy for a Jedi to love ... it's just you have to love without being controlling and love without being afraid of losing somebody" (Soule). Now that *Star Wars* has lost a "sovereign (re-)writer" in the person of George Lucas and Disney has so far failed to establish the canonicity of its own contributions to the myth, the texts Lucas left behind have taken on new authority, becoming subject to constant reinterpretation as the franchise seeks a way forward (Canavan 277-81).

As the debate over the prequels rages on, this paper offers a couple of fresh considerations. First, impartiality is a key ethical commitment of the light side of the Force. Wildly divergent systems might be thought up to achieve this goal—as varying as polygyny and sexual abstinence—but universalism is the *Star Wars* ideal. Contrary to Filoni, the prequel Jedi Order does not teach that loving and caring are bad things. It teaches that attachment to specific individuals interferes with the impartial decision-making required of those who serve the Force. In the real world, the rightness or even acceptability of Smith's ethical experimentation is a subjective question; the literary text of the prequels, however, clearly does not condemn the Jedi Order. For all its flaws, the Order remains on the light side of the Force throughout the series; impulsive, duty-averse, attachment-prone Anakin does not. So long as humans/humanoid aliens—trapped in time and space and sometimes fond of romantic pair-bonding—seek to place themselves in the same ethical position of a disembodied Force or an all-powerful God, strange systems of bodily discipline and sacrifice will crop up to achieve that goal.



No system is immune to abuses of power and corruption. Those at the top will carve out exceptions for themselves and their friends that they refuse to extend to underlings. Some abuses are more objectionable than others (involving teenaged girls in polygyny, for example, or children in the Jedi Order). But so long as a religious system involves certainty in the correctness of one's convictions and an organizational hierarchy with no internal or external checks, there will always be the possibility for arrogance and abuse. The prequel Jedi had the right ideals; but having the right ideals, even in a space opera, is not the same as being righteous.

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### ‘Not Every God’: Theosis and *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*

Conor Hilton



“Ye shall not surely die; For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

—King James Version, Genesis 3:4-5

Within Mormonism, the serpent’s promise that “ye shall be as gods” is taken as the truth within the broader lie of the serpent’s words. Once partaken of the fruit, humankind will die; but, once partaken of the fruit, humankind will be set on a path of exaltation to become as God—a grand narrative arc of theosis. While theosis is a tenet of Mormon belief, only the bare bones of that belief are sketched out in Mormon teachings, and nowhere in Mormon scripture is there a narrative of the process or experience of theosis. One such narrative is found well outside the faith in N. K. Jemisin’s debut novel *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. While Jemisin is not a Mormon, nor does her novel feature Mormon characters, nor do I intend for my claims here to be suggestive of reflecting her views of Mormonism, whatever they may be, I argue that it illuminates a shared imagination of what it might mean for Mormonism to make gods, while simultaneously complicating ideas about what theosis requires by embodying the process in the character of Yeine. Theosis in both Mormonism and Jemisin’s work explores ideas of the self, time, and kin, and these three areas will guide my analysis.

My use of Mormonism as an interpretive framework draws on Peter Coviello’s *Make Yourself Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism*. Coviello’s project is in part “a story about the dynamism and violence, but also the wild beauty and extravagant imaginative power, of nineteenth-century Mormonism” (4). Coviello uses Mormonism to access something else, to shed light on other conversations, and does so in enlightening ways. What I hope to do is slightly different. I hope to use some of the “wild beauty and extravagant imaginative power” that Coviello sees in Mormonism to illuminate elements of Jemisin’s work, and to use Jemisin’s text to flesh out the realities and possibilities of that imaginative power. In other words, I use the theological mechanics of Mormonism’s anthropology, cosmology, and soteriology<sup>1</sup> to converse with Jemisin’s worldbuilding, especially through the protagonist Yeine, and to better understand the imaginative conceptualization of theosis in both Jemisin’s literary work and Mormonism’s collective imagination.

*The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* demonstrates the complexity of time and chronology as they are tied to theosis, exploring through narrative time what it might mean for an individual to become a god. Jemisin’s debut novel tells the story of Yeine Darr, summoned to the city of Sky by her grandfather Dekarta, who rules the world as the head of the Arameri family. Yeine is

immediately embroiled in intrigue surrounding the death of her mother and the plots of some of the gods and other Arameri. Yeine is surprisingly named as heir to the throne and must survive the machinations of relatives and the gods, while learning some shocking revelations about herself. Jemisin's work seems to largely ground Yeine in time, unlike the traditional Christian God, who exists outside of time, but akin to the God of Mormonism, who resides in time similar to humanity. The text opens with Yeine, the novel's narrator and protagonist, engaging in some self-reflection: "I am not as I once was. They have done this to me, broken me open and torn out my heart. I do not know who I am anymore. I must try to remember" (1). This opening demonstrates that while the reader moves through the novel, Yeine, our narrator, is reflecting back on what has happened. Until well into the novel, it is unclear what Yeine is describing here. Eventually Yeine discovers that she carries with her the soul of Enefa, one of the three original gods, alongside Itempas and Nahadoth, and that this is the result of a plot by some of the captive gods to overthrow the power of Itempas and regain their freedom. This opening reflects the transformation that Yeine undergoes toward the end of the novel, when she is transformed from a mortal into a god, undergoing theosis—a transformation made possible only because of her mortality.

For Yeine, theosis evokes doing and action, contrasted with a common Mormon aphorism about theosis, which focuses on becoming. Yeine's opening line echoes a Mormon couplet about theosis, from Lorenzo Snow, one of the early prophets of Mormonism: "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be." Where Snow draws a connection between humanity<sup>2</sup> and God, Yeine is drawing a distinction between her mortal self and her present divinity. Yet, when Yeine actually undergoes the process of becoming a god, she seems to see much more of her past in the present than this initial articulation suggests. Yeine does "not know" who she is and she "must try to remember;" theosis then leads to a sense of confusion and loss of a sense of self, which must be recovered through memory. The couplet from Snow, on the other hand, focuses on becoming, presenting a linear, straightforward line of development from humanity to God, similar to statements that could be made about moving from childhood to adulthood. This shared sense of godhood being reached severely complicates traditional Christian ideas of God's atemporality but complements nicely Mormon teachings about God's transtemporality—essentially that God exists in time, even if that relationship to time is somewhat different than humanity's (Faulconer 60-1). Unbeknownst to the reader of Jemisin's text, Yeine is already a god by the time the novel begins, narrating events that led to her apotheosis. The reader is aware of the distance between Yeine's position and the novel's events but does not fully know what has transpired until they finish reading. This resonates with Mormon teachings about God, who exists within time rather than outside of it, and became God at some earlier point in the history of the universe, but was not always God. Sam Brown in *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* notes that Joseph Smith "was resisting one type of temporal homogeneity—the linear flattening of modern time—with a radically distinct homogeneity—the entire accessibility of all time... He wanted to be able to fully inhabit the past and allow the past to inhabit the present" (65). This

collapse of time is a part of the project of Mormon theosis, seeking to bring all time together, and is echoed in the collapse of time in the novel, where past, present, and future are present all at once.

Yeine's godhood depends on her unique, physical, once-mortal being. This connection echoes Mormon teachings, while complicating Mormonism's assertions about the ontological sameness of God and humanity. In a dramatic ceremony towards the end of the novel, Yeine is killed. This is the beginning of her becoming a god. She talks with Enefa, returns to her body, and responds to a shocked Dekarta (her grandfather, who has just played a part in orchestrating the ceremony that led to her death): "Not every god, I said because I was still me after all, I leaned down to smile in his face. 'Just me'" (377). Here, Yeine draws attention, twice, to the fact that she is still herself. Both in her inner dialogue, noting that "I was still me after all" and then in the final jab to Dekarta "Just me." This complicates Yeine's opening assertion that she is "not as I once was" (1). Yeine struggles over the ending of the novel to reconcile herself to her new godhood and to figure out whether she is someone new or the same person that she has been throughout the text. She wrestles with the violence and trauma that bring about her divinity, calling into question who she is and what role her body plays in this new divine self. Yeine asserts that she "was still me after all," while previously saying that "I am not as I once was." Yeine then retains some coherent sense of self as she changes. Yeine is no longer a mortal, but is now god, yet still Yeine.

The question of the self is central to the possibility of theosis within Mormonism, wherein the individual can become god, importantly retaining or reclaiming their physical body to do so. Joseph Smith, Mormonism's founding prophet, taught that:

God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret! If the veil were rent today and the great God that holds this world in its sphere and the planets in their orbit and who upholds all things by His power—if you were to see Him today, you would see Him in all the person, image, fashion, and very form of a man, like yourselves. (235)

The Mormon God is embodied and experiences pleasure and pain, just as people do. Coviello dramatizes the relationship this way: "They are themselves *embryonic gods*, defined in the grain of their flesh by the possibility of an expansion, via the channels of an engaged carnality, into eternality and godliness itself" (5). Coviello links this to polygyny (which we'll return to later), but a key point here is that within Mormon thought, the potential for godhood and theosis is tied to the flesh (only those who receive a body on Earth are able to be exalted, should they live accordingly).

Embodiment is central to Yeine's journey to godhood as well. As Yeine begins to exercise some of her newfound power, she is hit with a revelation: "Suddenly I understood. It was my flesh, and my power, too. I was what mortal life had made me, what Enefa had made me, but all that was in the past. From henceforth I could be whomever I wanted." (382). Importantly, Yeine, as a god, is embodied: she realizes, "It was my flesh" (382), and the fleshiness of the god Yeine is central to

the reality and power that she possesses. Briefly in the novel Yeine is dead and disembodied, but she must return to the flesh, to her body, to claim the divinity that awaits her. Mormon scripture states that “the spirit and the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15). Within Mormonism there is a particular idea that spirit and body are fused together to make the soul. This fusion is central to theosis, where the material, physical body is indeed seen as part of the very purpose of mortality (*Translation* 111). Yeine’s statement that her new divine self “was what mortal life had made [her],” draws attention to the ways that her self is shaped by her experiences. Life has shaped Yeine into a god; she is not the actor becoming a god. Choice is removed from Yeine and put on others—mortal life and Enefa. Jemisin’s narrative of theosis suggests that the self is constantly in flux, that Yeine may still be Yeine, but that she is also shaped by her mortal life, transformed. The shaping then allows Yeine to “be whomever I wanted.” It is only once she is made a god that she feels truly free to “be.” This sharply contrasts with the ontological sameness of God and humanity within Mormonism and the becoming of Snow’s couplet. Brown, in describing God and humankind, argues that “True enough, they were all born into the species *Ahman*, but their developmental stages differed radically” (*Translation* 107). Here, Brown charts out an ontological category of being—which he calls *Ahman*, drawing on some of Joseph Smith’s teachings—that contains both humanity and God. This infuses humanity with the possibility of godhood from the beginning.

The embodiment of Jemisin’s gods is inextricably tied to pleasure, particularly carnal pleasures, much as Coviello draws our attention to in the case of Mormonism. As Yeine is dealing out justice to Itempas for the suffering he has caused, she kisses him “and filled that kiss with all the promise I could muster. But some of the surprise that passed between us was mine, for his mouth was soft despite its hard lines. Underneath that I could taste hot spices and warm ocean breezes; he made my mouth water and my whole body ache” (388). This is a very physical, pleasurable, embodied description of the experience. As Yeine becomes a god her pleasure and senses seem to be heightened (this is also illustrated in her earlier sexual encounters with Nahadoth), emphasizing the fleshiness and embodied nature of Jemisin’s gods. The physical pleasure here is a part of being divine, of being embodied, very much in line with Coviello’s reading of Mormon theosis. As Coviello says of Joseph Smith, “His is a point, that is, about the divinity of the flesh” (59). The fleshiness of God for Mormonism is the point—it illustrates the divinity of carnal, fleshy pleasures. Coviello continues arguing that “The flesh, the material body, vouchsafes to us the divinity of humankind. It is the vehicle not of corruption but exaltation” (68). As expressed here, that pleasure of the flesh is central to theosis, not a hindrance. Coviello’s account likely strikes some Mormon readers as counter-intuitive, but Jemisin’s narrative of theosis leans into the connection between embodiment and pleasure. Yeine is a god with passion, transformed by physical experience, fleshy and embodied.

Theosis, in both Mormonism and Jemisin, requires connection and communion—ritualized in Mormonism initially in polygamy and manifested in Yeine’s polyamorous relationship with Nahadoth and Itempas, her romantic and sexual connection to both of them is intertwined with their own romantic and sexual relationship. Jemisin’s work de-ritualizes and firmly queers<sup>3</sup> the



communion at the root of theosis, offering an alternative to Mormonism's patriarchal polygamy. Coviello argues that "Mormonism is, at its core, *a radical theory of embodied life*... I will argue, plural marriage is at the defining center of Smith's vision of exaltation" (55). Sam Brown argues for something similar, though articulated slightly differently, saying, "A persistently embodied God, the imitation Christi, and human preexistence pointed toward a state the Latter-day Saints called 'exaltation.' . . . The Saints would rise, through the relationships they created and sealed, to a status beyond their wildest imaginings, a state scholars often call apotheosis or deification" (265). In both of these arguments, exaltation or theosis is tied to relationships and sociality, though a sociality structured largely by patriarchal relationships. Both Brown and Coviello point out the inherent plurality and sociality that is tied to becoming a god within Mormonism, which finds queer expression in the sociality between Yeine, Nahadoth, and Itempas. The three are all lovers, intertwined with one another, in a complicated polyamorous relationship--Yeine loves Nahadoth and Itempas, Itempas and Nahadoth are lovers, both of whom share some romantic and/or sexual feelings for Yeine.

Yeine's communion is found in the polyamorous connection with Nahadoth and Itempas, queering the communion necessary for Mormon theosis. Over and over again, once Yeine achieves godhood, we are reminded of the connections between her, Nahadoth, and Itempas. This spills over from the kiss that Yeine and Itempas share and manifests in a variety of ways. Yeine, in talking about what to do with Itempas, says that "Yet killing him was also impossible. Out of Three had the universe been made. Without all Three, it would all end" (386). Yeine, Itempas, and Nahadoth are all three necessary for the universe to exist. They are bound together in the creation of the Universe and in its continued existence. Itempas, Nahadoth, and Enefa were all lovers and that same pattern is teased with Yeine's replacement of Enefa as the third member, though that collective communion and sociality is found for Yeine only after she becomes a god (though she has had romantic and sexual encounters with Nahadoth throughout the novel).

Yeine's divinity is also marked by her lingering connection to Enefa, which made her apotheosis possible in the first place. In a somewhat ambiguous moment, Yeine says that "it surprises me to admit it, but I shall miss you, Enefa. My soul is not used to solitude. Then again, I will never be *truly* alone, thanks to you" (394). Enefa's soul has left and Yeine is no longer living with two souls inside her, so this assertion that she will not "be *truly* alone" suggests that she will be bound to both Nahadoth and Itempas, the three of them all together in some way, even when they are not in the same physical location. Or perhaps, Yeine here refers to how she shared a soul with Enefa and will have those memories to reflect on for the future. To further the necessity of connection and relationships to godhood, Yeine notices that both Itempas and Nahadoth have "a great and terrible loneliness within" them, that the separation that all three of them have experienced has created "something unwholesome" at their core (380), rendering them lacking. Their collective love and bond is here figured as necessary to their health as gods, in much the same way that relationships are central to theosis within Mormonism. Jemisin's account of theosis expands the possibilities of sociality that Mormonism, especially contemporary Mormonism,

forecloses. Jemisin's theosis depends on a queer, de-ritualized sociality, opening up possibilities for more radical and liberatory readings of Mormon theosis.

Through Jemisin's narrative exploring the relationship of chronology, the unity of self, the pleasures of embodiment, and the necessity of sociality, she explodes the possibilities of Mormon theosis, giving flesh to the bare bones of the theology that Joseph Smith sketched out. Mormon theosis as an interpretive framework, in turn, allows us to think through what is happening with Yeine as she becomes a god, giving some language and a framework to analyze the narrative elements that may otherwise escape notice. With Yeine, Jemisin offers a possible model of what exaltation could look like. The embodied possibilities offered by Yeine transgress some of the norms surrounding theosis within Mormonism, productively opening up the image of God, while remaining surprisingly faithful to many of the key pieces of what it means for someone to become a (Mormon) God.

## Notes

1. Soteriology is the study of religious doctrines of salvation.
2. While Snow's couplet refers to 'man', it is likely more reflective of current Mormon theology to use humanity, though the theological conversation is complicated depending on how you read a few key texts, such as Doctrine & Covenants 76, Doctrine and Covenants 132, and the endowment ceremony in LDS temples. My reading of these and other sources suggests that present-day Mormons would likely say 'humanity' over 'man', so that's the usage I'll follow.
3. I am drawing on Blaire Ostler's framework of "Queer Polygamy" for my use of queer throughout this section. Ostler notes that "Polygamy is inherently queer according to contemporary monogamous marital expectations. It is, by western standards, a deviation from the norm...The use of the word queer in Queer Polygamy is to signify a more thoughtful and thorough interpretation of polygamy which would be inclusive of such diversity and that many of its manifestations would be rightly considered queer" (82). Ostler is not asserting that historical Mormon polygyny is 'queer', but rather offering a way of recontextualizing Mormon theology of polygyny, and implicitly theosis, that is queer in its expansive reach and encompassing of relationships that deviate from a western norm of monogamy. I see Jemisin's novel as exploring some of these possibilities in the polyamorous relationship(s) between Yeine, Nahadoth, and Itempas, where all are lovers of each other in a variety of forms.

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# **SELECTED PAPERS FROM ICFA 2021**





**“Master harmonizers”: Making Connections in the Post-Disaster  
World of Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* Novella Series**



Iuliia Ibragimova

Rosi Braidotti, contemplating the implications of human and non-human agents’ interrelations laid bare by globalization and capitalism, states in *The Posthuman* (2013) that the “unity [of these agents] tends to be of the negative kind, as a shared form of vulnerability, that is to say a global sense of inter-connection between the human and the non-human environment in the face of common threats” (50). Emphasizing the urgency of the environmental crises that the world is embroiled in, this statement also expresses concerns about the perception and attitudes, construed through the discourse of interconnectedness visible and incontestable due to these crises. While the recognition of these connections is vital and integral to boosting awareness of the necessary shift in environmental policies, coming from the premise of a looming threat to human survival casts these connections as “negative” and “reactive” (50), locating non-human agents in relation to the central human figure. The human figure dominating the discourse is equated to a specimen of an endangered species, which anthropomorphizes the non-human species and diminishes them by failing to recognize their significance independently of the human. This paper draws on the theoretical framework set forth by Donna J. Haraway in *When Species Meet* (2008) and *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013), and by Anna Tsing in “Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species” (2012). They advocate a transformation of this reactive bond by shifting the focus from the human and seeing these relations as an intricately connected whole without a hierarchical center, treating organic and non-organic companion species in a compassionate and respectful manner (Haraway *Species* 262-263; Braidotti *Posthuman* 101; Tsing 144). But what would it look like in practical terms? How can this inevitable interconnectedness be revised in an affirmative manner without falling into the trap of anthropocentrism?

Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* novella series (2015-2019) presents a compelling, if utopian, model of establishing relations between the interconnected human and non-human agents in a post-disaster world. These relations are based on listening and responding to various others, becoming a part of the flow of shifting matter entailing mental, spiritual, and even physical changes and acting with respect and compassion to all human and non-human persons. Dustin Crowley in “Binti’s R/evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies” (2019) notes that Okorafor employs the elements of African animism (238) in the novella, introducing the non-hierarchical and non-dualistic paradigm of relations with human and non-human others. This paradigm that can be traced throughout the series is consonant with critical posthumanism, a theoretical approach contemplating “what it means to be human under the conditions of globalization, technoscience, late capitalism and climate change” and “non-dialectical relationships between human and

posthuman (as well as their dependence on the *nonhuman*)” (Braidotti “Critical Posthumanism” 94, emphasis original). The eponymous protagonist approaches communication with human and non-human agents through harmonization, a process of making contact peacefully and considerately, blurring the traditional boundaries between the natural and the artificial, the born and the manufactured, the human and the non-human. “Harmonization,” a talent and skill that Binti inherits from her family, enables communication between the human, technology, aliens, and non-human animals, laying bare the irrelevance of borders between them and offering a way to challenge the consumerist and oppressive regime that the existence of these borders sustains. The process of harmonization and its implications are discussed later in the essay.

The series does not give a detailed explanation on how the environmental conditions of the post-disaster world emerged. Okorafor does not delineate a clear line between the present-day Earth and the future and does not mention a natural catastrophe or connect the environmental conditions of the future with a war, though the war with Meduse comprises an essential part of the plot. Likewise, the differences in the ecological conditions of our world and the world of the series do not become the focus of the *Binti* novella series. They are mentioned in passing: the intensity of Sun radiation that requires tinted glass for a fair-skinned person to endure it (Okorafor *Binti* 10), portable water capture stations (87), energy from solely renewable sources both for domestic and industrial needs, as well as only two climate varieties – desert and snow – in describing the future Earth. All these details contribute to the picture of different climate conditions, which are portrayed in a deliberately oblique manner. This creates a dynamic of the world that has not changed overnight due to a single event, be it a natural disaster or a catastrophic event; the process of transformation has been gradual, like the sea level rising by millimeters to cause the destruction of whole habitats, like a single species extinction that destroys the balance of an ecosystem that deteriorates day by day losing biodiversity, like global temperature rising by fractions to inevitably change the climate conditions of the planet. This approach to the portrayal of the post-climate change world instigates the feeling of urgency. No single disastrous event is necessary; the environment is already on the verge of collapse due to anthropogenic influence. In *Staying With The Trouble* (2016), Haraway accentuates that multiple factors caused by and connected to human activities threaten “major system collapse” right now (100), revealing the urgency of the problems and the necessity of the systematic changes to at least attempt to solve them. Okorafor’s depiction of the world transformed by climate change echoes the gradual decay of modernity, showing how these negative changes accumulate and transform landscapes and habitats to make them unrecognizable. In this manner, the urgency of the shift in the vision of the world and the necessity to challenge anthropocentric views is articulated as vividly as in disaster narratives, which tend to concentrate on a catastrophe that leads to an environmental crisis.

Harmonization, a skill, and process which Binti is gifted at, suggests a way to contemplate the relations between human and non-human agents from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Harmonization, initially presented through Binti’s capacity for mathematical thinking and engineering, is not limited to science and technology; when the ship taking her to Oomza



University, a prestigious intergalactic institution, is attacked by the Meduse, a combative alien race, she uses harmonization techniques to communicate with them. Mwinyi, a young male of Enyi Zinariya, an imaginary tribe getting their name from their contact with another group of aliens, is also a harmonizer and uses his gift and skill to communicate with non-human animals and to provide for the safety whenever a need to travel through the desert arises. The expansion of the meaning of harmonization from technological skill based on individual talent to alien species and non-human animals resonates with the posthumanist vision of the unstable boundaries habitually infringed upon in complicated entanglements and shows how decentering the human harbors the potential of a peaceful co-existence in the interconnected universe. The capacity of harmonization to achieve understanding between different species echoes Tsing's vision of "interspecies species being" (144). Tsing states that "most species [...] – including humans – live in complex relations of dependency and interdependence" (144), pondering the processes of globalization and the division of domesticated and wild species; she emphasizes the importance of respecting these connections and understanding the implications and consequences of one's actions from the point of view of mutual impact. While harmonization, unlike Tsing's analysis, is grounded in a fictional universe, it depicts a necessary shift in the worldview for the respectful and peaceful co-existence of different human, non-human, and alien species.

Harmonization is first introduced in the novella series as a hereditary trade and gift in Binti's family allowing them to produce intricate devices, astrolabes that resemble modern-day phones. These devices are in high demand not only among the Himba, a real ethnic group and the one to which Binti belongs, but also among the Khouish, a fictional majority in the series. Joshua Yu. Burnett describes Okorafor's representation of the Himba as technological experts thus challenging the image of traditional cultures left behind by the progress and lacking access to advanced technology (127). The association of Western culture with science and technology development is no longer valid for Okorafor's future; the Himba in the series are not conflicted by creating computational devices receiving universal acclaim and following traditional patterns of governance, family structures, as well as wearing otjize on their skin and hair. The erasure of the perceived interdependence of technological progress and Westernization conveyed through the relations between the Himba and technology in the series also aims to eliminate the association of technological progress and the destructive consequences of technological intervention driven by the consumerist approach to the colonized territories and ethnicities in Africa, associated with Western colonization practices.

Locating technological expertise in the Indigenous African environment, Okorafor conveys a different vision of technology – it originates in negotiation and cooperation with natural forces that are a part of the environment, its logical continuation, not a detrimental factor triggering environmental decay and natural disasters. The manufacturing process is a process of making contact and connection, based on the recognition of non-human agency; it entails "communicat[ing] with the spirit flow and convinc[ing] them to become one current" (Okorafor *Binti* 16), rejecting the idea of mastering the nature and imposing a purpose on inert matter.

Technology, created and used by the Himba in general and Binti in particular, becomes a “full partner,” not only mediating the relations of the human with the world, but also revealing its own agential power (Haraway *Species* 249). Technology, both an agent and a product of negotiating with natural forces, is rendered inseparable from the natural world, which dissolves the dichotomy of the natural and the artificial. This vision of technology rejects a division of interconnected phenomena into separate ontological categories with clear boundaries and embraces the interdependence of agents, processes, and the environment. This vision is crucial for the post-climate change world where the methods of interaction between the human and the environment must be revised and reformulated to avoid further destruction and to sustain the fragile balance. The *Binti* novella series presents a vividly optimistic image of technology, but this technology is unhinged from the habitual associations with progress, Westernization, and globalization; it emerges from the deep connection with the environment and relies on the expertise of Indigenous people to respectfully communicate with the environment rather than assume control over it.

A deep awareness of the connection with the environment in the series manifests itself not only in relations between the human and technology, but it also spreads to the relations with non-human animals. The skill of harmonization as practiced by Mwinyi opens communication channels with non-human animals. In contrast to Binti who learns harmonization from her father, Mwinyi discovers his talent in an encounter with elephants, who are notorious for killing humans on sight but spare him because he can talk to them. It activates the reversal of the colonial discourse when the colonizers refuse to acknowledge the agency of the colonized based on their inability to understand the colonizers’ language (Burnett 124). Here on the contrary, the human colonizers of the natural world are threatened by their inability to listen and converse, and Mwinyi, enabled by his talent to initiate a conversation, is rewarded not only by surviving the encounter, but also by being able to advance his innate ability with his elephant friend’s help. Mwinyi’s learning of harmonization skill from a non-human agent results in a revelation for Binti: “An elephant taught him to harmonize and instead of using it to guide current and mathematics, she’d taught him to speak to all people. The type of harmonizer one was depended on one’s teacher’s worldview” (Okorafor *Binti* 230). The worldview that Mwinyi shares with his teacher allows them to form a bond that is mutually beneficial and promotes their understanding of each other, allowing them to live side by side peacefully, regardless of the initial animosity that elephants have to humans. The relations based on negative reciprocity, that grow out of the interactions between species in the “contact zones” (Haraway *Species* 264), are transformed through communication and recognition of agency that all the participants of the interaction possess. This transformation is rooted in African animism, which runs through other works by Okorafor as well. She describes the mysticism in *Who Fears Death* by the “golden rule” of “welcoming and tolerance” that promotes the peaceful co-existence of species (Okorafor “Writing”24). This concept is interwoven into the plot of the *Binti* novella series as well and is expressed through the multiple connections that Binti shares with technology, human others, non-human animals, and aliens.

The communication between Binti and the Meduse is the main driver of the plot of the series, which starts on her journey to Oomza University and eventually brings her back home to her roots and to new revelations about herself. The ship, itinerant to Oomza University, is attacked by the Meduse who kill everybody on the ship except for the pilot, who they need to get to Oomza, and Binti, who is unexpectedly protected from them by her “*edan*” – a piece of ancient and alien technology that Binti attempts to decipher during the series (Okorafor *Binti* 6). The *edan* also acts as Binti’s translating device invoking once again the colonizer-colonized discourse and reiterating the significance of language as a means of communication and making contact in the imagery of the series. Communication, assisted by harmonization, becomes a way to prevent the imminent massacre at Oomza; as a master-harmonizer, Binti first gets to the bottom of the Meduse’s attack and then becomes the mediator between the Meduse and the University’s governing body. Binti, a member of the marginalized Himba minority, becomes a speaker for the marginalized alien race who used to reject contacts with the intergalactic community and have no interest in integrating into its shared culture. They even refuse to attend Oomza University before they encounter Binti. The successful resolution of this conflict exemplifies the importance attributed by the series to listening to marginalized voices and recognizing their capacity to show new ways of tackling complicated situations that otherwise can lead to bloodshed. Only when all the voices are heard and all interests are heeded can the peaceful cooperation and mutually beneficial development between species and races ensue.

However, to represent the interest of the Meduse Binti must give up her *edan* temporarily and suffer a Meduse sting that introduces alien genes into her genome, which not only allows her to understand the Meduse without her *edan*, but also changes her appearance. Her dreadlocks turn into tentacles, leaving a visible trace of contact and the transformation it entails. Haraway, speaking about the interactions between companion species, contemplates the mutual changes on the chemical, genetic, and microbial levels that emerge through interaction and communication with each other (*Species* 16). Being a companion, sharing a meal, and making kin entails intimate changes and recognizing it facilitates understanding of the nature of communication, an action that transforms the participants in meaningful ways, no matter how big or small these changes are. Binti’s metamorphosis is radical in a SF fashion. Representing the Meduse in the negotiation with humans and other alien races entails becoming a part of their “family through battle,” a human-Meduse hybrid (Okorafor *Binti* 56). It reiterates the inevitable changes that communication brings to all participants. Reflecting them on the bodily level makes them conspicuous and challenges the perception of communicants as separate entities, accentuating the reciprocal nature of communication on more than one level.

Binti’s physical transformations are not limited to becoming partially Meduse. In the last installment of the series, she dies in the Meduse-Khoush conflict reignited by Binti and her Meduse companion’s visit to the Earth. Binti is saved by New Fish, a sentient spaceship that is genetically close to a shrimp and houses a plant garden in its intestines that produces oxygen both for itself and its passengers. The young spaceship’s microbiome, flourishing in the plant garden,

is in its active developmental stage and possesses the power to revive Binti's dead body. However, Binti's revival comes at a price for both her and the spaceship: they need to be physically close to each other to keep Binti alive. These relations, though formed to save a human life, do not place the human into the center. New Fish will live much longer than Binti and chooses to sustain Binti's life by staying next to her; it is a gift and a reward for Binti's ability to listen and respect others' voices. It is given willingly rather than taken forcefully without considering the agency and aspirations of the other. Binti is still a receiving party in this exchange mirroring the real-world relations between the humans and non-human animals and bringing to light the underlying mechanism of interdependence: humans are critically dependent on those from whom they take and those with whom they engage in a mutual evolutionary process; the impact of these relations on all parties is difficult to underestimate.

The concept of harmonization in the series connects the human, the non-human animal, and technology with the bonds of communication, creating a complex network of agential interactions rather than separate individuals acting independently to achieve their goals. This network does not have a defined center, it does not allocate any agent with a special place or power, which challenges human exceptionalism. The representation of communication between different agents in the series resonates with posthumanist theory, which counters the ideas of human centrality, analyzing interactions between different entities including individuals, species, environments, and humans from the point of view of their interdependence (Tsing 144). Approaching the environment from the point of view of human hegemony has already brought the world on the verge of disaster and has proven to be a dangerous misconception (Haraway *Staying* 100). The future of the Binti series shows the consequence: the climate of the Earth is irreversibly changed and the relations between species are bound to change as well. The human participants representing the results of this transformative process are located outside the Western paradigm among Indigenous people, like the Himba; their vision, rooted in a different culture, is key to a peaceful co-existence between species, technologies, and environment. African animism endows non-human agents with a pronounced individuality and the ability to engage in a dialogue with each other and humans, which influences the vocabulary of the series where all animals, both human and non-human, and aliens are referred to as "persons" (Okorafor, *Binti* 82). This reference implies their equal contribution to the process of living and working together in the interconnected world that requires equal respect for each agent. Endowing personhood to the humans, non-human animals, and aliens blurs the traditional boundaries between the human and the non-human, expanding the ideas of who can be considered sentient and, consequently, whose interests should be considered in political decision-making, which makes the choice of vocabulary a purposeful declaration of the political stance towards non-human others.

The dichotomic boundaries are blurred not only in the human/the non-human dichotomy. The boundaries between the born/the manufactured, the human/the animal, and nature/culture are habitually broken in the interactions between the protagonist and other agents. The clear distinction between these categories underpins the hierarchy that the human envisions in both

nature and in human society; the instability of these borders undermines these hierarchical structures, leading to decentering the human and questioning the treatment of those who are classified as ontologically different from the self (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 96). Harmonization becomes a fictional tool dissolving these boundaries. Using it the protagonist is capable of traversing strikingly different landscapes, like a desert on Earth, a spaceship travelling through planetary systems and a planet-sized university campus accommodating various alien peoples, and making a connection with various agents, without approaching them from the hegemonic position of anthropocentricity. But an even more striking challenge to boundaries comes with the physiological transformations that Binti undergoes: the Meduse genes and New Fish's microbiome. These changes transfer the broken boundaries from mental space into corporeality, infringing upon the boundaries that define an individual. Binti's body is the illustration of a contact zone where different genomes, microbial organisms, and other species meet and come into a complex entanglement. These multiple transboundary encounters, experiences, and transformations reiterate the interconnected essence of the world where pulling one string has an impact on others and where meeting in the nodes – contact zones – leaves traces on those who and which meet. Comprehending this essence and its implications opens a different perspective on how humans can navigate their relations with other species.

The different perspective on the interspecies relations in the Binti novella series rooted in African animism and cosmology branches out to the posthumanist vision of fluid boundaries and non-hierarchical relations, where the self is not divided from the environment but becomes a part of an intricate system of connections and where it can form multiple contacts with others and get transformed through this connection. Both the Binti series and posthumanist theory invites us to reconsider the hegemony of the Western paradigm depicting vivid images of global interconnectedness. This invitation is valid not only for a post-disaster world but the contemporary situation where ecological balance is under a constant anthropogenic threat.



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## Is That From Science or Fiction? Otherworldly Etymologies, Neosemes, and Neologisms Reveal the Impact of Science Fiction on the English Lexicon



B.L. King

Science fiction has been the red-headed step-child of literary genres since her beginning, despite being one of the most successful and fast-growing genres besides her sister, fantasy; however, this position is inconsistent with the impact the genre has made on language and the relating novum that its neologisms represent. Numerous English words and phrases have been coined or redefined by science fiction; they are also widely recognized and understood as more than pop culture references—as actual concepts, intellectual properties, and objects. Words such as *spacesuit*, *webcast*, and *blaster* are neologisms and actually find their derivations from science fiction literature and film, while words like *alien* and *satellite* were given new meanings while becoming used and understood on a much larger level, making them neosemes (Valentina). These words and phrases are widely recognized, even without contextual clues, and used outside of science fictional contexts, despite their alien meanings, pun intended. Even though they were initially introduced to characterize and term foreign, extraterrestrial objects and concepts, they have extended beyond that context and have made it into generalized dictionaries. Most find their birth in science fiction texts instead of scientific research, contrary to common belief and assumption. These etymologies prove the momentous impact of science fiction on the English lexicon and contribute to the popularization and mainstreaming of the genre as a whole while also mentally inventing new ideas and thoughts for the human race, especially in exploration of science, through linguistic means. Examining the extension of SF terminology into the lexicon results in evidence for SF to be regarded with reverence and credibility as a literary genre in and of itself.

It is no secret that SF has been looked down on for its sensationalism and has been accused of writing for the masses as a product of “the culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno). Anthony Enns highlights this discrimination in his article “The Poet of the Pulps: Ray Bradbury and the Struggle for Prestige in Postwar Science Fiction” and recounts that the cultural perception of the pulps and critics of SF’s widespread reaction of awe and horror contributed to this imbalance. Despite the positive pop-cultural reception and growth of the genre, university programs continue to shun it and it is unequally represented in the western literary canon. Such negative associations, connotations, and biases persist in the world of both authors and critics.

To negate this inequality, I will relay the undeniable impact of SF neologisms and neosemes on the English language by recounting the etymologies of the most widely used neologisms and citing their listings in mainstream, standard, modern dictionaries. It is crucial to clarify that the

words to be discussed are simply the most popularly recognized and utilized words SF has coined and not the only ones. My etymologies will also be abbreviated as for the purpose of this paper, the quantity and usage of these words proves more to the argument than their lengthy histories.

Thus, to start our alphabet of SF, the word *alien* (noun) has taken on a purging of its original meaning, which is “a foreigner” in its noun form and “belonging to a foreign country” in its adjective form (Oxford English Dictionary, “Alien”). It first appeared with its new definition as a noun meaning “a being not of earth” in the 1820 *Collected Letters of Thomas Carlyle* and was used again in this context in Frank R. Paul’s *One Prehistoric Night* and again in Eando Binder’s 1939 *Impossible World* (Prucher and Qolfe 2). From there it continued in its new usage as such while the other, though still used but infrequently, became a secondary meaning. The word’s first known use as an adjective was in Abraham Merritt’s *Moon Pool* (1919). The recorded usage of alien escalated rapidly after approximately the late 1800s and beginning of the 1900s. This time frame parallels the rise in popularity of its SF definition, which has now become for many the first definition that comes to mind.

*Artificial intelligence* (AI) (noun) was coined in 1973 by G. R. Dozois in the novella *Chains of Sea* (Prucher and Qolfe 10). It is defined as “the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence” (Prucher and Qolfe 10). Big Tech and its most well-known entrepreneurs, like Bill Gates and Elon Musk, have co-opted the phrase to describe their technologies that mimic human intelligence. It is also the basis for the more recent term *artificial super-intelligence*, which formed before most modern computer programs were invented and one year before the personal computer’s (PC) invention, contributing to the notion that SF takes part in the invention of technology by speculating it.

*Atomic bomb* (noun) was introduced to the lexicon by none other than H. G. Wells in his 1914 novel, *The World Set Free* (Brake 122). Oxford defines the term as “a bomb that derives its destructive power from the rapid release of nuclear energy by fission of heavy atomic nuclei” (Oxford English Dictionary, “Atomic Bomb”). Wells invented the term about thirty-one years before the first actual atomic bomb, “Little Boy,” was dropped over Hiroshima, Japan. Wells’s psychic phrasing points again to the strong bond SF has with the English language and the technology around us.

*D* stands for *disintegrator* (noun), first appearing as the name of a weapon in 1925 by N. Dyalhis in *When Green Stars Wane*, published in *Weird Tales* (Prucher and Qolfe 36). In the same sentence where the world first saw a disintegrator, Dyalhis also coined the term *blaster*—although some might first think of a certain space opera by the name of *Star Wars* upon hearing this word because the films are one of the main perpetrators of its use. Both words have made it into the Oxford US English lexicon and through their widespread use, are very easily pictured and recognized words and concepts. When this type of recognition and mental imagery happens, it is as if the author has invented something concrete and is not merely describing or employing a plot device, accentuating the power of language and specifically the power of SF language.

Going back to one of the most common themes of SF, *extraterrestrial* (noun, adjective), a neoseme to describe alien life, first appeared in S. D. Grottesman's 1941 *Cosmic Stories*. Its root word, *terrestrial*, comes from Latin meaning "of the earth" and now with the prefix *extra-*, it does not mean more earthly, but instead "outside of earth," in reference to UFOs or alien species (alien as in the aforementioned definition). An entire institute is actually named from this word called The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) which accredited scientists support and research for. This solidifies the integration of not only the word into the language, but also the concept it stands for.

*Hyperspace* (noun) was given its meaning of another dimension that one reaches by travelling faster than light in 1934 by John Campbell in *The Mightiest Machine* (Brake 70), yet many commonly associate the phrase with the *Star Wars* franchise's Millennium Falcon. The term was recorded once before 1934, but only as a geometrical reference, and was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2010 (Oxford English Dictionary, "Hyperspace"). It has become a shared concept among SF texts and contributed to the use of *hyperdrive*, which originated in SF in 1955. Campbell's word also inspired the term *cyberspace* which was coined by William Gibson (Brake 137) in his 1982 short story *Burning Chrome* and then expanded upon in his best-seller from 1984, *Neuromancer*.

*Lightspeed* (noun), coined in 1929 by E. Hamilton in the novel *The Star Stealers*, is a neoseme meaning "a unit of speed equal to the speed of light" (Oxford English Dictionary, "Lightspeed"). It is now used in scientific texts and jargon and is the accepted unit of measurement of 300,000 kilometers per second. It was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2005, cementing its use. *Lightspeed's* continued usage persists as a common element of SF stories. The phrase "speed of light" inspired our neoseme, but it was not a measurement and related itself with questioning and speculation rather than with coinage or tangible ideas.

One of the most famous neologisms of SF origin is *robot* (noun), derived from a Czech play called *R.U.R.* that uses the Czech word "robota" meaning "forced labor" (Prucher and Qolfe 165). The play was written by K. Čapek in 1920 to refer to artificial but biological slaves, and P. Selver translated the play in 1923. Flash forward to 1941 when Asimov applied it, along with other writers, to mechanical beings, and he coined *robotic*, *robotics*, and *roboticist*. It is arguably one of the most famous SF-derived words and concepts and is another one that we tend to forget or not realize was originally coined in SF.

The neologism *spacecraft* (noun) was first used in 1930 by P. Nowlan and R. Calkins in Buck Rogers 2430 A.D. Buck Rogers is probably a familiar name to some and has contributed to the mainstreaming of SF through its franchise so it is no surprise that it has also contributed to language like it has with pop culture. *Spacecraft* as a term makes its appearance twenty-seven years before the Soviet Union's Sputnik launched from earth. Yet spacecrafts have a far more complex and impressively prophetic history than that. Johannes Kepler, an astronomer and early SF author, wrote in a letter to Galileo humans should and could create a "craft 'adjusted to the heavenly

ether for the ‘brave sky-travelers’ who are ‘unafraid of the empty wastes’” (Brake 20). This letter was written about 300 years before any sort of spacecraft even existed and illustrates the mental experimentation that SF holds at its core.

The neologism *spacesuit* (noun) can be defined as a “a sealed and pressurized garment which protects the wearer against the conditions of space.” It was first used in the 1929 July edition of *Science Wonder Stories* (Oxford English Dictionary, “Spacesuit”). Man’s first actual journey into space took place many years after that and astronauts did not don spacesuits until the 1960s. NASA now refers to these “pressurized garments” as spacesuits because of science fiction stories. This is yet again an instance of SF not only influencing the jargon of science, but also the very technology that science can create. Similarly, *space station* (noun) also made its debut in *Science Wonder Stories* in 1929; however, it actually appeared as “spatial station” and later that year in December, C. W. Harris and M. J. Breuer replaced it with space station in *Baby on Neptune* in *Amazing Stories* (Oxford English Dictionary, “Space Station”). The neoseme phrase *space travel* (noun), the concept of navigating outer space, also finds its coinage in the 1929 September edition of *Science Wonder Stories* (Oxford English Dictionary, “Space Travel”) and is even born in the same sentence where we first see space station. In 1998, the International Space Station was launched, simultaneously actualizing both phrases, *space station* and *space travel*, once again showing a cross between SF and science and making SF predictions a reality. Mark Brake writes “that a spirit of ‘what if’ is common to both science and science fiction” (Brake 2).

*Time machine* (noun), perhaps one of the most famous neoseme phrases from SF, is a phrase coined by H. G. Wells’s 1894 novel of the same name. This text is one of the very first SF novels and created one of SF’s signature tropes, inspiring classics like *Back to the Future*. Through this phrase Wells also made time the fourth dimension (Brake 70). *Time machine* was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in March 2012, over a century after its first use (Oxford English Dictionary, “Time Machine”). This phrase also precedes *time travel* and *time traveler*. Wells did not just coin a word, however, he invented a scientific concept that some scientists believe could be an actual possibility. Einstein himself believed in and studied the existence of wormholes (Brake 70), which are essentially tears in the space-time continuum through which one could theoretically enter and come out the other end at a designated date in what is considered linear time. Again, SF has opened doors for scientists to experiment with concepts born of authors’ minds.

Our last word, a brief honorable mention is the neologism *Webcast* (noun), which was coined in 1987 by D. K. Moran in *Armageddon Blues*, meaning, “[a] live broadcast transmitted over the World Wide Web” (Oxford English Dictionary, “Webcast”) Now with the technologies of Skype, Zoom, and Webex, Moran’s direct vision is a vivid reality.

As we end our alphabet of SF, it is important to note that SF has also been crucial to the popularization of existing words. Among this category are words like *zero-gravity*, *humanoid*, *mothership*, and *nanotechnology*. These words had scattered use before they appeared in SF texts, but after their appearance they steadily gained momentum in use and in research (Google Ngram).



Not only does SF coin words, but it also popularizes obscure words and is the main contributor to their inclusion in the standard lexicon.

Yet not only has SF impacted our language through these neologisms, introducing new words to our shared, universal vocabulary, but it also has introduced novum, new ideas, to our realities. SF has not just coined a word for a space station, but because it has introduced a new word to our minds linguistically, it has now invented intellectual property that must be represented by the word, as I conclude using Darko Suvin's and Ferdinand de Saussure's theories in conjunction. The genre introduces us to novum, those of which must be symbolically represented by our language in order to be conveyed. These neologisms are signs that transfer new meaning, novum, and images to the human brain and consciousness that were previously unthought of, and their signifiers (or words) were previously without meaning. In order for a word to be coined, introduced to, and used in a lexicon, it must have an image, concept, or idea behind it to provide its meaning since language is an arbitrary medium for communication in which the main goal is for ideas to be exchanged. SF has not just impacted us linguistically, but idealistically. To impact a language is to impact thought and reality, perceptions and inventions. Thus, SF has not just coined or re coined words, but has introduced and described new ideas, which are novum, and the mental invention and recognition of concepts like spacesuits, robots and webcasts. Mark Brake, the author of *The Science of Science Fiction*, discusses a version of this as "a kind of theoretical science" (Brake 2). However, an emphasis on the linguistic part of that science is missing. SF could not achieve this theoretical science of exploration and, as I term it, mental invention without keywords which are neosemes and neologisms to signify those inventions.

Now that we have explored what words come from SF, we must highlight why it matters. Brake argues that SF precedes science in many cases and has impacted our culture and interests, which largely supports the notion for SF to be regarded with more reverence as a genre. To build upon this, the elemental way in which SF is able to influence our culture and science is through neologisms and neosemes. The concepts SF words stand for are why people love them, but the way the concepts are communicated—through neologisms and neosemes—is what makes readers able to grasp and understand them and henceforth, to accept them within the culture. Without the invention of these words, the intellectual properties and tropes of SF would be lost in translation, would not be able to be copied and recognized across texts as effectively, and would also not as easily slip into our language. We do not talk about "the pressurized garments worn in space"; we talk about spacesuits. Most of us are not familiar with the mechanics of navigating precise wormholes that operate through use of hyperspace activity and their function in the fourth dimension, but we do know what time travel is. Without these neologisms and neosemes, these concepts would not be popularized or commonly recognized.

It is difficult to argue that another genre has been this heavily involved with real-world science and the English lexicon. This sets SF completely apart from other literary genres, yet it has not been dignified as a credible genre. Many of the words above represent concepts that actual scientists are now exploring thanks to concepts that originated in SF like time travel, parallel

universes, and space travel (Brake). This exemplifies the strength of language, but also the impact of SF as a genre on our reality. Considering the volume and popular usage of the collection of SF words above, it is reasonable to say that SF has made a large impact in not just the words we speak, but the voice we hear in our heads that heralds images and ideas into the forefront of our minds. SF has not made meaningless words, but has mentally invented a vast world of concepts, some of which we have made into a tangible reality. This linguistic power moves SF beyond the page and into our daily lives, into the fabric of our communication, making the case that SF should no longer be ignored when its impact extends this far. This proof that SF is a credible genre lies in its very text and our very own language.

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### Wolves and Werewolves: How Our Beliefs About One Influence the Other



S.M. Mack

#### Introduction

While modern research into the behavior and socialization of wolf packs positively influences the portrayal of werewolves in contemporary fantasy literature, in horror novels, or other stories portraying lycanthropy as undesirable or dangerous, past prejudices about real wolves tend to eclipse fact-based observations. In texts portraying lycanthropy in a positive or desirable light, the contemporary scientific parallels are significant, but in literature portraying lycanthropy in a negative way, these parallels are absent. This is significant because while scholars have discussed werewolves from a historical, folkloric, and even literary standpoint, my research indicates that no one has studied how our changing view of wolves has resulted in similar evolutions of the portrayal of werewolves in the various genres of contemporary fiction.

As modern research educates the public regarding wolves' behaviors and social patterns, people increasingly empathize with wolves and seek to treat them humanely. However, previous generations of "naturalists," nature writers and field biologists of varying experience, spread lurid and hostile fabrications about wolves. Those stories remain embedded in the public consciousness. This sets up a clear contrast between the more positive views of werewolves in contemporary fantasy literature, where authors use modern lupine research from approximately the last sixty years to humanize their werewolves, and werewolves portrayed as a source of horror, where authors rely on the monstrous preconceptions still held about wolves to craft their werewolves, thus perpetuating stereotypes that influence individual and collective responses to the treatment of actual wolves. If fantasy authors were to include more positive portrayals of werewolves in their fiction, it could create a more positive contextualization for the protection of wild wolves.

#### The Reality

According to Valerie M. Fogleman, a leading environmental lawyer and professor at Cardiff University in Wales, "...[M]odern scientific research about wolves began in the 20th century." Prior to and even after that, sensationalist, exaggerated, and outright false stories about wolves' viciousness and bloodthirstiness spread far and wide, mostly via dramatic magazine articles. She states that the first study using modern research techniques took place in 1944; therefore, all accurate scientific knowledge we have about wolves today has been gathered since then (Fogleman 81). Modern research on wolves has helped to dispel an incredible amount of misinformation, but much more is left to learn. As L. David Mech and Luigi Boitani say in the introduction to their seminal book, *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation*:

The wolf is truly a special animal. As the most widely distributed of all land mammals, the wolf, formally the gray wolf (*Canis lupis*), is also one of the most adaptable... The great variation in the wolf's environment, and in the creature's behavior and ecology as it contends with that environment, makes generalizing difficult. This problem can lead to false generalizations and misunderstanding about the animal. (xv)

Therefore, this paper will provide as accurate and up-to-date scientific information as was available at the time of writing, but it is worth noting that there is likely an exception to every anecdote and discovery that wolf researchers have made. For example, we know today that a wolf pack is, first and foremost, a biological family unit. However, as wolves leave their natal packs and disperse in search of territory and a mate, sometimes they are adopted into other packs. Sometimes they find a mate and start their own pack. Sometimes they spend a year or more splitting their time between their natal pack and another that they have been adopted into. Therefore, the designation of a biological family unit does not necessarily hold for all instances. As a result, this discussion will necessarily deal with some of the generalizations that Mech and Boitani warn us about. It is important to keep this in mind moving forward.

Common knowledge has spread the notion that the hierarchy within a wolf pack is rigid, with the alpha male and female at the top, followed by the less dominant beta wolf or wolves, all the way down to the supposedly abused and submissive omega member. However, although the number of members fluctuates far more than the members of a human family, the two otherwise display a large number of similarities. Instead of alpha, beta, and omega members in a wolf pack, consider a human family: the parents (or, more correctly, the breeding pair) are the dominant members, and the children range below them. Dominance is not based on size or age alone; in fact, in both humans and wolves, personalities are the greatest indicator of dominance. Additionally, dominance doesn't necessarily mean bullying more submissive pack members. For example, many people today consider their pets to be part of the family. A pet is the equivalent of an omega wolf, because while pets are cherished and taken care of, they are not allowed to attempt to dominate the humans in their families. If a pet attempts to do so, it is reprimanded and subsequently put in its place, just as a so-called omega wolf would be.

In both wolf packs and human families, siblings tend to make up the bulk of the pack. These siblings can be the children of the breeding pair, or they can be the siblings of one member of the breeding pair. While the former is considered standard, the latter is not at all uncommon and would occur in cases where one member of the breeding pair aged out or died. The dynamics between these siblings and half-siblings depends on a number of factors, including ages and environmental influences, while personality is, again, generally the most accurate indicator.

Even families with adult children and aging parents can find their situation mirrored in a wolf pack, because the hierarchy within a wolf pack can be approximately as fluid as a human family. Adult children have a different relationship with their parents than young children do with theirs. Furthermore, the relationship between children and their parents evolve as the children grow. In

wolf packs where one or more of the breeding pair's children do not disperse to find their own territories and mates, the hierarchy shifts as family members come of age, grow ill or injured, recover their strength, and accept or reject newcomers into their pack.

Dispersal is the process by which the offspring of a breeding pair leave their natal pack to individually search for their own mate and territory. "Some wolves disperse when as young as 5 months of age, whereas others may remain with the pack for up to 3 years, or occasionally longer" (Mech and Boitani, *Ecology* 11). Dispersal has been recorded as late as five years of age, though it generally occurs when the offspring is between 10 and 36 months. Dispersal usually occurs during puberty, when tensions between the maturing wolf and the pack's breeding pair rise. A low food supply can also trigger a higher dispersal rate. According to Brenda Peterson, author of *Wolf Nation: The Life, Death, and Return of Wild American Wolves*, only approximately 20 percent of the wild wolf population are dispersed at any given time (179).

When a young wolf disperses from their natal pack, they go in search of a few things: a mate, enough food to feed them both, and a territory of their own. A successful wolf is one who has found those things and gone on to have a litter. Until a dispersed wolf finds a mate and settles down, however, it is considered a lone wolf. Almost none of the common knowledge or connotations held today about "lone wolves" is accurate—for one, real lone wolves are never as violent as a "lone wolf" human killer. As Peterson states:

Not only does comparing a man who opens fire with a military-grade automatic weapon on a helpless crowd of people to a lone wolf betray our blatant prejudice against this most maligned animal; it also is not based in any biological fact. A real lone wolf has deeply diminished powers to hunt or kill. A solitary wolf must live off smaller ground prey like squirrels and rabbits. Without family for protection and alliance, the wolf endures the most endangered time of his life and will survive only half as long as the eight- to ten-year life span of wolves in the wild (159).

For wolves, being alone is always temporary. They, like people, are not meant to live in isolation. A wolf named OR7, nicknamed Journey for dispersing over 1,200 miles after leaving his natal pack, traveled as far as he did in search of a mate. Additionally, the "slender, black" female wolf that he eventually paired with had also dispersed from her natal pack, likely based in northeastern Oregon (Peterson 185-86).

OR7, born in 2009, was special in several ways. First was the epic journey for which he was nicknamed—he traveled hundreds of miles farther west than any wild wolf had since their reintroduction to the lower 48 states. He was also the first wolf in Western Oregon in sixty years. Additionally, in December 2011, he made international news by being the first wolf to cross the border from Oregon into California since 1924, when the last wild Californian wolf was killed. As OR7 reached milestone after milestone, he accumulated thousands of fans from across the U.S. who followed his progress online. Everyone from schoolchildren to seasoned field biologists spent years rooting for him; even some hardline anti-wolf politicians allowed that they would at least



consider supporting bills that only permitted the hunting of wolves that had “a history of going after livestock” (Peterson 186).

OR7 did not change everyone’s minds, of course, but his stardom raised the profile of all wolf conservation and why that conservation is important. People who had never given a second thought to wolves before grew genuinely invested in OR7’s health and progress across the western U.S. Documentaries and other media coverage brought wolf conservation into the public consciousness; a San Francisco librarian even wrote a successful children’s book about OR7’s journey, which further endeared him to the public. We are lucky that OR7’s dispersal closely followed a hero’s epic journey because it illustrates so clearly that when humans can look at wolves with empathy, it can help us learn to value and protect them. Furthermore, when authors imbue werewolves with genuine wolf-like characteristics, rather than the horrific and untrue attributes humankind has long associated with wolves, readers’ attachments to these werewolf characters can help them to see wolves with a clearer and less fearful eye.

### **Fantastic Werewolves**

Charles de Lint’s short novel *Wolf Moon* features a werewolf named Kern on the run from an evil musician with a magical harp. The book opens with the werewolf going over a waterfall rather than confronting the musician’s golem. He washes up near an inn where he is taken in and healed. Kern and the innkeeper, Ainsy, fall in love, but before Kern can tell her his secret the harper finds him and turns Kern’s newfound family against him. Ainsy’s cousin fights her way free of the magic and helps Kern kill the harper.

Although De Lint’s version of a werewolf exhibits a much higher tendency toward violence against humans than is realistic for actual wolves—Kern kills a brigand who was torturing Ainsy’s uncle and, later, the evil musician—for the most part Kern’s journey follows that of a young wolf. His first transformation occurred at thirteen, “hard on the heels of puberty” (42). His parents, who were completely human, drove him away in fear.

In reality, “dispersals do not seem to be actively chased away;” it is usually a mutual parting due to puberty-related aggression (Mech and Boitani, “Ecology” 13). Conflicts within the pack become more common when young wolves reach sexual maturity. When these conflicts become intolerable, the young wolves disperse. The young wolf’s quest, however, is the same as Kern’s. He wants to find a mate (Ainsy), find a territory he can call home (the inn), and have a pack (the rest of the inn’s ragtag permanent guests, and presumably any children that Kern and Ainsy may have down the road).

*Wolf Moon* is significant because, above and beyond the implicit similarities between Kern’s journey and that of a young wolf’s, de Lint draws a direct line between the werewolves in the world of *Wolf Moon* and real wolves:

What was it about [Kern’s] gray brothers that filled people with such terror? They spoke of a pack numbering thirty or more, but that was never the case. A pack of twelve wolves was

extraordinarily large. Folk told tales of atrocities that only men were capable of and laid the blame on a wolf. Not that wolves were gentle creatures, incapable of violent actions. They were the rulers of the forest, fierce and implacable when aroused. But first there must be a threat of some sort... (129)

Even Kern's new family, before they learn he is a werewolf, openly despises wolves as terrifying predators, capable of bloody and horrific "atrocities" (129). When the antagonist, a musician named Tuiloch, begins telling people that he's seen a wolf in the woods nearby, even Ainsy wants to know: "Is anything being done to hunt the [wolf] down?" (129). The wolf's supposed presence is what frightens people, not its actions.

The reader sympathizes with Kern as he listens to people he respects and is growing to love disparate creatures like him. Additionally, part of what makes the musician a villain is his use of the preconceptions people hold about wolves to stoke fear and hatred for the supposed lone wolf in the nearby woods—he turns people against Kern before revealing to them that Kern is the wolf. Granted, the musician uses dark magic to complete Kern's ostracization, but Tuiloch's actions stem from the belief that wolves—and werewolves—should be hunted into extinction. Tuiloch treats Kern like an animal that would make a good hunting trophy.

De Lint uses the reader's sympathy for Kern and his efforts to defeat Tuiloch to build an indirect yet equally sympathetic link between the reader and nonfictional wolves. The reader feels for Kern, who in turn dislikes that regular wolves are hunted as he is being hunted—relentlessly, and by someone who cares not at all if the wolf has a family similar to Kern's new one. Over the course of *Wolf Moon*, the reader becomes willing to take Kern at his word that wolves deserve the same dignity and respect that he does.

*Wolf Moon* stands out as a particularly clear example of the parallels between real wolves and werewolves portrayed in a positive light, but it's not the only one. *Huntress Born* by Aimee Easterling and *Raised by Wolves* by Jennifer Lynn Barnes both feature a protagonist who disperses from their natal pack. Furthermore, Easterling's werewolves behave remarkably like real wolves. At one point, Ember, the werewolf protagonist of *Huntress Born*, is sexually harassed by another werewolf on her way home from work. "A teaspoon-ful [sic] of bile clawed its way up my throat and I opened my mouth to release odors that should have cued any sane werewolf in to my lack of interest" (71). Easterling uses the moment to show the reader that there is something mentally wrong with the attacker—he can smell that his advances are physically making Ember want to throw up, but it doesn't phase him at all. As it turns out, the assaulter is under the sway of magic that radically impairs his judgment. Real wolves rely heavily upon olfaction for communication. Most biologists agree that it is a wolf's most acute sense.

In *Huntress Born*, Ember leaves her family to travel to the big city in search of her biological brother. Ember was adopted by her maternal uncle and his wife as a baby but considers her adoptive parents (both werewolves) her real mother and father. Her father is the alpha of their pack, and he treats Ember with warmth, understanding, and respect. He is a good father, and that

is what makes him a good alpha. Jane Packard notes that there are two theories that deal with leadership within a wolf pack. A deterministic view concludes that a wolf pack is a “qualified democracy” within which “the male leader guides the activities of the pack and initiates attacks against trespassers.” On the other hand, a stochastic view concludes that “parents influence the offspring, but offspring also influence their parents. Wolf families can be so diverse that both models probably have merit, depending on... the history of relationships within the pack” (Packard 60).

The werewolves in *Huntress Born* use urine to scent mark; it tells other werewolves who left the scent and the leaver’s approximate mood. As Easterling writes, “My brother had been present in this very spot no more than a week earlier. And in the way of wolves, he’d imbued not only his identity but also his mood into the chemicals that laced his urine” (32-33). Fred H. Harrington and Cheryl S. Asa discuss wolves’ use of urine to communicate at length in their chapter “Wolf Communication” in *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation* (83-86). The werewolves’ body language described also tends toward accurate depictions of wolf behavior and interactions: “[P]awing at the earth, I whined out my confusion;” “[T]he alpha’s displeasure bent down my spine until my tail tucked between my legs;” and “[S]lobber soaked the bedspread where I’d drooled out my distress and my ears pinned back against my skull” (33, 37, 93).

Easterling plays with the delineation between human and animal through the use of bourgeois mores. Ember, who is blond and white, uses words like “darn,” and regularly refers to herself as a “pack princess,” believes that certain cultural norms must be followed (16, 63, 127, 71, and 98). Ember is also a baker, and Easterling plays up the harmlessness of creating, sharing, and eating desserts such as apple turnovers, oatmeal cookies, and triple chocolate cupcakes. Through her baking and upper-middle class mores, Ember is among the most harmless of werewolves in existence.

By crafting werewolves that behave similarly to real wolves while keeping them relatively harmless with middle-class backgrounds and an emphasis on behaving civilly, Easterling draws a line directly between how harmless werewolves of *Huntress Born* are and how harmless real wolves generally are to humans. Like de Lint’s more overt attempt to spread understanding about wolves as social animals instead of monsters, it is a method of garnering sympathy and understanding for non-supernatural wolves.

The werewolves in Jennifer Lynn Barnes’s *Raised by Wolves* exist within a pack, in contrast to *Wolf Moon* and *Huntress Born*. There is a certain level of jockeying for hierarchy inside the pack, as well as an undercurrent of violence that threatens to manifest whenever someone steps too far out of line. Like real wolves, aggression is used to assert dominance and solicitous or humble body language and behavior is used to placate anyone whose dominance has been threatened. In this way, the werewolves in *Raised by Wolves* are dangerous in the same way that wild animals are dangerous: if one cannot read a wolf’s body language, it can be impossible to know how to deescalate an encounter.

*Raised by Wolves* is noteworthy because the protagonist, Bryn, is not physically a werewolf. She is one of the lone humans who grew up in a werewolf pack. As such, she understands werewolves better than she understands humans. Aside from the physiological differences, being a werewolf comes with different body language, expectations, and culture, and Bryn understands those better than she understands humans'. In this way, she is a werewolf in every aspect except the physical ones—she cannot transform into a wolf and lacks the supernatural senses, strength, and advanced healing abilities. However, she behaves and thinks like a werewolf.

In *Raised by Wolves*, Bryn ends up leaving her natal pack and founding her own. She originally leaves under duress, essentially spirited away by her adoptive mother after a disagreement with the alpha of their old pack. The alpha had allowed Bryn to be corporally punished for breaking a pack rule as if she was physically a werewolf. Bryn accepted the punishment, essentially telegraphing submission as a real wolf would, but her adoptive mother (who is also human) decided to leave the pack and take Bryn with her. In biologist terms, they dispersed together. Although there has been no recorded anecdote in which a mother-daughter pair dispersed together, under the right circumstances (for example, if a pack fractured) it is not out of the question. Additionally, after a time Bryn's romantic partner joins them in their new home, helping Bryn carve out a small piece of territory between two existing territories just as real wolves would.

Part of Bryn's emotional journey involves coming to terms with the violence indicative of life among werewolves. She learns to protect herself and surrounds herself with people she trusts not to treat violence as a panacea, as several wolves from her natal pack did. In founding her own pack, Bryn also finds a level of connectedness and family that she had never expected. She grows to accept that a certain amount of violence is part of growing fangs and claws at will, but trusts that her packmates, who are a number of new, young werewolves, are not bloodthirsty in the least. Bryn maintains a relationship with her prior alpha, but both understand that Bryn's new pack is her future. Although they have access to cell phones, email, and other methods to stay in touch, the physical distance between their territories prevents any kind of blending of packs.

### **Horrific Werewolves**

In an unpublished essay obtained via private correspondence, Steve Cave's Stonecoast third semester paper "From Hellhound to Hero: Tracking the Shifting Shape of the 21st Century Werewolf" discusses a shift in the portrayal of werewolves from the monstrous creatures that naturalists historically pushed to protagonists with close family ties and an affinity with the natural world. It has been a gradual evolution occurring over the last two decades or so, but one I predict will continue as solid and meaningful research into wolves progresses. However, Cave's essay overlooks the fact that in horror fiction, werewolves remain as monstrous as wolves have ever been viewed. This holds true even in non-horror novels where lycanthropy is portrayed as something undesirable or dangerous. In novels such as Glen Duncan's *The Last Werewolf*, Carrie Vaughn's *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*, and Steven Graham Jones' *Mongrels*, werewolves in their transformed

state are dangerous killing machines without any qualms or morals whose bloodthirstiness often leads to cannibalism.

*The Last Werewolf* in particular relishes the horror that its protagonist, Jake, creates. It is a gory book full of all the worst characteristics a werewolf can have—in the protagonist’s grotesque wolf-like form he is hideous, horrific, and deadly. While reading, one might even conclude that the author intended to disgust the reader as much as possible. Jake has killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people over his extended lifespan, beginning with the graphic murder and cannibalism of his pregnant wife the first night he transformed. Additionally, and perhaps most tellingly, the protagonist has spent his life since that first transformation as a lone wolf. Some naturalists describing wolf behavior prior to the application of modern research techniques held that wolves only came together to hunt or to mate (Fogleman 72). Because wolves supposedly only tolerated the company of other wolves during mating or at times of bloodshed, all wolves, then, were necessarily lone wolves.

Jake has never held out hope that he might be able to find a mate, although the possibility of sex with a female werewolf (a “She”) eternally taunts him.

On the Curse you’re desperate for sex with a She... while off the Curse your regular libido’s amped up by the frustration of not having had sex with a She. It’s a numbers problem. Infection rates for females have always been low, WOCOP [the werewolf hunting organization] estimates one to every thousand years. As you can imagine, we don’t run into one another. (38)

Despite the book’s various depravities, the parallels between Jake and dispersed wolves such as OR7 are clear, even though Jake treats the absence of a female werewolf as a problem only because it is impossible to be completely satiated by sex with a human women. What he discovers upon meeting a “She” later in the novel, however, is that meeting the right female werewolf (or in this case, the only one) is rather like meeting one’s soul mate. This is a distinctly human idea, of course, but again we see parallels to OR7 and his own mate.

Jake’s ideal romantic partner, however, has his same appetites, and it is on these that the book lingers. Jake and Tallulah’s meeting is portrayed as a monstrous communion. Even as they retain their human forms between full moons, their inner monsters are only temporarily caged; neither attempts to control their base urges. Tallulah fought it for her first three months as a werewolf when she only ate animals when she transformed, but the combined effort and act nearly killed her (231). Since then, she has adopted Jake’s resigned acceptance that if there’s no way to reign in the monstrous side of her wolf, then she might as well enjoy it.

“I’m smarter when I change,” she said. “In all the worst ways. In all the ways that matter.”

“I know, Lu.”

“You think some sort of red cloud would come down, some sort of animal blackness to



blot everything out and just leave the dumb instinct, but it doesn't... I know what I'm doing. And I don't just like it—I don't just like it..."

"I know."

"I love it... I tasted it," she continued calmly. "All of it. His youth and his shock and his desperation and his horror. And from the first taste I knew I wasn't going to stop until I had it all. The whole person, the whole fucking feast." (232-33)

All this, as they make love in a hotel room. Jake's narration emphasizes that it is his lycanthropy that makes him a monster; although he makes no attempt to control it, without the lycanthropy he would have been a normal human. The same holds for Tallulah.

Fogleman recounts various stories about naturalists from the 1800s and 1900s: "One naturalist ignored the opinion that wolves did not ordinarily attack people by stating that some wolves preferred human flesh to animal flesh. Another naturalist stated that once a wolf tasted human flesh, the animal would then attack people instead of animals" (71). Jake and Tallulah's transformed bodies look more like cinema's traditional humanoid wolf-man than an actual wolf, but it is clear that all their animal urges stem from historical attitudes and misconceptions toward wolves.

It is easy to see the parallels in horror fiction, specifically, to past descriptions of wolves, but it is important to note that in all instances that lycanthropy is portrayed negatively, werewolves' negative traits have roots in historical attitudes. This is true even of non-horror literature such as Carrie Vaughn's *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*, in which Kitty Norville, a werewolf, works to balance her lycanthropy with her job as a radio DJ. The novel itself is urban fantasy, but the traits Vaughn gives to its werewolves are both disturbing and similar to those employed in *The Last Werewolf*. Upon transformation, werewolves in *Kitty and the Midnight Hour* experience "innate bloodlust": "...[I]f you didn't hunt deer you'd be hunting people, and that would get you in trouble. How do you feel about hunting people, Pete? How about eating people?" (28). Kitty's pack of fellow werewolves also joins together only at the full moon. The rest of the time, the farther-flung members are essentially lone wolves; recall that common knowledge for centuries insisted that all wolves were lone wolves.

In order to stress Kitty's struggle to maintain a balance between her civilized and wild sides, Vaughn makes the contrast as stark as possible. Like Ember from *Huntress Born*, Kitty is white, blond, and comes from an upper-middle class background with a loving, normal (albeit human) family. She went to college, is working in her preferred field, and—unlike Ember—is only a werewolf because of one terrible night of bad luck. Where in *Huntress Born*, Ember's lycanthropy binds her to her beloved family, Kitty's lycanthropy restricts her job options and time spent with her family because she is unequivocally unavailable once a month.

In addition, Kitty is the most submissive member of her pack. Misconceptions about hierarchy and dominance struggles within wolf packs have led to the mistaken idea that life is

always miserable for the “omega” wolf. While this is generally not true for wild wolf packs, it is absolutely true of Kitty’s werewolf pack. The pack’s alpha pair —there is no breeding pair in Kitty’s world because no werewolf pregnancy is viable—emotionally abuse Kitty while protecting her from physical abuse by the rest of the pack. The alpha male also regularly takes her to bed without giving her the option to say no. Although there are occasions when a pack’s most submissive member is abused, sometimes to the extent of dispersal, this is not the way most packs operate.

As aforementioned, most wolf packs in the wild are comprised of biological family members. An excellent example of a horror novel that blends both the accurate and inaccurate traits attributed to real wolves is Stephen Graham Jones’s *Mongrels*. The story follows a boy who lives with his aunt and uncle as he grows up. They are a biological pack. His aunt and uncle are werewolves; so was his maternal grandfather, who dies early in the story. The protagonist’s mother died in childbirth and his father (the biological outsider in this situation) is hardly mentioned. The violence in *Mongrels* remains front and center—it includes both grave robbing and cannibalism—but blends the horror sourced from old stories and modern knowledge about real wolves.

In *Mongrels*, all the characters consider 16 years old to be full maturity. When the protagonist reaches 16, his aunt and uncle leave him to join their respective romantic partners and the pack effectively disbands. This would be realistic but unusual in a real wolf pack. According to Jane M. Packard, a pack without a breeding pair doesn’t generally last very long. It fractures, and the members disperse (38).

However, wolves’ devotion to their young is well documented. Siblings from every generation have been recorded helping to take care of their brothers and sisters or nieces and nephews. Though unlikely, it is not impossible to imagine that a pair of siblings might rear their dead sister’s pup. In a wild wolf pack, if the puppies’ mother dies, the primary job of raising them usually falls to the father. Because the father of *Mongrels*’ protagonist is absent, however, this is not possible. Although violence is a given in the hard-scrabble life of *Mongrels*’ werewolves, it is never turned inward on the pack. There are squabbles between the members, but no actual fights.

Despite the similarities between the *Mongrels*’ pack and real wolf packs, many of the horrific traits ascribed to werewolves in *Mongrels* stem from the same common misconceptions that the public once held about real wolves. In *Mongrels*, grave robbing is unfortunate, rather like eating out of the garbage, but needs must be met. Murder is frowned upon in that it will bring attention from authorities, not for its moral implications, and the bloodlust is so intense that cannibalism is a given.

While some werewolf books emphasize the gory impulses that stem from historical inaccuracies about real wolves, others use stark contrasts between the horror that is an innate part of the characters’ werewolf sides and the gentler, more natural and civilized human sides. This contrast allows both the positive and negative traits to shine more brightly. Readers are more deeply horrified, but also more deeply moved to empathize with the werewolves. It could be argued that what readers empathize with is the werewolves’ human sides and ascribed desires, but

the werewolves' more admirable traits are present in both humans and wolves. The fact that the admirable traits exist in wolves as well as humans has simply been overlooked.

### Conclusion

Werewolves are intimately tied to wolves, and the perception of one influences the other. In her essay "American Attitudes Toward Wolves: A History of Misperception," Fogleman says, "If no-one had been interested in hearing or reading about werewolves, accounts of them would not have been influential in shaping American attitudes toward wolves" (78). Werewolf fiction influences how we view real wolves, and vice versa. For hundreds of years, wolves were "the very symbol of avarice, viciousness, and guile," and tales of monstrous werewolves were the only kind found in literature (Busch 109). However, as Fogleman states, "...[T]he negative attitudes toward wolves are slowly beginning to change" and she attributes the most important factor in this evolution to an "increased knowledge of wolves" (80).

The more we learn about wolves, the harder it is not to see the similarities between them and ourselves. This is reflected in werewolf fiction, which portrays werewolves either as monstrous creatures, depictions of which draw on the sensationalist and inaccurate stories about wolves that naturalists pushed for centuries, or on modern wolf studies and research dating from approximately 1944. The former is used in literature intended to showcase werewolves in a negative light, while the latter is used in stories meant to humanize werewolves.

Learning about wolves and using those characteristics to craft sympathetic or heroic werewolves in contemporary literature could create a positive feedback loop—as the public begins to associate "good" werewolves with real wolves, wolf conservation will grow more popular with the public as well. When we begin to admire or empathize with an endangered species, we are more inclined to create and enforce public policies that protect that species. In the long run, werewolves could help protect their nonfictional counterparts in the wild.

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## Terradeformation: Unsettling Environments, Knowledge, and Control in Recent Speculative Fictions



Aaron Gabriel Montalvo

One of the chief ironies of the global warming crisis is that this virtually unknowable and uncontrollable event is an accidental side effect of attempts to exert control over the earth. Western science offers unprecedented abilities to measure and mold the earth. Yet, these tools are inadequate to fully comprehend or halt the changes they have wrought. Critically, these changes can be likened to an earthly enactment of the science fiction trope of terraforming. Terraformation is commonly recognized as the engineering of other planets, typically Mars, to make them habitable for human survival (Prucher 224). However, terraforming is not solely a speculative enterprise confined to other planets. Earth itself has been largely transformed to make it more fit for human habitation (224). As Chris Pak has elucidated in his book on terraforming and SF, the recognition of terraforming as an ongoing, earthly process is a recognition of the profound impacts made on the planet by modern society (Pak 2016, 2). A consideration of the issues surrounding terraformation calls to mind broader issues of control over the earth. What are the limits of such control and who benefits from it? While all societies have engaged in terraforming, the most sweeping changes are the result of Western society's attempts to gain dominion over the planet. The modern era's colonialist and capitalist enterprises have enacted fundamental changes to the planet in order to support a slim margin of Earth's population. Now these changes threaten to exceed the possibility of human control in ways that make the planet ironically less fit for human inhabitation. Terraforming is not just about a future Martian enterprise but about contemporary shifts in Earthly ecology and society (7).

As this year's conference theme of "Climate Change and the Anthropocene" attests, science fiction can and has played a role in the development of ecocritical practices, themes explored by authors such as Eric C. Otto and Ursula K. Heisse. Key among their arguments is that science fiction provides a unique opportunity for ecocritical engagement through its ability to reimagine the dynamics and parameters of human relations with the environment (Heisse 281-82; Otto 7-18). For my paper, I am going to expand this practice of SF ecocriticism by introducing a conceptual framework for theorizing some of the unruly environments of speculative fiction, a concept I will refer to as terradeformation. To begin, terradeformation names a trope in recent speculative fictions in which the environment undergoes a dramatic reconfiguration that defies human attempts at control. While the nature of these changes may vary, the central facet of these transformations is that they upend existing epistemologies and political systems through radical reformations of the earth. Practicing terradeformation moves beyond naming the trope to asking about the status of human and environmental relations when those relations are no longer stable. Such questions include: What types of knowledge of the earth are possible? How have society



and the earth shaped one another? How does earthly dominance interact with technological and political systems? And what effect can an earth-centered consciousness have on such systems? Terradeformation offers a critical technique that serves to unsettle the foundations of modern socio-political systems, thereby providing opportunities for their reconstruction from the ground up.

In my explanation of the possibilities of the concept of terradeformation I am going to focus on two primary points. First, I will examine the way it works to undo concepts of epistemology as control by presenting an earth that is both unknowable and untamable. I will do so through a reading of Jeff VanderMeer's *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy*.<sup>1</sup> Second, I will explore the way that terradeformation rethinks oppressive socio-political systems by highlighting the interconnection of earthly and human dominance and showing how an unstable earth can be brought to bear against these systems. For this section I will draw on N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*. In my explanation of the possibilities of terradeformation, I have set the concept largely in contrast to terraformation. However, I do want to note that these two terms are not entirely oppositional. Both these terms describe shaping the land in ways that could be considered as deformations. Further, they are not strict moral opposites. Advocates of terraforming also advocate earthly stewardship (Beech 11-12) and terraforming in SF often deals with questions of ethics (Pak 2016, 7-17). The distinction I wish to convey is that terradeformation is concerned with examining the problematic principles of earthly control on which terraformation is based. Rather than extrapolating systems of control into fantastic futures, terradeformation interrogates these systems, asking how they have formed the world and how they might be formed anew.

Questions of terraformation are invariably questions of epistemology. In both its speculative and real-world manifestations, terraformation relies on a carefully codified knowledge of the earth in order to reproduce these conditions across space. Terraformation therefore requires an orderly form of the earth that abides by scientific measurements and categorizations. The universal application of these measurements both facilitates and requires control of spaces. Terraforming involves an imposition of a global order onto a landscape to force it to conform to a preset ideal. This imposed order is written in the gridded landscapes visible outside the window of any passenger plane, a striking example of terrestrial terraforming. These grids mark not just organization, but also control and possession of physical spaces (Campbell 9). Terraformation represents an extension of Enlightenment principles in which science serves to extend dominions of power through twinned forms of geographic and geologic knowledge.

Terradeformation, meanwhile, focuses on an earth that resists clear epistemologies and the strict ordering that would be imposed on it. This shift in knowledge engenders a renegotiation of existing relations of humans to the earth. To demonstrate this effect, I will focus on Jeff VanderMeer's *Area X* trilogy, a text explicitly concerned with ecological epistemologies and their limits. Broadly speaking, *Area X* concerns the attempts of government scientists to learn about the mysterious Area X, a space that maddens and transforms living beings that enter it and that cannot be explained despite decades of research (VanderMeer 63). Area X operates as

a destabilizing force; its name hints at unknowability and the failure of these government agents reveals the inadequacy of scientific systems. Area X is akin to Tim Morton's concept of the "hyperobject" (Tompkins), an object whose existence can only be recognized and comprehended symptomatically (Morton 1-2). Morton's paradigmatic example of the hyperobject is global warming (3), and just as global warming defies attempts at full-scale comprehension, so too does Area X resist understanding beyond the piecemeal. Universal comprehension is denied in favor of an acceptance of the unknowable. The trilogy, therefore, imagines a terrestrial space that cannot be subjected to Enlightenment's scientific classifications in order to deform them and ask what other modes of thinking are possible in their stead.

In its resistance to scientific categorization, Area X also breaks down the boundaries these orderings serve to impose. Area X disrupts systems of terrestrial ordering by defying schemas that circumscribe spaces and define them by human use. Though Area X is bounded by a nearly impenetrable border (Vandermeer 154), its boundaries are not defined through scientific or political processes like the grids of geographic coordinating systems or national borders. Instead, Area X arises spontaneously in an undefined "Event" to change the space around it (63). Read critically, this terradeformation is legible as an environmental disruption of the spatial impositions of socio-political systems. Though Area X is a localized transformation, its critical possibilities are not so confined. These possibilities can be extended to considerations of intellectual control, a possibility echoed in the slow transformation of the environment and people surrounding Area X. While Area X may not expand physically (221), it affectively transforms the government agency tasked with researching it. The agency is just as mad as Area X itself, with several characters driven insane by their inability to understand Area X (313-15). Changes in the terrestrial landscape lead to changes in the psychological and intellectual landscapes as well, highlighting the reach of these transformative possibilities. Reading for terradeformation need not induce madness but should induce intellectual destabilization, a necessary change for rethinking relations to the earth beyond forms of containment and control. Terradeformation recognizes an unknowable and untamable earth that drives to the heart of Enlightenment epistemologies and the systems they serve.

Now that I have demonstrated terradeformation's application to issues of knowledge, I will turn to issues of power. Issues of terraforming are invariably aligned with issues of power.<sup>2</sup> For example, the grids that define the U.S. landscape mark a legacy of settler colonialism. Gridding represents dominance over landscapes but more importantly signifies power over the people who live within human-scripted geographies. Terraforming mimics these relations in its future-oriented enterprises as well. Recent proposals of geoengineering as a solution to global warming represents terraforming at a planetary scale (Pak, "Terraforming and Geoengineering" 500; Iles 11). As critics have noted, whatever possibilities geoengineering may offer, it is a speculative solution that largely supports systems of power already in place (Pak 2018, 500; Iles 2; 11). Geoengineering relies on a technological answer to a social problem; it foregrounds narratives of scientific innovation that fail to address scientific limits and social injustices as part of the

campaign for sustainability (Iles 2). While terraformation promises radical environmental change, it does not promise the same for political systems.

Terradeformation, meanwhile, asks for a reconsideration of these systems of power by examining the ways dominance over the earth is tied to dominance over others. We have already seen aspects of this in Area X's engagement with epistemologies of control. Now I will directly engage the political through a reading of N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*. Jemisin's novel takes place in a world called The Stillness, which is regularly beset by large earthquakes (2) and devastating ecological disasters (94). The novel's central protagonist is an "orogene," a person with the quasi-magical ability to control earthquakes (462). Orogenes are subject to racial discrimination (56; 462; Iles 7-9; Murphey 109; Walter 11-13) and must work for the ruling Sanzed Empire, whose power they must help maintain or be killed (Jemisin 34). Applying the concept of terradeformation makes visible the interrelations of environmental and political systems of power in the ironically named Stillness. The Stillness is hinted to be a future version of our world at several points in the text through allegories of modern environmental destruction (115; 284; 379-80).<sup>3</sup> These destructions include mining the earth's mantle, which causes a shattering of the earth that destroys most of civilization (379-80). This description allies the novel with cli-fi, but more importantly it demonstrates that the terrestrial instability of the Stillness is a result of the continuance of extractive environmental practices. Earth's shattering is a response to ongoing structures of power that rely on environmental destruction. Earth is not inert matter subject to external power; it is an agential force capable of destroying those systems that would do the same to it. Jemisin's novel serves as a warning, demonstrating that change will come to these structures in one form or another.

Though terradeformation is invested in examinations of human-environmental politics, it does not neglect the human end of this dynamic. Environmental control is one aspect of its interrogation of larger socio-political systems. The book makes clear that the discrimination faced by orogenes is the manifestation of a systematic racism deployed in order to secure power for the ruling class. The perceived threat of orogenes allows them to be separated from society and trained in service of the Sanzed Empire in roles such as controlling earthquakes (34). The capital of the empire, in fact, is one of the only places in the Stillness that is free from tremors, due to this system (117). The process via which orogenes are forced to serve an imperial power that dehumanizes them is a clear metaphor for slavery (Murphey 109; Walter 112; Hurley 468). More importantly, for our discussion, it demonstrates that exploitative systems of power rest on a false stability built atop a quaking foundation of marginalized human beings. This stability is only maintained via the continued acceptance of these systems. By connecting this unstable dynamic to the earth, Jemisin's text concretizes the interrelation of global power systems and earthly dominion. *The Fifth Season* does simply metaphorize our world, however. The novel includes several scenes in which characters cause earthquakes as a means of striking back against these power structures (7; 56-58; 413). Terradeformation in this case is a destruction of the literal bedrock of socio-political systems in order to force their reconstruction. This reconstruction is not only about justice for the earth but also justice upon the earth, a reckoning for those harmed by political forces. Significantly,

these scenes tie terradeformation to human agents. In the previous examples, the concept might seem to be a theorization of Gaia's revenge scenarios. This case, however, demonstrates that terradeformation is not solely focused on an agential form of the earth. Rather, it entails a recognition of what an earthly agency might afford for reconfiguring relations both to the earth and to other human beings.

In summation, terradeformation offers not only a name for a speculative fiction trope but also a way of thinking about what the stakes and possibilities of that trope are in this era of global, ecological disasters. It asks us to reconsider the limits of Enlightenment thinking and to dissolve the false barriers imposed by such knowledge. It also envisions the deformation or destruction of oppressive political regimes supported by these intellectual schemas to argue for their change at a fundamental level. As the Earth undergoes non-speculative deformations induced by these systems of power, terradeformation's lessons will only grow more significant. Just as terradeformations expand beyond their initial bounds to change intellectual and political systems, so too must these lessons beyond their textual bounds to reform the terrestrial sphere.

## Notes

1. Hereafter the trilogy will be referred to as *Area X*.
2. Pak makes a similar argument (Pak 2016, 7).
3. Iles describes this process as it is revealed throughout Jemisin's trilogy in detail and similarly analyzes the interrelation of environmental destruction and systems of power (10-12).

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## Locating Blackness at the End of the World: N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* and the Black Anthropocene



Misha Grifka Wander

The Anthropocene has been portrayed as a crisis that implicates the whole human race, threatening every person as well as their nonhuman ecological surrounds. However, several theorists have critiqued the totalizing nature of the Anthropocene. Axelle Karera writes that “the ‘political Anthropocene’ (if there is or ought to be one) will remain an impossibility until it is able to wrestle with the problem of black suffering,” (33) and further argues that theorists of the challenges facing the human race have yet to take into account the fact that Black and other marginalized peoples are often not counted as part of that human race. I believe both that Anthropocene ethics are important and also that Karera is right. As a first step toward reconciling these two beliefs, this paper will use N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* series as a speculative staging of the ethics involved when Blackness meets apocalyptic sensibilities.

This paper is intended to be an opening statement in a conversation that I believe is crucial for scholars of speculative fiction: that of speculative fiction’s ability to imagine possibilities for us that critique has yet to address, specifically with regards to climate change and the pressing problems of the Anthropocene. While I hope to contribute valuable ideas to this discussion, I am not a Black person, and I acknowledge the potential discomfort in my speaking on this topic. I am still going to do so, hoping that I have honored the topic and material as best I can, because I believe white people should be and are called to do anti-racist work. That being said, I acknowledge the possibility I have failed to do the material justice, for which I can only apologize and invite correction from other scholars.

My main critical conversant is a paper by the philosopher Axelle Karera called “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” in which she critiques the theorists of Anthropocene ethics in light of their failure to acknowledge race. Calls for interconnectedness with the earth and urgent recognition of relationality fall flat when one realizes that white humans have failed to treat other humans as equals, much less the nonhumans that Anthropocene ethicists would have them attend to. The claim that the world is ending once again begs the question: Whose world? As Karera writes, in the academy “To deny the ‘unprecedented’ geological impact of humans’ force on nature is now practically untenable” (33), and yet, this apocalyptic sensibility fails, in Karera’s eyes, to produce a viable ethics or critical framework. She sums up, “In other words, the insidious problem of the Anthropocene is the generalized—perhaps even calculated—unwillingness to account for past and current imperial injustices, coupled with a rampant inability to imagine alternative futures outside an apocalyptic state of emergency” and that “More specifically, I would like to argue that apocalyptic sensibilities which have significantly monopolized Anthropocenean

discourses are powerful in disavowing and erasing racial antagonisms” (33). The apocalyptic sensibility is one in which we are told that unless we take drastic collective action, the human species will not survive, to say nothing of the countless other species which will die (and are already dying). “We” who are about to die must act together, with each other and with an awareness of the interconnected nature of human and nonhuman existence.

However, this “we” is suspect. Currently much of Anthropocenic ethical writing “establishes grievability—or the capacity (and the necessity) of mourning one’s own life—as the constitutive imperative that both forms the category of the human and ensures its survival.” (37) And yet if we accept that, what do we make of “those ungrievable lives for which even survival requires facing death. That is to say, those lives for which existence requires suicidal decisions such as deadly expeditions across the Mediterranean Sea, the Mexico-United States border, and the many ‘border-fortresses’ of the EU” (45)? Karera makes a powerful argument about the failure of Anthropocene ethics to incorporate the reality of racial violence and death, and therefore its failure to make its own argument for interdependency and species unity.

Karera’s argument is troubling for scholars of the Anthropocene such as myself. And yet, I think the concept of Anthropocene ethics can be rescued. Karera concludes that “In these conditions, therefore, we are left with what I would like to call here the potential of ‘speculative experimentations’ whereby one can experiment with ethically counterintuitive terms like the ‘non-relational’ in the attempt to renew the central tenets of our critical endeavors” (50). Speculative fiction provides a space to conduct ethical experiments, creating test conditions, so to speak, where responses to extreme ethical quandaries can be explored, tested, rejected, altered, and more. N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* series is rife with difficult ethical questions, and thus provides a perfect testing ground for a re-evaluation of Anthropocene ethics.

In the *Broken Earth* series, we find the complete shape of an apocalypse: the lead-up, the beginning, and the struggle to survive mid-disaster, as well as the new shape of the world after the total apocalypse is averted. The people who live in the world of the Stillness (the setting of *Broken Earth*) are quintessential Anthropocene subjects—living in an actively unfriendly environment, suffering under onslaughts from both nature and the political system. The apocalypse they are suffering is swifter than the one discussed in Anthropocene ethics, but nonetheless the parallels are striking, as no doubt Jemisin intended. While many of the people in the Stillness are described as Black-presenting, it is the orogenes who are the metaphor for Blackness. Their labor and lives are exploited to maintain the status quo and even possibility of life in the Stillness, through the enforced labor of the Fulcrum orogenes and the grotesque enslavement of the tortured orogenes inside the node stations. Yet, even though they are necessary, they are despised and subject to both lynching and judicial murder. Just as Karera acknowledges that American democracy is built on Black death, so too is the Sansed Empire of the Stillness built on orogene enslavement and death.

It might at first appear, then, that Alabaster’s choice to end the world is a kind of revenge, a strike back against the world that has treated him and his kind as so much chattel. But then we

learn that it was in fact an attempt to fix the world, to bring back the moon and end the Fifth Seasons that necessitate orogenes' powers in the first place. Karera characterizes the apocalyptic sensibility of the Anthropocene as one that erases "the racist origins of global warming" (38) and fails to imagine a new system of racial relations in the hereafter. Alabaster's actions portray the apocalypse as, instead, a kind of political action, a destructive but potentially also corrective and renewing explosion of the old political order, in favor of a hoped-for better future. Of course, there are differences between the world of the Stillness and ours—no one person is causing anthropogenic climate change. But it does portray the possibility of apocalypse as a liberatory rupture from oppressive systems.

In fact, as we learn in the third book, it is a rejection of oppression that caused the Fifth Seasons in the first place. An earlier civilization had subjugated the original orogenes and tortured them to provide energy; when the tuners (who later become stone eaters) found this out, they destroyed the civilization in question rather than allow such injustice to continue. In the process, the Earth grew angry at the people who tried to manipulate it, fought back, and the moon was flung out of orbit, causing the Fifth Seasons and further angering the Earth. Unfortunately, while this struggle successfully erased one kind of oppression, it gave way to another, as the orogenes were used to control the geological chaos of the Fifth Seasons.

So then, what: are apocalypses liberatory? Are they doomed to re-create the world in all its oppression again? The callous use of the Earth, the torture and oppression of the orogenes; these crimes resonate through the history of the Stillness just as anti-Blackness resonates through our own history. In her review of the series, author Amal El-Mohtar writes:

I am used to fantasy and science fiction [...] setting up apocalypse as threat, cataclysmic change as something to be prevented at all cost. [...] The unquestionable premise of this kind of setup is that the world is precious and worth saving. *The Stone Sky* rejects this out of hand. If the *Broken Earth* trilogy as a whole shows a world where cataclysm and upheaval is the norm, *The Stone Sky* interrogates what right worlds built on oppression and genocide have to exist.

El-Mohtar's writing aligns with Karera's in understanding apocalyptic themes as a plea to protect the status quo. I could not agree more that Jemisin rejects the right of genocidal worlds to exist. However, I would like to examine the ending of the series. In the end, Essun makes the ethical choice to let her daughter end the world rather than kill her own child. And yet her daughter, Nassun, is inspired by this choice to save the world after all. Saving the world, though, does not mean restoring it to the same world in which she grew up. Neither Essun nor Nassun want to continue the world as-is, but they both recognize the value of life-in-relation, the value of one's own loved ones, the ethical weight of caring. Caring for others' pain, for the injustices they were subjected to, leads those in the Stillness to end the world, but also to make sure that there is some kind of afterlife for the world, a chance to rebuild a different and better society.

This, ultimately, is how I believe *Broken Earth* can help resolve the problems Karera describes: the apocalypse should not usher in an urgent desire to protect the status quo, but rather introduces an explosive, liberatory understanding of the fact that the apocalypse represents an opportunity to remake the world. The apocalypse may end some worlds, without ending all life. The interconnected, relational Anthropocene ethics that Karera critiques are valuable, I believe, but only as a goalpost to strive for in remaking the world. They are speculative as well: we have seen the instantiation of none of them, not yet. To fully commit to an ethics of interconnected relationality would mean committing to an ethics of justice, would mean addressing environmental racism as part and parcel of any other environmental topic. In the shadow of an Anthropocenic apocalypse that threatens to end all life, let us instead work to end the world-as-is, and make a new world that fully recognizes the importance of justice to our interconnected existences. Otherwise we will simply preserve the existing world of oppression and, for marginalized peoples, relationality will only be “the condition for the possibility of their enslavement” (48).

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## Make the Familiar Strange: Decolonizing Speculative Fiction Through Postcolonial Visibility



Marisca Pichette

### 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<sup>1</sup> 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 Gurinder 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.

Bhabra 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 Bhabra’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 (Bhabra 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” (Bhabra 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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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## The Reclamation of McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*: Irony as Resistance to Utopian Ableist Narratives



Tessa Swehla

The future of the bodymind and the emergence of the posthuman remains one of the most ethically charged points of social discourses concerning medical and technological advancements, especially those that affect disabled people. Alison Kafer argues that social discourses concerning the future often erase or discount disabled bodyminds, excluding them from the fantastic or imagined futures: “if disability is conceptualized as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid” (259). Utopian narratives often include these “cured” futures as a natural part of human evolution or as a sign of progress. Over the past decade, criticism of Anne McCaffrey’s science fiction novel *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) has focused on a perceived erasure of disability from its imagined future. This presentation invites a reconsideration of criticisms of McCaffrey’s novel, presenting an alternate reading of the text as an ironic critique of utopian narratives.

The main character of *The Ship Who Sang* is a disabled woman, Helva, whose body is encased in a spaceship. The text positions Helva as disabled in the opening lines of the novel: “She was born a thing and as such would be condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all newborn babies” (McCaffrey 1). Here is a government, Central Worlds, that has seized complete control over medical institutions and is concerned intimately with the bodies of its citizens, but styles itself as a place-based utopia that cares about the happiness and wellbeing of all its citizens. Helva is positioned as labor for Central Worlds: she is a cargo ship, a diplomat, an artist, a scout ship, and an informational processing machine, amongst other roles. Due to the nature of its origins as a series of published stories, the novel functions episodically, with the first story establishing Helva’s origins as a shell-person (a human encased inside a metal shell) and the loss of her first partner (a “brawn”), with subsequent chapters recounting adventures while dealing with issues of grief, trauma, sexuality, privilege, ableism, and gaslighting.

The controversy surrounding the novel stems in part from a misreading of the text by Donna Haraway. In her “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway briefly references Helva as an example of how people with prosthetics might pose a challenge to organic integrity: “Anne McCaffrey’s pre-feminist *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) explored the consciousness of a cyborg, hybrid of girl’s brain and complex machinery, formed after the birth of a severely handicapped child. Gender, sexuality, embodiment, skill: all were reconstituted in the story. Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (25). Kafer criticizes Haraway’s use of this example:



It is useful to note that the one example Haraway gives of such “severely handicapped people” is not a real person but a fictional character from Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang*: a “severely handicapped child” who was so physically disabled that her only hope of survival was to have her brain removed from her body and placed inside a machine (the spaceship of the title). (112)

Although Sami Schalk does not mention Haraway’s reading of the novel, she echoes Kafer’s criticism by positioning *The Ship Who Sang* in the tradition of speculative “cure” narratives, “all of which represent disabled people significantly enhanced—and essentially erased as visible figures—through technology in the future” (2117). In her blog post “The Future Imperfect,” disability activist Sarah Einstein reacted to reading the first lines of the novel with horror at the thought of a future where “disability is so depersonalizing that the very promising are rewarded with slavery and disembodiment; those who don’t pass the test for these rewards are put to death” (Einstein). These readings are supported by the paratext surrounding the novel. After all, the back cover of the Del Rey collection of these stories includes the rather dramatic description “Helva Had Been Born Human... but only her brain had been saved—saved to be schooled, programmed and implanted in the sleek titanium body of an intergalactic scout ship” (*Ship*). This is inconsistent with the novel, which insists again and again that Helva and the other shell-people are not disembodied brains but are bodyminds whose nervous systems have been connected to a ship as an advanced form of prostheses. It is easy to see how Haraway may have misread the text through the lens of this framing, and it is furthermore understandable why many crip theorists and disabled readers have dismissed the novel as ableist based on Haraway and these paratextual readings.

What McCaffrey’s novel does is explore the ironic relationship between utopia and cheerful affect. Place-based utopias often posit general happiness or cheerful affect as an end goal. Many have argued that science fiction has the unique potential of allowing writers and readers to imagine *otherwise*, making an ideal conveyance for utopian discourse; however, unstated in this claim is that science fiction also has the power to allow writers and readers to imagine *the same*. This double-vision of *the same* and *otherwise* within the same temporal space destabilizes utopian narratives through irony: “Utopia’s critical edge requires irony’s edge to sustain its challenge to, rather than its endorsement of, ideologies of all stripes” (Wagnor-Lawlor 6). In *The Ship Who Sang*, the cheerfulness of these characters, a signifier of utopia, is deliberately juxtaposed with darker signaling of dystopia to create that double-vision of *the same* and *otherwise*. Helva is Le Guin’s “child in the basement”<sup>1</sup> that allows the Central Worlds to thrive; she exists in a dystopia within the same spatial plain as utopia, a utopia that relies on her very existence. Hutcheon asserts that this kind of irony gets its “edge” from having “two or more meanings being played off, one against another. It [irony] plays between meanings, in a space that is always affectively charged, that always has a critical edge” (72). McCaffrey’s novel’s critique comes from this space: the physical and discursive space that must contain both the utopia of the abled characters of Central Worlds and the dystopia of disabled characters within itself, creating an affective charge between optimism and debilitation.<sup>2</sup>

Helva's affect is cheerful and matter-of-fact, but her affect is the result of early childhood brainwashing. Early on in the novel, the narrator describes the education of shell-people to be "balanced properly between optimism and practicality" with a "non-defeatist attitude" (6). The novel explores how the Central Worlds uses this conditioning through Kira, a temporary brawn. Kira reveals to Helva that she has attempted suicide in the past but has been subjected to heavy conditioning to avoid it (67). Kira is highly suspicious of Helva at first because she believes that Helva is either participating in Kira's conditioning or is monitoring Kira for signs of conditioning failure. Helva assures Kira that neither is true but then gives the reader some insight into why the conditioning occurs: "And they can't allow you to suicide because the ethos of Central Worlds is dedicated to extending life and propagating it wherever and whenever possible. I'm a living example of the extremes to which they are willing to go to sustain a human life" (67). The mission of sustaining and saving life is equated with absolute control over the bodyminds of the citizens of Central Worlds. This control is justified through the utopian "ethos" but the unspoken question here is what kind of lives are valued and why are they valued? Central Worlds is clearly not interested in the kind of life Helva may have had as a disabled person at the beginning of the novel. Yet Helva insists in the above passage that she is proof that the "ethos" is real, that Central Worlds has gone "to extremes" to sustain her life (67). The irony here comes in the affective charge between the two statements: Central Worlds values a certain kind of life, a life they can control through a "cure." Conditioning in this novel, then, signifies the debilitating discourse that forces citizens to participate in the capitalist systems of this utopia as biopower.<sup>3</sup>

Helva's bodymind as a person/ship is positioned from the very beginning of the text as biopower for Central Worlds. Shell-people are expected to work for Central Worlds in whatever capacity deemed necessary until they pay off "the massive debt of early care, surgical adaptation, and maintenance charges" (10). Central Worlds is a "company store" model: the shell-person must rely on the government for all resources, medical or otherwise, until they have paid off their debt. While this arrangement may seem like a natural extension of a capitalist system that requires payment for services, it also blurs the boundaries between national and corporate entities. Central Worlds values Helva as biopower, which gives them a vested interest in continuing to debilitate her. By using utopian language—"Helva would live a rewarding, rich, and unusual life, a far cry from what she would have faced as an ordinary, 'normal' being" (1)—to describe the value of disabled bodyminds (provided they are not too disabled), Central Worlds simultaneously erases and debilitates Helva's body into biopower that is used for the good of the corporation-state.

When Helva does "pay off" by the final chapter, she realizes that although she yearns for companionship from someone who sees her as a human being, anyone qualified to be her partner would have gone through conditioning by Central Worlds, which she has begun to distrust. She is free to choose, but her choices are limited. While she contemplates this dilemma, another shell-person, Silvia, recommends that she get legal representation from some activist groups for minorities and then tells her to contact another shell-person to ask about other employment options (203). This advice suggests that the shell-people have formed both formal and informal

networks designed to resist the debilitation by Central Worlds. Faced with the possible threat of forced service, Helva realizes the extent of control Central Worlds has over shell-people:

Now Helva could see that the subtle, massive conditioning she'd received in her formative years was double-edged. It made her happy as a shell-person, it had dedicated her to her life in Service, and it made her Pay-off a mockery. What else could a BB ship do but continue as she had started... in Service? The same must apply to other shell-people trained to manage ships, mining planets or industrial complexes. (205)

The conditioning made Helva "happy" in her role as biopower and obscured the inability for Helva or any of the other shell-people to opt out. The last sentence especially highlights the irony: Central Worlds contends that the compensation the shell-people receive prevents them from becoming slaves, but ultimately, what does that compensation mean if the shell-people must give it back to Central Worlds in the end?

I am currently writing a chapter of my dissertation on this reading of McCaffrey's novel: there is simply too much material here for a short presentation like this one. I certainly do not intend to argue that *The Ship Who Sang* should be immune to criticism; McCaffrey's inattention to race and her positionality as a straight white seemingly abled woman perhaps brings into question her motives for writing this novel. However, I think this study of the novel as an ironic examination of utopian narratives through the lens of a disabled character, one who learns to recognize and resist the debilitation of those narratives, can help us understand feminist science fiction of the 1960's. After all, renowned science fiction texts such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969) posit utopias much like Central Worlds, but lack the ironic critique that McCaffrey's novel poses.

## Notes

1. A reference to Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", in which Omelas is a utopia that exists only so long as a child is tortured in a basement.
2. I use Jasbir Puar's definition of debilitation as the way in which social, political, and geographical forces slowly create populations as biopower for late capitalism (Puar xiii-xiv).
3. Robert McRuer connects the capitalist construction of disability with social constructions of heteronormativity in a theory he calls "compulsory abled-bodiness," meaning, "free to sell one's labor but not free to do anything else effectively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else" (8). He goes on to connect the social model of disability to the idea that normalcy does not just create disability, but that it compels citizens to perform ability in order to participate in capitalistic discourses (or risk being excluded) (8). Although Helva performs super-abled-bodiness instead of abled-bodiness, she still must perform to participate in the capitalist system.

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**Against Man: Violence and the Vegetal in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian***

Cynthia Zhang



Commonly marked as a horror novel, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* follows a simple premise: one day, after a series of bloody dreams, a woman named Yeong-hye stops eating meat. Yet despite the novel's title, reminiscent as it is of such horror movies as *The Ring* or *The Grudge*, it is not vegetarianism but patriarchal violence that emerges as the true horror in *The Vegetarian*. Rather than accept her unorthodox but otherwise initially innocuous decision, Yeong-hye's family members—in particular, her husband and her father—respond to her vegetarianism with intense and often violent censure. Previously seen by her husband as “completely unremarkable in every way,” Yeong-hye's conversion towards vegetarianism marks an end to her previous “passive personality” as she begins to instead start asserting control over her own body (Kang 11). As the violent responses of Yeong-hye's father and husband show, however, such attempts at autonomy are viewed as threats by patriarchal authorities and punished accordingly.

At the same time that *The Vegetarian* can and has been read as an “indictment of the Korean patriarchy,” it is also crucial that Yeong-hye's resistance to patriarchal violence takes the form of solidarity with non-human actors (Kang and Patrick). In an interview for Literary Hub, Kang acknowledges the feminist currents of *The Vegetarian* while also characterizing the novel as a mediation on her “long-lasting questions about the possibility/impossibility of innocence in this world” (Kang and Patrick). In this paper, I examine Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as an act of resistance against not just patriarchal violence, but the violent logic of consumption more generally. Through allying herself with planthood, initially through choosing a purely plant-based diet and then later through rejecting consumption altogether in favor of “becoming” a plant, Yeong-hye signals her desire for a model of being that does not rely on the consumption of other bodies for its own survival. Yeong-hye's resolutely human body, however, complicates a celebration of the vegetal as an alternative to human subjectivity as her attempts to become plantlike ultimately leave her near death. Despite this, *The Vegetarian* is not wholly nihilistic about the possibility of alternatives to systematic violence, and in Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye, I read the possibility for another mode of being, one which acknowledges the impossibility of innocence while insisting on a commitment to coalitional politics.

**Part I: The Meat of the Issue**

In examining Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, it is necessary to first consider what meat means within *The Vegetarian*. For Yeong-hye's family, eating meat is a natural behavior, and Yeong-hye's new diet is consequently disconcerting because of its challenge to the norm. “It's preposterous, everyone eats meat!” Yeong-hye's father exclaims during a family dinner (Kang 46). Similarly, when Yeong-hye and her husband attend a company dinner, Yeong-hye makes the other guests

uncomfortable not because she challenges their eating habits, but because her vegetarianism implicitly offers an alternative to normative meat consumption. It is particularly telling, moreover, that the figures who most strongly police Yeong-hye's eating habits are ones with strong ties to the established social order: Yeong-hye's father is a decorated veteran while Mr. Cheong, her husband, is a decidedly archetypal office worker. That the most severe censure of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism comes from such staunch representatives of the social order further emphasizes that "what matters is not vegetarianism but Yeong-hye's difference from others" and the threat posed by that deviance (Lee 68).

If diet is one realm in which societal norms exercise control over bodies, it is far from the only one. As a woman, Yeong-hye suffers particularly gendered forms of violence: as a young girl, she is expected to bear her father's paternal violence while as an adult, her status as a wife means she is expected to satisfy her husband's alimentary and sexual needs regardless of whether she shares them. In a patriarchal society which views her body as the property of others, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism becomes a way of asserting bodily autonomy. Previously the near perfect model of a docile Korean wife, Yeong-hye becomes unyielding when it comes to defending her right to vegetarianism. Following weeks of erratic behavior, Yeong-hye's family confront her and attempt to alternatively bully and convince her into eating meat. Yet despite Yeong-hye's weakened state, when she declares her refusal to comply, "[f]or the first time in a long while, her speech was clear and distinct" (Kang 45). Even in the midst of malnutrition and weeks of insomnia, Yeong-hye finds mental and physical strength in her right to vegetarianism, a right which also serves as a declaration of bodily autonomy.

Yet while Yeong-hye's commitment to vegetarianism can easily be read as an assertion of bodily sovereignty, Yeong-hye herself does not make this connection and instead consistently links her vegetarianism to her dreams. As generations of psychoanalysts have established, dreams are a primary space where repressed memories and unconscious desires can take form. Yeong-hye's blood-soaked dreams can thus be read as the return of the repressed, a way in which the bodies she has previously consumed "return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt" (Žižek 23). It is telling, then, that one of Yeong-hye's most vivid dreams is a childhood memory of eating a dog that had bitten her. Prior to biting Yeong-hye, the dog is Whitey, a beloved presence whom "everyone in the had village always thought... could do no wrong" (Kang 49). After biting "the big man's daughter," however, Whitey becomes merely 'the dog,' a creature whose flesh, according to folkloric tradition, must be eaten for Yeong-hye's wound to heal (49). To kill the dog, Yeong-hye's father ties it to the back of a running motorcycle, forcing the animal to run to its death in an ordeal that is supposedly "a milder punishment" than flogging but which Kang describes in excruciating, nightmarish detail (49). While not directly responsible for the dog's fate, Yeong-hye's implication in its death is more direct and visceral than it would be with a fish or piece of pork bought from a grocery store, and thus her recollection of this childhood anecdote can be seen as a sign of her lingering guilt over her role in a violent system that preserves certain lives at the expense of others.



Notably, the manner in which the dog's death is arranged mirrors the operation of humanistic systems of sovereignty. As a companion animal, Whitey occupies a para-human space and is granted a para-selfhood, one which is accordingly stripped away when Whitey becomes 'the dog' and thus an entity which can be killed and eaten. Almost human yet indelibly animal, dogs represent a border space where selfhood is largely provisional. Such a space of precarious subjectivity is also the domain of traditionally Othered humans, and within *The Vegetarian* itself, Kang connects the practice of meat consumption to the legacies of patriarchy and colonialism. The first section of *The Vegetarian*, also called "The Vegetarian," is narrated by Mr. Cheong, and throughout the sub-novella, he never refers to Yeong-hye by her name—she is only ever 'my wife,' a term which neatly condenses his understanding and expectations of her. Yeong-hye is his wife; therefore, she prepares meals for him, sees him off to work each day, and fulfills his sexual needs. When she ceases performing the last of these wifely duties, it is not long before Mr. Cheong's frustration leads him to rape her in a scene he mentally compares to that of "a 'comfort woman' dragged in against her will" by "the Japanese soldier demanding her services" (38).

The link between colonial violence and Yeong-hye's plight are further underscored by the fact that Yeong-hye's father, her first abuser, was a veteran of the Vietnam War, another colonial conflict in which South Korea fought on the side of former colonizers. As Rose Casey and other scholars have noted, Yeong-hye's father is described as taking immense pride in his service, taking any opportunity to boast of his actions there: "*I myself, in Vietnam... seven Vietcong...*" (Kang 38). Note how the enemy here is referred to as not men or soldiers, but simply 'seven Vietcong.' Just as renaming Whitey to 'the dog' makes it possible for a village to kill and eat a former beloved pet, referring to enemy soldiers as 'seven Vietcong' is a gesture that reduces the value of their lives and thus enables their death. Similar to how human sovereignty rests on the consumption of animal bodies, patriarchal subjects and colonial powers acquire sovereignty through the 'consumption' of female subjects and colonized countries.

Considered alongside the other forms of violence present in her life, Yeong-hye's turn towards the vegetal can be seen as her attempt to exit a model of sovereignty that demands consumption. In becoming vegetarian, Yeong-hye rejects the consumption of animal bodies; in becoming a plant, she rejects the consumption of any living bodies. Rather than being predicated on the domination of others, plants are self-contained and self-providing; through photosynthesis, they meet their own needs rather than relying on others. Upon first meeting Yeong-hye, In-hye's husband describes his sister-in-law as "radiat[ing] energy, like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary," and those tree-like qualities—self-sufficiency and lack of either excess or desire—are only intensified after Yeong-hye converts to vegetarianism (71). "[U]ncommonly hard and self-contained," Yeong-hye post-vegetarianism is a subject who has exited an economy of desire that depends on consumption of the Other for its fulfilment (94).

Yet for all the potential of the vegetal as an alternative form of subjectivity, one cannot escape the fact that by the end of *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye is physically near death. While death can be read as an ultimate rejection of human subjectivity, Kang herself has described *The Vegetarian* as

a novel about “human violence and the (im)possibility of refusing it,” implying that for all that we are meant to sympathize with Yeong-hye, there is still something irrevocably quixotic and doomed about her philosophy (Kang and Patrick). Queer theorists such as Lee Edelman may read death as a refusal of normative values and systems, but in the final analysis, death is still death; it is not a mode for living in this world. Yeong-hye’s commitment to the vegetal may command our respect, but she does not serve as a model for future dwelling. For that, one is better served by examining Yeong-hye’s sister, In-hye.

## **Part II: Sibling Sympathies: In-hye and Vegetal Solidarity**

As the narrator of the “Flaming Trees,” the third and final section of *The Vegetarian*, In-hye is positioned throughout as a counterpart to Yeong-hye. Despite not being close in age, the two sisters are often described in terms of their physical similarities, with both Mr. Cheong and In-hye’s husband commenting on their resemblance to each other. Beyond physical similarities, In-hye and Yeong-hye initially both adhere to standard expectations of good Korean wives; prior to the Yeong-hye’s conversion to vegetarianism, she is noted as being a “skilled cook” like her sister, with both women dutifully preparing their husbands a variety of meat-based dishes (Kang 42). When In-hye’s husband consistently prioritizes work over his family, In-hye never directly confronts him; similarly, pre-vegetarianism, Yeong-hye is the type of wife who dutifully irons her husband’s clothes and sees him to the door each morning. Despite these similarities, In-hye is consistently described as the more conventionally attractive of the two: while Yeong-hye is androgynous, In-hye has “larger and prettier” eyes and is generally “much more feminine” (35). In better conforming to societal standards of femininity, In-hye is marked as also better conforming to societal standards than her sister. As a diligent wife to her husband and a caring mother to Ji-woo, In-hye fits typical expectations of womanhood, while as the successful owner of her own cosmetics store, she exemplifies the self-determining liberal subject whose “innate strength of character” enables her “to make one’s own way in life” (145).

Yet for all that In-hye is the more successful of the sisters, such success does not make her immune to patriarchal violence. While their father’s violence targeted Yeong-hye primarily, he does not shy from using physical discipline with his other daughter. Similarly, while In-hye’s husband is less demanding than her sister’s, he still expects sexual services from her, neither stopping nor caring when she starts crying during a sexual encounter. For all her outward accomplishments, In-hye is as much a victim of the patriarchy as Yeong-hye, and as her sister’s condition worsens, In-hye begins to consider the hollowness of her success: “She had never lived. Even as a child, as far back as she could remember, she had done nothing but endure” (167). As the stressors pile up on her, In-hye begins to be haunted by the same bloody dreams that tormented her sister, a sign that she too is vulnerable to the existential dilemmas that have led Yeong-hye to self-destruction. More so than any of the characters in *The Vegetarian*, In-hye understands her sister—and consequently, more than any of them, she is vulnerable to following in Yeong-hye’s steps.

Ultimately, however, In-hye does not share her sister's fate. Speaking on her intentions for the novel, Kang states that the novel's ending image—one in which “In-hye stares fiercely at the trees” while she accompanies Yeong-hye in an ambulance—was intentionally chosen for its ambivalence (188). Even as In-hye searches for answers by studying the trees her sister seeks to emulate, her interrogation is an open-ended one: “Without start or finish, only struggling tenaciously with her open eyes, in the same form/way of “now” in our life” (Kang and Patrick). Like Yeong-hye, In-hye is acutely aware of the violence endemic to a system of humanist subjectivity; unlike her sister, however, In-hye does not accept vegetal sovereignty as an alternative to the liberal humanist subject. By acknowledging violence without fully renouncing humanity, In-hye can be seen as enacting what Julietta Singh would call the project of dehumanism. As a practice, dehumanism seeks “to dispossess oneself from the sovereignty of man [and] to refuse the anticolonial reach of becoming masterful human subjects” by making oneself vulnerable to the Other (Singh 157). Yet even as a project that encourages sympathy for both Othered humans and non-human actors, dehumanism remains a practice of “vital ambivalence,” one which “emphasizes, politicizes, and embraces the subject's contradictions and slippages” (158). Just as In-hye's gaze embraces the coexistence of beauty and violence in the world, the dehumanist subject is both altruistic and selfish, a wronged victim and a perpetrator of violence themselves.

In its focus on ambivalence and refusal of innocence, dehumanism appears as a powerful alternative to both liberal humanist and vegetal conceptions of the subject. Rather than a vegetal form of sovereignty, I argue that dehumanism enacts what one could call vegetal solidarity. While vegetal sovereignty is represented by Yeong-hye's attempt to literally become a plant, vegetal solidarity can be best found in In-hye's relationship with her sister. As represented by Yeong-hye, vegetal sovereignty moves inwardly away from the world and seeks to erase the difference between self (Yeong-hye) and other (trees). By contrast, vegetal solidarity reaches outwards towards the world, operating via sympathy with radically different others rather than a totalizing empathy. In-hye may participate in her family's disastrous intervention attempt, but she is also the only person who does not attempt to dissuade her sister from vegetarianism, instead focusing on how Yeong-hye should “draw up a proper, well-balanced meal plan” (Kang 43). While this advice remains a corrective injunction, In-hye remains the only member of her family who respects the essence of Yeong-hye's decision to give up meat. When Yeong-hye's complete rejection of food leaves her close to death, In-hye's worry may tempt her “to force [Yeong-hye's] mouth open” and shove food inside, but In-hye ultimately sides with her sister against psychiatric doctors who would use coercive violence to rescue her (160). In-hye may find her sister inscrutable, but she still cares for her, and in this care, one can see the coalitional promise of dehumanism: the promise of being sensitive to not only those beings similar to us, but also “those which we still imagine as radically distinct” from us (Singh 64).

In addition to extending outward, vegetal solidarity is also a relational practice that extends forward towards the future. While responsibility towards others also entails guilt over one's failures to carry out one's ethical duty to others, responsibility's future-facing orientation is one which

does not allow one to be caught in the mire of this guilt. Musing on the similarities between herself and her sister, In-hye concludes that it is her son, Ji-woo, and “the sense of responsibility she felt toward him” that ultimately anchors her to the world (Kang 173). Given that children are commonly figured as representatives of futurity, In-hye’s responsibility towards her son can also be read as a responsibility towards the future and the possibility of newer, kinder forms of existence. At the end of the novel, as the ambulance rushes Yeong-hye to the hospital, In-hye admits to her sister that she shares her bloody dreams. “[A]nd I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over... but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don’t we? Because... because then...” (187). Ambivalent and uncertain as they are, In-hye’s questions do not point to any concrete model of being that can supplant the liberal humanist subject and all its flaws. Yet in this same ambivalence and refusal of clear-cut answers, one can see glimpses of a mode of existence that neither repudiates nor resigns oneself to the world, but which rather aims to dwell imperfectly within it.

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# **NON-FICTION REVIEWS**



*Image by jplenio*

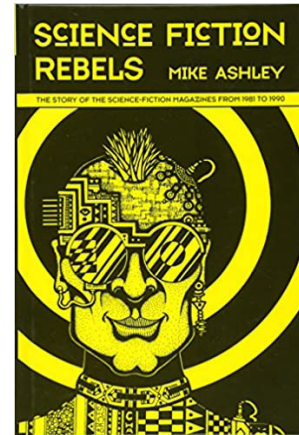


### *Science Fiction Rebels*, by Mike Ashley

B.L. King



Mike Ashley. *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990*. Liverpool University Press, 2020 (hardback: 2016). Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies 54. Paperback. 495 pg. \$39.10. ISBN 9781789621716. Ebook ISBN 9781781384404.



To fully and accurately account for the history of science fiction remains a difficult task for scholars of the genre due to its ever-changing subject matter, fluctuating surges, and mixed public receptions, as well as the bordering genres it can include, depending on who one asks and in what time period, and the colossal range and measure of the genre in itself. It seems to be to this end that Mike Ashley, a legendary scholar, editor, and anthologist of science fiction, fantasy, and mystery, attempts to recount the history of specifically science fiction (hereafter “SF”) magazines by time period in his ambitious collection of volumes entitled *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine*. The series includes the previously published *The Time Machines* (2001), *Transformations* (2005), and *Gateways to Forever* (2007) and the subject of this review, *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science-Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990* (2016), the latest volume, although a projected fifth volume entitled *The Rise of the Cyber Chronicles* is set to cover the 1990s. Unlike most existing scholarship on science fiction magazines, *Science Fiction Rebels* microscopically focuses on the publication and editing history of the magazines while occasionally mentioning the trends of the genre, namely the cyberpunk movement, slipstream SF, and the radical hard-SF renaissance. This volume heavily centers on the editors and sales trends of the SF magazines around the world along with their format, level of professionalism, circulation, and samples of their content. *Science Fiction Rebels* proves to be an irreplaceable companion for study of SF magazine editorship in the 1980s and, though it is not ideal for new or casual SF fans, those interested in specifically SF magazine editing will find this volume as a useful resource for surveying editorial hardships and might view the decade as more difficult for SF writers to prosper in than originally thought. Besides arguing for better publishing and editorial techniques, Ashley displays no interest in hypothesizing an argument from his data, but instead offers it up to future scholars as a prime literary source on SF magazine culture in the 80s.

In *Science Fiction Rebels*, Ashley organizes the magazines by prozine—meaning professional magazine, semi-prozine—to mean semi-professional magazine, and small press magazines, approaching them in mostly that respective order. Ashley also divides the magazines by region,

starting with America, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Australia, and South Africa, ending with non-English speaking regions covering Asia, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Americas. Ashley concludes the volume with five appendixes that are astoundingly detailed and absolutely unparalleled in bibliographic utility, recounting the names and issues of the magazines, a directory of the magazines' editors and cover artists, and the magazines' circulation figures. Interviews with editors, a few authors, and clips of reviews and even some magazine reader reviews are frequently made use of throughout *Science Fiction Rebels* to establish public attitudes and behind-the-scenes stories surrounding the magazines.

Ashley spends little time speculating or judging what makes an SF magazine attractive or successful, but rather suggests that future magazines learn from the mistakes of the many failed magazines of the 1980s. He postulates, using the recounted tales of fallen SF magazines in the 80s as evidence, that insufficient funding, inadequate planning, and lack of an open, devout, manifold publishing and editing team as combined and individual factors steered the magazines, professional or not, into their demise. Other than this, however, Ashley does not attempt to argue over the best of the magazines, their content or art, nor the theory surrounding their content. Ashley's main objective in *Science Fiction Rebels* is to give a mostly historical account of SF magazines in the 80's, not more, not less, with microscopic detail and momentous collections of data, focusing mainly on the editorial side of the magazines. Throughout *Science Fiction Rebels*, the rapid imparting of editorial history and name-dropping might be overwhelming for less than serious SF readers, but to advanced SF enthusiasts and scholars, the brisk history is welcome for academic purposes, and the name-dropping is an exciting discovery of beloved authors who started their careers in SF magazines. However, to both types of readers the repetitiveness of recounting the back story and demise of the literary magazines can become tedious.

Thus to start, in chapters 1 and 2, Ashley recounts the stories of the prozine SF magazines, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories* and *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, and *Omni*. Here Ashley retells the birth of cyberpunk and the competition between SF magazines as well as their conformity to a slick magazine design or tradition, as well as the ways in which formatting and content changed and affected sales. Ashley briefly mentions public opinions on each magazine while paying most attention to the editors behind the magazines and sales and circulation history. As with most of the magazines discussed in *Science Fiction Rebels*, Ashley offers brief bibliographies of some authors and summaries of stories within these magazines to provide a glimpse into what each magazines' interests and readerships were like. Ashley spends the most time on these magazines, rightfully so given their legendary legacies and impact on not only SF magazines, but SF as a whole.

Chapter 3 details the related cousin of SF in horror and dark SF, mentioning splatter punk. Here Ashley describes the histories of Rod Sterling's *The Twilight Zone* magazine, *Night Cry*, *The Horror Show*, and *Pulphouse*, amongst other small press magazines, giving an overview of their birth, life, and fall. Here Ashley draws attention to the blurring and mixing of genres that SF was

undergoing in America while also emphasizing the competition between SF and other genre magazines. Recounting the hard-SF renaissance, though there is relatively little commentary on what contributed to it, chapters 4 and 5 tell the histories of SF magazines in English-speaking countries other than America. These include *Interzone*, *Something Else*, *Back Brain Recluse*, *Dream Magazine*, *Stargate*, *Tesseract*, *Omega*, and, of course, others. These chapters illuminate the reversion to hard SF in other countries besides America, which was experiencing a pushing of SF boundaries and a “Cyberpunk Daze,” (212) as Ashley coins it.

At the end, chapters 6 and 7 encompass slipstream SF’s and speculative fiction’s places in the SF magazines, discussing the history of *Last Wave*, *Modern Stories*, *New Pathways* and others. The chapter also offers a much-needed highlight on the short-lived but influential small press magazines of the 80s. Lastly and interestingly, appendix 1, which seems out of place as an appendix and could have easily been a chapter 8, details the history of SF magazines that took root in non-English speaking countries; here Ashley manages to cover multiple countries from every region of the world. The other appendixes are collections of data tables involving sales figures, production, and contributors.

Though *Science Fiction Rebels* offers an unparalleled collection of data and a detailed editorial history, it excludes historical events and social justice issues of the 80s that impacted SF. For instance, there is no mention of the AIDS epidemic, the Cold War, the election of Sandra Day O’Connor (the first female U.S. Supreme Court Justice), the Ronald Reagan campaign, or the savings and loan crisis, all of which impacted either the economic or the content side of SF. Ashley makes no connection between general history and the history of SF magazines, not even to make commentary or connections on the impact of the world on the genre, its authors or editors.

There is also no mention of or allusion to the relationship between SF magazines and the massive blockbuster SF films of the 80s such as *Back to the Future* (1985), *E.T.* (1982), *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), or *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi* (1983), all of which sparked mainstream and widespread interest in SF. Ashley does not speculate about whether the magazines received any benefit from this SF explosion or if the content was influenced by these major films. Given the hard-SF renaissance, it seems impossible to not discuss these major films and their impact on authors. Part of this omission could be due to the fact that Ashley seems less interested in analyzing the literary content of the magazines than in focusing on the sales and editorship of the magazines, in an attempt to avoid arguments over the magazines’ stories and literary themes. This remains the only, albeit major, downside of *Science Fiction Rebels*. With no opinion or connection between the world of SF outside of magazines, a microscopic view of the 1980s SF magazines editorship becomes the result.

Besides its lack of historical context and linguistic repetitiveness, *Science Fiction Rebels* fills a niche but tremendous void in SF scholarship of 80s literary magazines and history. Giving an origin story of cyberpunk and slipstream SF, along with over 200 pages of appendices of editorial data and a developed recounting of the history behind the SF magazines of the 80s, Ashley gives other scholars of SF magazines valuable insight to the world of editing SF in one of the world's most eclectic decades. Ashley makes *Science Fiction Rebels* a scholarly must-have for research and editorial history within 80s SF.

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### *Inception*, by David Carter

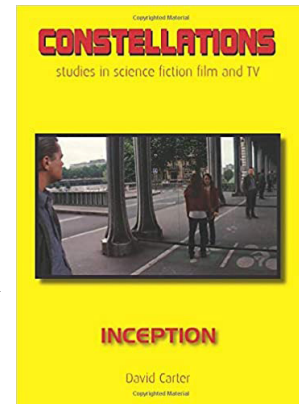
Bruce A. Beatie



David Carter. *Inception*. New York: Auteur (Columbia UP), 2019.

Constellations: Studies in Science Fiction Film and TV. Paperback. 120 pg. \$15.00. ISBN 9781911325055. E-book \$14.99. ISBN 9781911325062.

This small (3.5" x 7.5") and short (120 pages) monograph is part of a brief series published since 2016; the first volume on *Blade Runner* by Sean Redmond had appeared first in 2008 as "Studying *Blade Runner*." Jon Towilson's *Close Encounters* appeared in 2016, and all of the subsequent half dozen in the series appeared in 2019. I was interested in reviewing this volume because, shortly after Christopher Nolan's film appeared in 2010, I reviewed a 2011 volume of semi-scholarly articles on *Inception* (*Extrapolation* 54, Winter 2013, pp. 316ff.), and I wanted to see how critical views might have changed over those years. What strikes the reader immediately, however, is that within the book's ten numbered chapters plus "Notes" and "General Bibliography" are 57 titled sections and subsections—an average of some two pages per section; the "Contents" page alone lists seven of the subtitles. Clearly, the brevity of these sections would not do justice to a discussion of changing critical views.



In a very brief "Introductory Remarks" that includes a "Synopsis" of Nolan's films (7-8), Carter introduces us to "Christopher Nolan: The Director and His Work" (9-29) with summaries of his films from *Memento* (2000) to *Dunkirk* (2017) and stills from all the films but the second and third *Batman* films. After a very brief chapter 3 ("The Industrial Context of *Inception* from Production to Premiere" 31-32), chapter 4 ("The Question of Genre" 33-49) discusses "The Notion of Genre," "The Heist Film Genre," and "The Sci-Fi Film Genre," concluding with a brief "Note on Tech-Noir." In chapter 5 ("Dreams in the Cinema 51-78), Carter finally focuses on the title film *Inception*; after shorter subsections, he turns to "How *Inception* Uses Dream Theory" (54-78), illustrated with eleven images from the film.

In chapter 6 ("Cobb's Emotional Journey: From Guilt to Redemption" 51-78), the only chapter with no subtitles, Carter provides a close analysis of the film itself. The only image is taken from the end of the film: the image of "The spinning top, now still" (88). The chapter concludes: "The final ambiguous image in the film of the spinning top and Cobb's reunion with the children can therefore be interpreted as implying that maybe it does not matter whether the scene is real or not" (93).



The concluding chapters are very brief: Chapter 7 (“*Inception* and the Arts,” 95-97) includes images by M. C. Escher and Francis Bacon. Chapter 8 (“The Ending: Dreams, Reality and Ambiguity” 99-100) provides a narrative of the final minutes of the film, in which Cobb and the team apparently return to current reality; it includes an unidentified photo (100), titled “Dream or reality?” which looks like a desktop covered with obscure objects, perhaps toys. The penultimate chapter 9 (“Critical Reception” 101-103) briefly describes a few reviews, negative and positive. In the final chapter (“10. Further Lines of Inquiry” 105-108), the most interesting line provides a partial text, in both French and English, of the Edith Piaf song, a few lines of which one hears frequently in the film. The “Notes” section (109-113) contains the sources of texts referred to in the text, and the “General Bibliography” (115-116) lists “works recommended for further reading on specific topics.”

Since my university library does not own any of the monographs in this series, I cannot compare Carter’s study of *Inception* with the other publications in this series. The substance of the book is in chapter 4-6, but only chapter 6 deals exclusively with the film. What I found most interesting was the discussion in chapter 4 of *Inception* as a heist film, a concept new to me. Carter’s only direct reference for the film is to Daryl Lee’s 2014 *The Heist Film: Stealing with Style*; a check of its contents shows that Lee does not deal with Carter’s *Inception*. Carter fails to mention sources available on the internet, including an online article of 2018 (“The Best 25 Heist Films of All Time”) that mentions *Inception* as the 5th best heist film. Wikipedia has a very detailed 30-page anonymous entry on *Inception* with 178 references; only some 30 of the references were published later than 2012. Carter’s “Notes” fail to mention the 2011 collection of studies I mentioned in the first paragraph; in that book, the essay by Sylvia Wenmacker is the most instructive writing on Nolan’s film than I have come across. In short, this little book is, for me a least, more frustrating than informative.

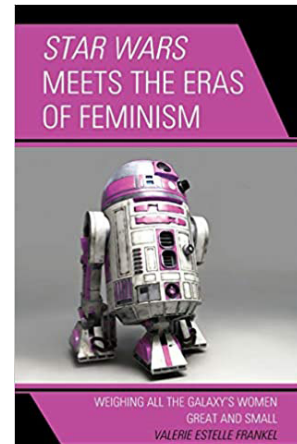
### *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism*, by Valerie Estelle Frankel



Kara Kennedy

Valerie Estelle Frankel. *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism: Weighing All the Galaxy's Women Great and Small*. Lexington Books, 2018.  
Hardcover. 353 pg. \$120.00. ISBN 9781498583862.

Valerie Estelle Frankel takes on the daunting task of analyzing all of the women who appear in the *Star Wars* Universe in *Star Wars Meets the Eras of Feminism: Weighing All the Galaxy's Women Great and Small*. The resulting study is a pleasurable and enlightening trip through the decades of *Star Wars* media, where one may be simultaneously cringing in agreement with the criticism while marveling at the many interesting ways of examining the representation of women. It is clear that Frankel has a solid grasp of the vast amount of material to be able to discuss women in the films and television shows, as well as the comics, novels, video games, and other media from the legacy expanded universe and the Disney canon. It is unfortunate that the book was published before the final film in the Sequel Trilogy was released, but there is certainly room for continuing studies as new media are produced. For those who have not had the time to keep up with the *Star Wars* Universe, this book may spark interest in reengaging with the franchise to discover characters such as rogue archaeologist Doctor Aphra, who currently only appears in the comics and an audio drama adaptation.



Frankel takes advantage of a variety of metrics in her analysis, moving between lenses such as the male gaze, the Bechdel Test, agency, and diversity to discuss the representation of women and intersectional issues of race and sexuality. The resulting richness and multi-layered nature of the analysis demonstrate the value in drawing from a wide theoretical pool. Her study brings together conversations and critical perspectives largely occurring in popular culture publications alongside theories and analyses found in academic articles and books. This provides a real sense of a larger picture unfolding in the world of science fiction and fantasy about the place of women and other marginalized people.

Frankel begins her study in section one, "The Original Trilogy Meets Seventies Feminism," with a thorough discussion of Princess Leia Organa and other Original Trilogy women in relation to second wave feminism of the 1970s. She weaves together commentary on Leia's costuming, changes in agency across the trilogy, and the extent to which she reflects tropes about princesses

and damsels in distress. Frankel acknowledges the breakthroughs Leia represented in the historical time period, but she does not shy away from interrogating problematic areas. The analyses in this section of characters such as Leia, Mon Mothma, and Oola the Twi'lek are important in establishing the context for the discussion of women in *Star Wars* and also allowing for comparisons with later depictions of the same characters or species. Frankel thus carefully layers her arguments to be able to demonstrate some movement away from stereotypical portrayals of women.

In “The Girl Power Prequel Era,” Frankel moves into an analysis of women in the Prequel Trilogy and legacy multimedia and how they reflect aspects of third wave feminism and girl power. For example, her critique of Padmé/Queen Amidala reveals a complicated web of images that help explain the difficulty in labeling female characters in simple terms. Indeed, Frankel calls this “an era of contradictions, seen in the variously empowered and weakened character” (43). The analysis of Padmé’s complex costumes and the downward trend of her agency is insightful and further strengthened when placed in conversation with the idealistic markers of third wave feminism and key texts such as Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994).

In the final section, “The Fourth Wave Hits the Sequel Era,” Frankel covers the increased presence of women in the franchise since 2008 and explores the extent to which they align with fourth wave feminism. Moving fluidly between major characters, their expanded characterization in other media, and minor characters, she is able to show both progression and setbacks in the franchise’s movement toward greater inclusion of a diverse range of women. There is significant attention to female Force users such as Ahsoka Tano and Rey, and the increased diversity in the Sequel Trilogy and *Rogue One*. Even the more experimental media of the *Forces of Destiny* cartoons—designed as tasters of the larger universe for young girls—receive coverage. The closing analysis of the women in *Solo* shows a return to traditional archetypes; however, Frankel suggests that the droid L3-37 represents a stand-out character as “a delightful voice for empowerment” who, though cast as humorous, reminds the audience of the rights some characters must still fight for (318).

Accessible and engaging, this book offers a solid addition to the growing body of scholarship on *Star Wars*, and the representation of women and diversity in particular. One of its advantages is its comprehensiveness with regards to the sheer amount of media covered in both primary and secondary sources. The strength of Frankel’s arguments is fairly even throughout, though there are some rare places where her conclusions seem overly generous in trying to find positive representations. She relies on relevant direct quotations to support the thread of her analysis, which enables a multiplicity of voices to comment on the material under discussion. The study thus adds value by bringing key points of previous material in conversation with each other as filtered through Frankel’s perspective of each character, though sometimes the other voices dwarf

Frankel's own. This book would be useful to scholars and students in a cross-section of disciplines including science fiction and fantasy studies, feminist and women's studies, film and media studies, and cultural studies. However, it is also presented and written in a way that can engage general readers with an interest in analyses of the *Star Wars* universe.

**Kara Kennedy** is a researcher and writer in the areas of science fiction and digital literacy. Her doctoral work focused on women in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, and she has also published articles on world-building in the series. She has forthcoming works on other topics in the series and posts literary analyses of *Dune* for a mainstream audience on her blog at [DuneScholar.com](http://DuneScholar.com).

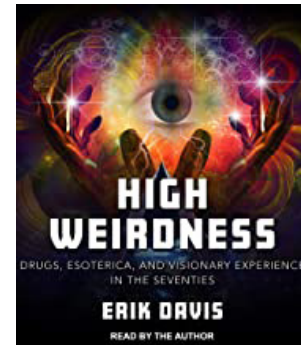
### *High Weirdness*, by Erik Davis

Terence Sawyers



Erik Davis. *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies*. The MIT Press, 2019. Hardback. 550 pg. \$34.95. ISBN 9781907222764.

Erik Davis's most recent foray into the weird currents of the post-war counterculture complements his previous examination of similar territory. Where *TechGnosis* (1998) unfurled the occult foundations of our modern information technologies and *Nomad Codes* (2010) offered a glossary of key ideas in contemporary occulture, *High Weirdness* is a collection of three case studies of key "counter cultural seekers" that places them firmly within the context of California in the early to mid 1970s (31). Taking a critical approach described as incomplete constructivism, Davis strives to map the dynamic forces that structured the first half of the 1970s and had such a profound effect on his three seekers: Robert Anton Wilson, Terence McKenna, and Philip K. Dick. His case studies for each of these authors focus, in turn, on extraordinary experiences that they each reported, and the various methods they each deployed to help them find meaning in those experiences. This is an intimidating book for many reasons, not least of all the 550-page doorstop physicality of the current hard-back edition, so Davis's arguments and approach will prove challenging to many humanities scholars, especially those wedded to prevailing discourses within literary studies.



When approaching the epiphanic experiences of his three psychonauts (a term he uses throughout to collectively describe his three subjects), Davis takes "the risky move of trying to take them seriously without taking them literally" (6). Religious experience is not examined here at arm's length or with any attempt to explain away the experiences, for example, as delusion, as hallucination, etc. Instead, it is taken for granted that in each case something was experienced, and there is no handwringing on Davis' part about how to either taxonomize these experiences or provide ontological justifications for them. Instead, the focus is on producing maps of "influences, resonances and structural dynamics" that reveal the interrelated and looping lines of force that shape, and are in turn shaped by, these religious experiences (7). It is this post-critical approach that may prove incompatible with traditions of Enlightened materialism that have been so central to the discipline of science fiction studies.

This, more religious than literary studies, approach is influenced by William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). James's text exemplifies the technique of incomplete constructivism by only partially committing itself to the tenets of social constructivism, hence



its incompleteness. For James, and in turn Davis, strict adherence to social constructivism is too reductive, reducing all experience to the social forces that shape them while leaving no space for encounters from within or without; from within the biological bodies we inhabit or from a without that is situated outside of or beyond the frame of structured reality. Davis argues that these two spheres, the body and the cosmic, are not blank slates, with the consequence that although encounters will be structured—“organized and exploited” (23)—by social forces, they cannot always be reduced to them.

Davis’s transgressive engagement with the prevailing norms of humanities scholarship is furthered by his sympathy for the ideas of polarizing public intellectual Bruno Latour. Latour’s storied career has seen his arguments gain both vociferous attack and celebrated acceptance across the disparate schools that make up the broader humanities. For Davis, Latour is useful twice over. First, Latour’s mapping of the discourses of power that structure knowledge production and legitimization emboldens Davis in his position-taking as a primarily religious studies scholar, a sub-discipline that has (until recently) been in the proverbial doghouse. Second, Latour’s problematizing of cause and effects arguments through his concept of networks and forces of interrelation is a key tool that Davis deploys in order to unlock the interrelationships that produce, and are produced by, the various encounters explored as part of *High Weirdness*.

Though I have described Davis’s tome as intimidating, this can be somewhat pushed against. Though a dense text, filled with challenging ideas, the structure is designed to be modular, which is often aimed for in longform academic writing but rarely achieves this degree of success. Chapters are separated into sub-sections, and then into further entries that average out at about 4-5 pages each. Davis invites readers to jump about and read the entries that appeal to them, in the order they choose. Each entry is both discrete from its neighbors while also being one part of a larger jigsaw. This allows flexibility for the reader, who may be pursuing a specific narrow interest, may want to pore over the same entry repeatedly or may want to read the book cover to cover. There are three comparisons that I think are apt here when considering this modular reading as an actualization of potential: first is *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) by JG Ballard; second are the exegetical writings of Philip K. Dick, which are synchronistically covered as part of *High Weirdness*’ case study on Dick; third the Bible, and other religious books that invite one to move between procedural and selective reading.

The success of this modularity makes Davis’s work far more accessible than might be suspected. One does not need a strong foundation in occult literature or religious studies before tackling this text, nor is it necessary to be a keen reader of any of the three writers focused on: Wilson, McKenna and Dick. However, those already conversant in the existing scholarship are afforded the opportunity to see a leading scholar of religious studies act as part of the vanguard of an increasingly self-confident sub-discipline no longer satisfied with existing on the periphery of the broad humanities.

For science fiction scholars, critical frameworks being developed as part of the respective studies of the weird, the occult, and New Religious Movements can prove challenging to those wedded to secular Marxism and ideology critique (which both make up part of the foundational DNA of SF studies). For scholars who welcome this challenge, the post-critical approach used by Davis could open new approaches to SF texts as well as productively problematizing the boundaries of genre and of form that characterize speculative expression. In this respect, *High Weirdness* puts its money where its mouth is by including Philip K. Dick as its third, and most extensive, case study. Dick, who proved so important to the legitimatization of the nascent discipline of Science Fiction studies, may also prove, via the work of scholars like Davis, to be a key gatekeeper that moves SF studies into the weirder territory that lies *beyond*.

**Terence Sawyers** is a film and media scholar who insists he is not a SF scholar; despite this the vast majority of his research continues to overlap with SF scholarship, go figure. His primary research area is the adaptation of SF writer Philip K. Dick into film and television. He also side-lines as a conspiracy theory theorist and is a dabbler in the history of occultism. When not sifting through layers of simulated hyperreality he can be found hosting About Film ([aboutfilmedinburgh.wordpress.com](http://aboutfilmedinburgh.wordpress.com)), a regular public engagement event held in the meat-space that is Edinburgh, Scotland.

## *Italian Science Fiction*, by Simone Brioni and Danele Comberiati



Sean D. Memolo

Simone Brioni and Daniele Comberiati. *Italian Science Fiction: The Other in Literature and Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Studies in Global Science Fiction. Hardcover. xvi + 289 pg. \$84.99. ISBN 9783030193256. eBook ISBN 9783030193263.

The “Anglophone Bias” in science fiction consumption and scholarship is an unfortunate phenomenon whose validity, causes, and outcomes have been discussed at length. Indeed, select a science fiction aficionado at random from any English-speaking country, and generally they would be hard-pressed, if called upon, to provide any detail about the science fiction product of, say, Italy, or why they should know or care about any of it at all. This study provides that reader with a lively, coherent education while leaving a residue of unsated curiosity on their palate. Brioni and Comberiati’s book explores how the speculative fiction of modern Italy, be it in literature, film, or the sequential art narrative, has presented The Other, and to what end. The authors concede that Italian science fiction published post-unification (1861) may on its face seem to be derivative of more well-known English language works, but analysis of it informed by social and historical context reveals truths about definitions of Italian national and regional identity and how Italy’s minorities are perceived and valued. These insights extrapolate to postcolonial and neocolonial situations, and point the way to the latent value of science fiction, in “other” settings.



The monograph begins chronologically, with an examination of the relationship between colonialism, exploration narratives/travel writing, and early science fiction produced after the unification of Italy in 1861. Even before the birth of the nation, science fiction writers imagined an Italian future where outsiders such as Germany and the Vatican had been dispatched. Later, travel periodicals such as *Giornale illustrato dei viaggi e delle avventure di terra e di mare* [Illustrated Journal of Travels and Adventures on Land and Sea] (1878-1931) set up a dichotomy between the idealized civilized Italian explorer and the savage indigene. An important function of this dichotomy was to justify colonization and to represent it as a righteous endeavor so that the explorer was not merely appropriating land, resources, and labor, but instead providing scientific progress, order, and moral direction to beings who were perceived/depicted as little more than animals and thus lacking in any legitimate right to the exotic paradises they inhabited and the precious natural resources therein. Writers such as Paolo Mategazza, Emilio Salgari, and Yambo published science fiction stories in the early twentieth century that had all the trappings of travel writing, but these journeys were either to other planets or the Earth’s future; the protagonists

continued to be Italian or European adventurers who were left to contend with and bring a civilizing force to aliens that were merely exaggerated contemporaneous racial stereotypes of Earth's colonized peoples. Thus, early Italian science fiction provided some of the fabric in the curtain that was placed between "Italian-ness" and "Other."

Later chapters look at narrative reactions and responses to the perceived challenges Italian national identity, calcified by tradition, faced by merely existing in the proximity of other cultures. In the decades following World War II, Italy endured a monkey's paw-like material prosperity followed by profound political turmoil. Apocalyptic films explored the resulting fractures to Italian culture with varying levels of success and ambiguity. In *Omicron* (1963) the advance party for an alien invasion observes Italian society through the eyes of a southern migrant factory worker. *L'ultimo uomo della terra* (*The Last Man on Earth* [1964]) shows the last stand of an isolated white middle-aged male in the ruins of a world overrun by zombie-vampire hybrids in black shirts. In *I cannibali* (*The Cannibals* [1970]) a young heroine and her foreign companion push back against the constraints imposed upon them by the older generation in an authoritarian near-future Milan. The discussion of these latter two films affords the reader insight into how works from other times and places—Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954) and Sophocles' *Antigone* (442 BCE)—translate into and comment on the anxieties of modern Italy.

Comberiati discusses Michele Medda, Antonio Serra, and Bepi Vigna's dystopian science fiction *fumetti* *Nathan Never* (1991-present), which "focuses on the fear of contamination, and the borders that separate 'pure' humans and aliens, mutants, or cyborgs" (169). *Never* exists in a complex vertical society where the privileged live high above and away from the downtrodden. His adventures have him mix it up with the spectrum of social groups, and he sometimes serves as the "white messianic figure" that protects the helpless in a cyberpunk world (170). Another popular sequential art narrative, Stefano Tamburini, Tanino Liberatore, and Alain Chabat's *RanXerox* (1978-97) features a title character who is as far from a charismatic white savior as one can get—he's a hybrid of a human and a copy machine making his way in yet another vertically stratified and unequal society. *RanXerox* is more durable than humans in moving about his violently chaotic setting, and thus, useful to employers, allies, and friends, but is not valued as a human would be. As they move forward in time, Brioni and Comberiati explore anxieties related to the increasing presence of Chinese residents in Italy and Islamophobia in the wake of the September 11th attacks. Tommaso Pincio's *Cinacitta* (*Chinacity* [2008]) and Pierfrancesco Prosperi's *La casa dell'Islam* (*The House of Islam* [2009]) speculate as to what an Italy ruled by Chinese and Muslim majorities, respectively, would look like.

Aside from demographic dread, uniquely Italian issues are discussed within the context of the contemporary science fiction narrative. One such example is the economic disparity and political tension between the North and the South. Booms and upswings have not distributed prosperity equally across the country. Antonio Pennacchi's *Storia di Karel* (*Karel's Story* [2013]) "is the struggle between those who want to modernize and those who want to maintain the traditional way of life, a key theme in debates on the Southern Question" (186). In Gabriele Salvatore's 1997 film *Nirvana*, the separatist dreams of the Lega Nord have come to pass and the resulting Northern Conglomerate is the economic and political center of the world. *Quando le radici* [*When the Roots* 1977]) shows how even economic boom times can devastate rural communities. The protagonist of that story is able to find meaning and authenticity only by adopting the way of life of the Romani, an oft demonized, misrepresented, and thus, misunderstood minority that has inhabited Italy since the Middle Ages, and has been the subject of persecution for just as long.

The study closes with an exploration of alternate histories that struggle to reckon with the legacy of the Fascist Era. The revisions of Italian history focus on Italy, in one way or another, joining the Allies and exiting World War II as one of its victors. While works by Enrico Brizzi (*L'inattesa piega degli eventi* [*The Unexpected Turn of Events*, 2008], *La nostra Guerra* [*Our War*, 2009], and *Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne* [*Lorenzo Pellegrini and The Women*, 2012]), and Stefano Amato repudiate fascism, Mario Farneti's "Fantafascist Trilogy" (2001-2006) celebrates it as a source of energy and power that can repel potential invaders. In Amato's *Il 49esimo Stato* (*The 49th State* [2013]), Sicily becomes the 49th state of the United States and is thus more baldly susceptible to neocolonialism and Cold War machinations (including the collusion of corporations, the CIA, and organized crime). Brizzi's version of postwar Italy gains new colonies in Africa and Europe, but when Mussolini, upon his death, is succeeded by the moderate wing of the Fascist Party, the result is a contemporary Italy that in many ways resembles our own.

Brioni and Comberiati's text is of great interest to both the scholar and the general reader who has more than a passing interest in Italian history and culture, postcolonial studies, and the effective use of science fiction to explore and uncover the important social and political issues to yield insights. Even when coming to the book's subject, Italian science fiction, with healthy skepticism and modest expectations, readers will find that the information presented here is quite fascinating and leaves them wanting to know even more. Since Italy has been home to such a diversity of political entities, institutions, and systems of government over time, contemporary studies of it are not interesting just for their own sake, but also may provide revelations that can be applied to other subjects. Going into the book, many readers will have no context for uniquely Italian terminology, concepts, and historical events such as "Piano Solo," "Lega Norda," and the EUR neighborhood, but the authors do an excellent job of quickly and clearly explaining them and their relevance. The book itself is well-grounded in postcolonial theory and by the end readers



have seen, as promised, just who “The Other” is via the prism of one nation’s contemporary science fiction and are well-equipped to apply what was learned to other subjects. The authors have provided a sound template to anyone who might do a similar study featuring sf works from another country or region on a particular topic, and they offer up to the scholar suggestions of authors and works for study and possible future translation.

**Sean Memolo** is a lover of comic books, SF, jazz, Boston Terriers, and calcio. He studied and lectured at East Carolina University in the earlier part of this century and now works in the software industry but writes the odd review or conference paper about science fiction here and there. Currently he lives a rather happy quiet life with his wife, two children, and two dogs in the land of Northern Alabama.

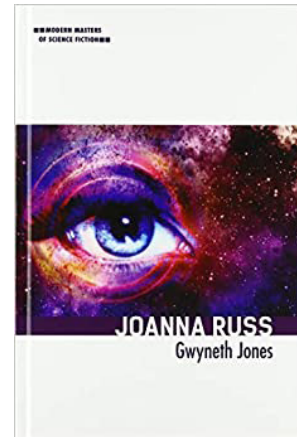
### *Joanna Russ*, by Gwyneth Jones

Anna McFarlane



Gwyneth Jones. *Joanna Russ*. Illinois UP, 2019. Modern Masters of Science Fiction. Paperback. 234 pg. \$22.00. ISBN 9780252084478. Ebook ISBN 9780252051487.

This overview of Joanna Russ's life's work is part of the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series, edited by Gary K. Wolfe, which has given a series of in-depth accounts of science fiction writers including William Gibson, Octavia Butler, and Arthur C. Clarke. In this volume, Jones surveys Russ's career in extreme detail, bringing in the most relevant of secondary sources as well as interviews with those who knew her and worked with her. The book is organised into chapters that each cover a span of years in Russ's career so that her critical works and reviews are given attention alongside the fiction of those years. This structure serves to foreground the skill of the reviewer to an unusual degree, giving some useful insight into Russ's thinking at different periods of her life. Russ's career as a critic was an expression of her love of and commitment to science fiction, and Jones's structure conveys this to the reader, allowing the reviews to give a wider sense of the science-fictional context for Joanna Russ's work. There are times where the format stifles the more interesting possibilities of such a survey. For example, the blow-by-blow account of *The Female Man*'s plot is perhaps a bit unnecessary; Russ's most well-known work of fiction is recounted chapter-by-chapter and, while Jones's descriptions are always well-written and engaging, this is perhaps not essential for a book that is still regularly to be found on book shelves and university syllabi. Perhaps this aspect of Jones's overview will be welcomed by undergraduates and those seeking to discover Russ's work for the first time, but if one wishes to know a text in such detail it might be wiser simply to read the novel. One might recall the final line of Russ's short story about female writers, "Swordblades and Poppy Seeds": "Are you truly curious? Then read our books" (quoted in Jones, 146).



Where this style does come into its own, however, is in Jones's use of first-hand accounts of science fiction symposia, fan culture, and magazine culture. These elements, so crucial to science fiction's production and reception, are not often given sufficient breathing space in academic accounts of the genre, and Jones redresses the balance here in some of the highlights of the book. The chapter on the Women in Science Fiction Event gives an account of the Khatri symposium, named after the magazine that organized this exchange of letters on feminism in science fiction between key figures, including Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree Jr., and Samuel Delany. Jones gives a good account of the flavour of these exchanges, offering the reader the context

necessary to unpick the complex personality politics of the debate. Alongside analysis of the letters and context from the contemporary period, Jones gives information gleaned from later interviews with the participants so that their insight into the event decades after the fact gives an account of the importance of these exchanges in shaping the situation of women in science fiction today. This analysis is perhaps the highlight of the book, gleaning precious insight from texts that are not widely studied and available.

The study also gives space for some useful analysis of Russ's role in the science fiction community, with Jones describing Russ's situation through a reading of Sam Greenlee's novel *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969). Greenlee's novel tells the story of the first black CIA agent and plays on the multiple meanings of the term "spook" to refer to ghettoized African Americans, spies, and ghosts. The idea of the spook who "sat by the door" is one who is displayed prominently to give a (probably false) impression of the organisation's progressive credentials. Jones argues that Russ was, in many ways, treated as a "spook who sat by the door" as an uncompromising lesbian feminist in a genre that had a tendency to treat women as inferior. Jones's commentary here is fascinating, and speaks to other situations in which the sf community tends to fixate on a singular individual in order to compensate for the genre-wide failure to integrate excluded groups – an example might be the profusion of scholarship, and placement on course syllabi, of Octavia Butler as a stand-in for African American women in general, a problem that is only now beginning to be eased through the rise of authors like N. K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor.

Another highlight of the book is the attention it pays to Russ's feminist activism and writing beyond her commitment to sf. In particular, the section on her essays from 1981-89 (137-44) gives a particularly tantalising account of Russ's engagement with feminisms during this period, an engagement that encompasses some of the movement's key conflicts and contradictions, including the risks of essentialism and the tension between the violence of patriarchal sexuality and the urgency of finding an authentic female sexuality; a tension which Russ, in an unlikely move, negotiates through her love of Kirk/Spock slash fiction. The brief quotations from Russ's essays of this period are an invitation to dive deeper and to discover the ways in which the contemporary debates in feminism shaped not just science fiction and literary criticism, but the parameters of feminist debate and women's place in society today. Highlights such as these will make this book a valuable addition to any scholar seeking to understand Russ's work in its literary and political context, while offering a detailed introduction for those approaching it for the first time.

**Anna McFarlane** is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Glasgow working on traumatic pregnancy and its expression in science fiction, horror, and fantasy. She is the co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2019) and is co-editing *The Edinburgh Companion to Science Fiction and the Medical Humanities*. Her first monograph is a study of William Gibson's novels, *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology: Seeing Through the Mirrorshades* (Routledge 2021).

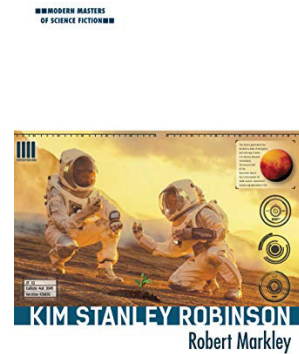
### *Kim Stanley Robinson*, by Robert Markley

Tara Smith



Robert Markley. *Kim Stanley Robinson*. University of Illinois Press, 2019. Modern Masters of Science Fiction. Paperback. 248 pg. \$25.00. ISBN 9780252084584.

Robert Markley's *Kim Stanley Robinson* is a wonderfully crafted and targeted introduction to one of the most significant writers in 20th century science fiction. Robinson's works of fiction depicting climate, interstellar travel, planetary politics, Martian terraforming, and utopic visions have been a vital backdrop in science fiction over the last 40 years which are only becoming more relevant today. Markley's work in categorizing Robinson's contributions to science fiction is the perfect volume both for an amateur who is new to Robinson and is unsure where to start, and for well-versed academics pursuing research within this field. *Kim Stanley Robinson* is neither a chronological index of Robinson's work, nor is it a biography but rather a panning camera which zooms in and out to tastefully pull apart the key themes, messages, and lessons within Robinson's major works. Robert Markley is a professor of English at the University of Illinois and is well equipped to write on Robinson, both with his friendship with the author as well as his shared interests. Markley has several publications in the field of climate change, science fiction, and the environment. These include "Ecological Footprints: Crusoe's Island and Other Alien Environments," in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*; "Literature, Climate, and Time: Between History and Story," in *Climate and Literature*; and "Nation and Environment in Britain, 1660-1705," in *Emergent Nation: Early Modern British Literature in Transition, 1660-1714* and represent a small sample of his larger canon of work and themes closely connected to Robinson's own interests. In the Introduction, Markley examines the threads of ecological, utopian, and Buddhist threads in Robinson's works. Markley's volume balances deep literary analysis with a personal and engaging exploration of Robinson and his work. He devotes close analysis to Robinson's works, treating them with the same weight he has given to other great works of literature such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), whilst still emphasizing the impact of family, background, and connection to the land have had on Robinson's fiction. This focused exploration reveals an extensive understanding of Robinson's work and highlights why Robinson is truly a modern Master of Science Fiction.



Markley's chapters are categorized by key works, with Chapter One being devoted to Robinson's short fiction and *Years of Rice and Salt* (2002). Chapter Two and Three focus on the *Three Californias* Trilogy (1984-90) (which explores different visions of California) and the *Mars* trilogy (1992-96) respectively. Chapter Four defines Robinson's Cli-fi through the *Capital* Trilogy

(2004-07), an insightful exploration into this vital theme of ecology within Robinson's canon. Chapter Five looks at four of Robinson's novels, from both earlier and later in his career, which critique the familiar motif and celebration of intergalactic travel, unpacking the political and ecological conflicts Earth must face. Finally, Chapter Six looks at Robinson's most recent works, *Aurora* (2015) and *NY2140* (2017).

Chapter Six neatly tracks the direction of Robinson's most contemporary works, focusing on two alternate futures for mankind. In *Aurora*, the ship narrates the lives of intergalactic explorers looking for their new home. The work problematizes and critiques the space fantasies so often explored in science fiction and asks questions about the nature of AI, environmentalism, and the problems of long-term ship life. *NY2140* is a story from the perspective of a collection of different characters who try to survive in a highly capitalistic and flawed new society which has become a water-logged New York. The work is highly critical of our current passivity to climate change with a key character, the "citizen," an unnamed everyman who berates previous generations for doing next to nothing to prevent the disasters of the new Anthropocene. Rather than producing a depressing pessimistic piece, Robinson offers hope through his depictions of people working together, sharing kindness and love, and dismantling capitalistic and selfish structures, remembering that it is vital that we take care of our environment.

Markley's *Kim Stanley Robinson* is an affordable and vital exploration into the life, works, and impact of Robinson's fiction. In the Introduction, Markley identifies the words "utopia," "explore," and "reframe" as key words which might arise if a word search were done on the book. In addition, I would like to add "ecology"; whilst politics, space exploration, sociology and science are key themes, Robinson (and Markley) remind us that mother nature always bats last. Robinson's utopias and works over the last forty years are only becoming more and more relevant. Utopias are sometimes considered as pure fantasies, too removed from current situations. However, Robinson's Utopias are grounded survival guides for a real-world future, which are only becoming more relevant today. Robinson reminds us the need and demand for skilled and ethically charged writers to create them. Whether one is researching cli-fi or science fiction and wants to explore deeply the themes of Robinson's works, or whether one is new to the author and unsure where to start, Markley's introduction is both comprehensive and accessible.

The literary critic Wayne Booth states that we often "underestimate the extent to which we absorb the values of what we read" and that fiction can shape our ethics and understanding of the world (41). In a similar vein, Robinson believes that we as a society are all writing our own science fiction novel, collaborating together when we read his works. If this is the case, then what better work to mimic than one which promotes ecological conservation and community, and seeks to question capitalistic tropes.



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**Tara B. M. Smith** is a PhD student at the University of Sydney's Department of Studies of Religion, Australia. Her PhD thesis explores the significance of Science Fiction in understanding the future and the way the genre is relevant and impacts cultural, social, religious and environmental landscapes. Tara's interests include conspiracy theories, cli-fi, New Religious Movements, comparative religion and literature portrayals of the environment.

### *The Cyberpunk Nexus*, edited by Lou Tambone and Joe Bongiorno



Terence Sawyers

Lou Tambone and Joe Bongiorno, eds. *The Cyberpunk Nexus: Exploring the Blade Runner Universe*. Sequart Organization, 2018. Paperback. 416 pg. \$19.99. ISBN 9781940589183.

The edited collection *The Cyberpunk Nexus* seeks to explore the film *Blade Runner* (1982, 1992, 2007), the wider *Blade Runner* franchise, and the film's enduring influence throughout popular culture. Published by the Sequart Organization, who specialize in popular (i.e. non-scholarly) criticism, the collection blurs the distinction between academic and non-academic criticism through its formal mimicry of academic norms: the inclusion of footnotes, a contributor section, and the use of ambiguous language. This ambiguity can best be seen in the collection's blurb that states that the book is written by "film historians" and "subject-matter experts." However, despite this, and in contrast to many other examples of popular criticism, *The Cyberpunk Nexus* seems far more comfortable with its non-academic pedigree, with arguments and observations that are self-consciously embedded in the personal or subjective, with only the occasional dalliance with pseudo-academic objectivity.



The book is broken into five sections that respectively cover the texts that inspired *Blade Runner*, the music and multiple versions of the film, the themes of the film, the further adaptations and spin-offs from *Blade Runner*, and a final section covering *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Most of the essays are a mixture of compendium and opinion from well informed fan-commentators/researchers. Among the many contributors to this 28-essay collection are popular critics, media practitioners, and academic scholars. With a foreword by Paul M. Sammon, it acts as a (sort of) companion piece to Sammon's own *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (1996), supplementing Sammon's focused and detailed accounting of the 'making of ...' with a broader discussion of *Blade Runner* as a complex and evolving intertext.

There have been two previous scholarly essay collections on *Blade Runner*. *Retrofitting Blade Runner* (1991), edited by Judith Kerman, focused more specifically on debates arising from the film itself with some attention paid to the adaptation process, while *The Blade Runner Experience* (2005), edited by Will Brooker, engaged in a wider discussion of the reverberating influence of *Blade Runner* throughout popular culture. Other than updating the discussion, and including responses to the 2017 sequel, the true value in this collection can be seen in the fan perspective

many of the essays offer and the testimonials from creatives who have added their own texts to the ever-expanding *Blade Runner* intertext.

To highlight the non-scholarly nature of the fan essays that dominate this collection is not an attempt at stigmatization. Rather, it is to recognize that these essays have not been produced in light of academic stricture or in an effort to satisfy the machinery of analysis. Therefore, the use-value of these essays can be seen in the, sometimes quite lengthy, accounts of preferred textual readings. Whether this collection is indicative of the wider genre-fandom community or is a more limited reflection of the specific communities engaged with *Blade Runner*, there are two key takeaways to consider. The first is that, where adaptation has occurred, fidelity to the original persists as an important measure of success. Second, fidelity is not a straightforward measure, applied as it is in this collection with nuance and complexity.

Across the collection, contributors discuss the necessity and desirability of divergence from the source material, citing the vagaries of filmmaking and the expectations of cinema audiences as part of their justification for this. Whether these arguments are convincing or not, they reveal a sophisticated approach to adapted texts by engaged audiences. Therefore, fidelity is deployed to critique the success of any changes or divergences from the source, rather than being used to denounce the differences themselves. The engaged audience whose voice is well represented by this collection combine, as part of their critical apparatus, preferred readings of both source and adaptation while also juggling questions of authorial intention through engagement with extant critical (popular and otherwise) literature and paratexts. This sophistication somewhat flies in the face of the logophilia that continues to haunt Science Fiction Studies and the denunciation of fidelity criticism that remains a shibboleth of Adaptation Studies.

A further usefulness of *The Cyberpunk Nexus* is the inclusion of an essay by Bryce Carlson, who was part of the team that produced the graphic-novelization *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (2009) for BOOM! Studios. This memoir-essay covers Carlson's evolving role in the adaptation from novel to comic book, as well as describing some of the practical and legal challenges that the project had to overcome. Carlson notes, with lawyerly finesse, that:

It wasn't an adaptation because *Blade Runner* was the adaptation and had all the rights that went along with it. And it wasn't an illustrated novel because we didn't have novel publishing rights ... It was a "graphic novelization" in the true sense of the term. (265-66).

This question of rights didn't just affect how the project conceived of itself but also impacted the design choices available. Carlson goes on to state that they had "one big artistic obstacle ... We were not allowed to do anything that looked like *Blade Runner*" (267). Rights ownership and exploitation is a hot topic right now within media studies generally and also within the hard sciences with discussion of vaccine patent ownership entering mainstream discourse. Therefore, this is a timely account by Carlson that will be of interest to any science fiction scholar engaged in the debates about copyright and its Janus-faced impact on contemporary creativity.

The primary weakness of this collection is in the lack of reliable citation or attribution in the essays that cover production and release histories. The usefulness of these essays is undermined by the inability to return to the origins of the data points. This is shame, as it turns exhaustive research and compiling into hearsay. And one would need to redo the research oneself in order to be confident in its veracity.

Furthermore, and as already pointed out, this is not an academic collection. Therefore, any scholars seeking an academic introduction or interrogation of *Blade Runner*, adaptation, genre cinema, or cyberpunk as a cultural force are looking in the wrong place. Instead, this collection provides many valuable insights and signals a number of trailheads for future study, while also serving as a choice example of contemporary genre fandom that reveals a continuity with the origins of sciences fiction criticism; that is, criticism carried out by a community of highly motivated, articulate, and, mostly non-academic commentators.

**Terence Sawyers** is a film and media scholar who insists he is not a SF scholar; despite this the vast majority of his research continues to overlap with SF scholarship, go figure. His primary research area is the adaptation of SF writer Philip K. Dick into film and television. He also side-lines as a conspiracy theory theorist and is a dabbler in the history of occultism. When not sifting through layers of simulated hyperreality he can be found hosting About Film ([aboutfilmedinburgh.wordpress.com](http://aboutfilmedinburgh.wordpress.com)), a regular public engagement event held in the meat-space that is Edinburgh, Scotland.

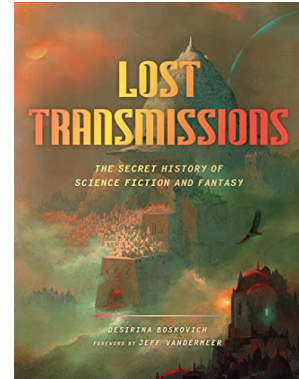
### *Lost Transmissions: The Secret History of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Desirina Boskovich



Raymond K. Rugg

Desirina Boskovich. *Lost Transmissions: The Secret History of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Abrams Image, 2019. Hardcover. 304 pg. \$29.99. ISBN 9781419734656.

Fans of speculative fiction are, by definition, those who enjoy the unknown, the hidden and the what-if. Science fiction and fantasy stories present fresh perspectives on what we think we know about the world and new realities for us to explore and contemplate. So when a book makes the tantalizing claim that it contains the secret history of the genre, it's practically an irresistible temptation to anyone interested in the origins, growth, and development of SF. Despite its subtitle, however, *Lost Transmissions* is less a cohesive historical overview than it is a compilation of individual insights into little-known episodes in science fiction and fantasy that have taken place throughout the years. The book comprises articles, interviews, and guest essays on speculative fiction projects in a range of categories, such as literature, film and television, music, fashion, and more. This is not to say that readers won't find interesting and engaging historical information in this book. In fact, there is plenty of that. It's just that the history is delivered in independent presentations, rather than as a continuing and connected historical narrative. The fact that the subtitle may be somewhat misleading is recognized by both the author and by Jeff VanderMeer, the award-winning writer and editor, who provides the foreword. Although they both use the phrase "secret history" when describing the collection, VanderMeer refers to the collection variously as an introduction, a catalogue, and a jumping-off point for exploring SF, while Boskovich notes, with her emphasis, that "above all, this is not the secret history, but a secret history" (xi).





That being said, the presentation of *Lost Transmissions* delivers its material in a nice, semi-chronological order within categories. The first nearly hundred pages are devoted to literature, a perfectly reasonable starting point given that this is how most readers are likely to have become enthusiasts of the genre. Following a quick nod to Mary Shelley, there are entries on other lesser-known contributions to science fiction and fantasy writings, from the 1500s through to the twenty-first century. When the articles discuss writers who are perhaps more recognizable and better-known to the mainstream, such as C.S. Lewis, Harlan Ellison, and Philip K. Dick, it is in order to reveal backstories and information that, in all honesty and deference to the name of the book, could very well be considered to be secret histories. They are stories that are most likely unknown to anyone who is not at least a moderately serious reader of these writers. The section on film and television is not quite as robust, with entries ranging from *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) and *Metropolis* (1927), through *Star Wars* (1977), *Dune* (1984), and *Aliens* (1986). One feels that there must be many more unknown or abandoned speculative fiction projects in Tinseltown than what we are presented with here, but the stories that are included are interesting behind-the-scenes tales of the film industry. The categories of architecture, art and design, music, and fashion are all smaller sections, while the final category, fandom and pop culture, is nearly as large as the section on film and television, perhaps because it is somewhat of an umbrella term, encompassing comics, role-playing games, computer gaming, and more.

As noted previously, these are individual glimpses into and untold stories of the genre, not a comprehensive, linear discussion of the development of speculative fiction. For example, David Barr Kirtley's essay on Robert Asprin's Myth series is less about the books themselves than the influence they had on Kirtley's life and career. Boskovich's article on the art of Michael Whelan briefly touches on his role in the growing popularity of realism for fantasy and science fiction book covers in the 1970s and '80s, but misses the opportunity to discuss his work in context with his contemporaries, such as Darrell K. Sweet. But this sort of criticism is practically unavoidable in an endeavor such as *Lost Transmissions*. The more any reader knows about any given subject, the harder it is for the book to deliver fresh, new, "secret" knowledge. In his foreword, Vandermeer openly acknowledges that some readers are likely to feel that their own particular favorites have been overlooked or under-represented.

This is why one of *Lost Transmissions*' strengths is its wide range of scope. Boskovich's articles, nearly four dozen of them, vary in length from just two paragraphs to several pages. All are interesting and most contain information that will be new to the average reader. Another nearly three dozen guest essays are provided by contributors including well-known names and award-winning personalities, such as Charlie Jane Anders, William Gibson, Lev Grossman, Annalee Newitz, and Neil Gaiman, and they range in tone and content from academically informative to personally reminiscent. Four interviews with genre writers are all thoughtful and interesting glimpses into the lives of the authors. New or casual fans will find this book to be, as VanderMeer puts it, "an utter revelation," (ix), while even the most scholarly of readers will be able to use the information here (including sources, credits, and a comprehensive index) as a resource to spark

new avenues of inquiry. In the unlikely event that a reader finds no new or hidden knowledge, it is still fascinating to read what people like Gibson and Gaiman have to say about the genre in their own words. All in all, any quibble with the subtitle is ultimately a minor issue, and *Lost Transmissions* is a worthwhile addition to the collection of anyone who has more than a passing interest in science fiction and fantasy.

A non-Native native of the American West and a recent transplant to New England, **Raymond K. Rugg** works in Speculative Fiction, Speculative Nonfiction and Speculative Poetry. He presents regularly as an independent scholar at regional and national academic conferences and his writing has appeared or is upcoming in publications including *Abyss & Apex*, *Asimov's* and *Foundation*, *The International Review of Science Fiction*. More information at [RaymondKRugg.com](http://RaymondKRugg.com).



# FICTION REVIEWS



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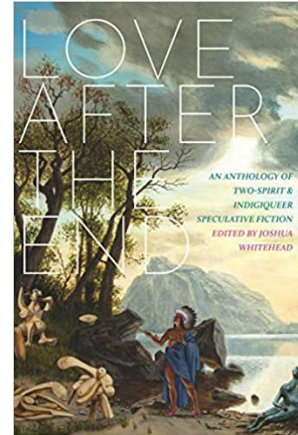


**“Our Bodies Dazzle in the Light”:  
A Review of *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and  
Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction***



Jeremy M. Carnes

*Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. Edited by Joshua Whitehead. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2020. Paperback. 194 pp. \$18.95. ISBN: 9781551528113.



How does anyone consider intimacy or eroticism in the age of the Anthropocene and the collapse of a world in the ruins of climate change and extractive capitalism? Even more, how do communities that have endured decades of violence and oppressive colonialism love within the apocalyptic? In Joshua Whitehead's (Oji-Cree/nêhiyâw) edited collection *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*, he argues that a turn toward the utopian is a centrally important political shift. He writes, “For, as we know, we have already survived the apocalypse—this, right here, right now, is a dystopian present. What better way to imagine survivability than to think about how we may flourish into being joyously animated rather than merely alive?” (10-11). This point is, I think, the crux of this collection: intimacy, joy, growth, and love can be imagined into the present and future, even in the face of undeniable collapse. Perhaps this is the power of queer love: to face this paradox, love after the end, head-on, unwavering in the truth of potential.

*Love After the End* is a collection of stories that highlight the joy, love, and eroticism of 2SQ (two-spirit, queer) communities, whether in the love between human and AI-augmented animals or between two-spirit indigiqueers and the doomed planet they leave behind. It is a collection of stories about finding “what we need when we need it: through community and through our relations” (15). Kinship ties and communal love, erotic or otherwise, provide the ground upon which these stories build, showing the life-sustaining power of relations despite settler dominance and the continuation of unsustainable social, cultural, and economic structures.

Many of the stories begin with or concern ecological devastation of the Earth, though the devastation itself is rarely the primary focus. Rather, these stories seem to center on responses to the devastation: personal responses, interpersonal responses, communal responses, and global responses. For instance, in Jaye Simpson's (Oji-Cree Saulteaux) “The Ark of the Turtle's Back”

we are introduced to a world on the verge of collapse; colonies have been established on the moon and on Mars, using the labor of Indigenous peoples to set up and sustain them. Ni, the protagonist, considers, “It will only be a matter of time before they come to take everyone capable from the Rez to work. The moon’s atmosphere is so successful that their oceans formed sooner than anticipated, and now they’re filling the waters with formerly extinct species. But at what cost? Our brown bodies?” (68). In a final escape attempt, the characters are convinced by Ni’s sister, Dakib, to escape on a series of arks; however, this exodus requires sacrifice: “we’re using energy from Earth’s kinetic core to fuel the trip. Upon takeoff, the core will cool almost entirely and cause significant damage to the planet. The magnetic field protecting Earth from solar winds and solar radiation will collapse and essentially turn Earth into the new Mars” (69). Simpson considers the weight of sacrifice and how much is too much. Should we leave the planet in an attempt to save our communities or should we stay as Ni argues: “Our people wouldn’t leave her, and you know it. We would stay until her last breath and go with her. We are the caretakers, and if she dies, we die too.”

A similar complication arises in Adam Garnet Jones’s (Cree/Métis/Danish) “History of the New World,” which tells the story of a family—Em, a Cree woman; Thorah, her non-Native wife; and Asêciwan, their daughter—as they decide between staying on a collapsing Earth or going through a portal to “the New World.” In clear reference to settler colonial discourse, the New World is often assumed to be without history. Indeed, Thorah even argues, “The New World is a blank page...we can make our story there, anything we want” (43). This rhetoric clearly replicates the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* used to bolster so many settler claims to Indigenous lands. Eventually, and through a complex series of events, Em and Asêciwan decide to stay on Earth, joining an Indigenous camp in the center of Toronto: “A hand-painted sign above the entrance announced our arrival at NAGWEYAAB ANISHINAABEK CAMP: RAINBOW PEOPLES’ CAMP. A HOME FOR INDIGNEOUS 2SLGBTQI PEOPLE AND FAMILIES” (59).

While the responses to collapse in these two stories are different—and we get similar responses in Mari Kurisato’s (Cote First Nation Ojibwe) “Seed Children”—each story centers 2SQ people and highlights the ways their choices depict love—love for their kin, love for the Earth, love for their partners. Whether in the scene of family ceremony on the departing ship carrying some land, flora, and fauna of the Earth in “The Ark of the Turtle’s Back” or in the decision to stay on a potentially doomed Earth in “History of the New World,” the stories focus more on the effects of having to make such decisions—and the potentials for joy within the decisions—rather than the idea that there is a correct choice to be made. While many of the stories about leaving give voice to the rights and responsibilities within Indigenous communities and in relation to the Earth through individual characters, they all refrain from casting judgment as if staying—or leaving—were the “more Native” thing to do.

A central facet to each of these stories is also the importance of stories themselves as vehicles for cultural knowledge, connection, and kinship. Indeed, story becomes a pivotal tool in considering “intimacy during doomsday” (10). In Kai Minosh Pyle’s (Métis/Baawiting

Nishnaabe) “How to Survive the Apocalypse for Native Girls,” we are introduced to Nigig, a two-spirit Anishinaabe girl, as she navigates life and compiles a primer for existing in the apocalypse of settler colonialism. Nigig’s entries include pieces of advice and wisdom, including, “when the apocalypse happens, make sure you bring your kookum” (80), “Everyone has ancestors, but not everyone knows theirs” (84), “Watch those in power carefully” (87), and “Love is good” (82). These instructions and the remainder of the story consider the importance of kinship in creating community and connection, both not always pleasant experiences: “Love is part of Kinship laws—it is the Kinship laws. Of course, in reality Kinship is just as much about hating each other and messing each other up as it is about loving each other, but without Love there wouldn’t be any Kinship at all” (83). Story is about the messiness of connecting, especially in the messiness of apocalypse.

We see this same messiness in “Andwànikàdjigan” by Gabriel Castilloux Calderon (Mi’kmaq/Algonquin/Scottish/French Canadian), which tells the story of A’tugwewinu (Winu) living in a world where settlers have tried wipe out storytellers and carriers of Indigenous cultural knowledge. New storytellers and knowledge keepers become marked with memory markings, which appear “when someone share[s] a story and you truly listened, listened with all your heart” (97). When storytellers touch these marks on their bodies “words would appear in your head, and you would repeat the story back, verbatim, as if you were the one who shared it in the first place.” These markings and those who carry them become targets for the Enforcers—the militaristic, settler presence in the story. Much like in Pyle’s story, Calderon here offers story as a tool for connection; In “Andwànikàdjigan” the connection extends cross-communally, for it is only through real, intimate connection across communities that we can hope to survive and thrive in the face of abusive settler powers. As much as “Andwànikàdjigan” is a love story between the two-spirit Winu and Bel, it is also about the literal power of stories to shake the foundations of settler worldviews and a reminder that, despite settler conceptions otherwise, we are really only stories.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this collection, the stories course through some of the central sub-genres now associated with Indigenous futurism, some of which provide the structure for the pivotal collection *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* edited by Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe). We get stories of slipstream (“Nameless” and “Eloise”), stories of the Native apocalypse (“The Ark of the Turtle’s Back” and “History of the New World”), stories about Indigenous science and sustainability (“Seed Children”), and—coursing through all of this—the central notion of Biskaabiiyang, “Returning to Ourselves.” Yet, what this collection does differently is centering 2SQ stories. As Whitehead writes, “we have put Two-Spiritedness in the front, for once, and in that leading position we will walk into the future, in whatever form that may take, together, hand in hand, strong, resilient, extraneously queer, and singing a round dance song that calls us all back together” (12). So throughout it all, we are offered stories of connection, of the messiness of kinship, and of the potential that lies in the future and in queer love. The trials of history mark queer communities and their stories, but they are not silenced. As Whitehead notes, “we have lived in torture chambers, we have excelled under the weight of killing machinations,



we've hardened into bedrock—see how our bodies dazzle in the light? (12). These stories, and the bodies in them, certainly dazzle in this light.

## Notes

1. For more on the importance of story, see Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*.

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### *His Master's Voice and Return from the Stars*, by Stanislaw Lem

Jeremy Brett



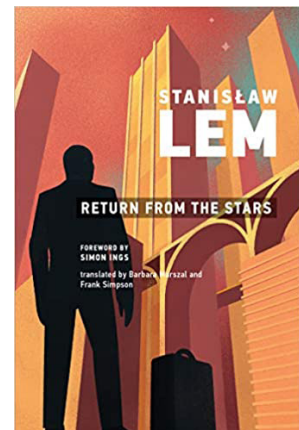
*His Master's Voice*. Translated by Michael Kandel. Forward by Seth Shostak. The MIT Press, 2020. Paperback. 259 pp. \$17.95. ISBN 9780262538459.

*Return from the Stars*. Translated by Barbara Marszal and Frank Simpson. Forward by Simon Ings. The MIT Press, 2020. Paperback. 295 pp. \$17.95. ISBN 9780262538480

MIT Press's decision to reissue the translated works of the incomparable, singular cosmic visions of Stanislaw Lem in lovely paperback versions is fortunate indeed for readers of philosophical and satirical fiction. Lem is one of those relatively rare authors of both profound ideas and deep prose; he provides each subsequent reading generation with renewed consideration of the impacts of technology on society, the inexplicability and utter foreignness to humanity of alien intelligence, and the complexities inherent in communication both between humans and between humans and aliens. These are longstanding and important concerns in speculative fiction, and it is a tribute to Lem that he remains, after six decades, one of the preeminent voices asking the kinds of foundational human questions that go to the very heart of the speculative fiction enterprise.

All the more appropriate, then, that these works started being released last year in advance of the 2021 centennial of Lem's birth; their reissue signals the perennial interest in Lem and his lasting value as a thoughtful writer whose works constitute a truly deep literary dive into humanity's relationship to the rest of the universe. And small wonder that Lem's native Poland has declared 2021 the "Year of Stanislaw Lem": a year of celebrations and commemorations of Lem and his place in world literature. But Lem's work, with his lasting curiosity about the universe and our place in it, transcends a mere year of remembrance and tribute: in the best traditions of fiction, he is an author for all years, and all time.

*His Master's Voice*, first published in 1968 and translated into English in 1983 by Michael Kandel (the version reissued and reviewed here), is centered around two of Lem's more common themes: the limits of science's ability to understand the universe around us, and how those limits are reflected in our own behavior. Lem wrote the book during the early years of the mid-



20th century worldwide search for extraterrestrial intelligence, and *Voice* is an artifact of that time when concerted efforts were being made to seek out evidence of alien life and ask serious questions about how we as a species would receive that evidence and interpret messages received. The novel is narrated by mathematician Peter Hogarth, a brilliant, caustic, and self-aware professor attached to a secret US government project seeking to decipher a signal from deep space that arrived on Earth carried by neutrinos. *Voice* is less a straight narrative and more an extended philosophical essay about humanity disguised as an exhaustive description of the His Master's Voice Project by Hogarth.

It is also the story of a massive failure, as evidenced by failed hypotheses and theories that the official project record will never show and the public will never see: as Hogarth notes, "the history of His Master's Voice is the tale of a defeat: of wrong turns that were not followed by a straightened path. Thus one should not wipe away the zigzags of our journey, because those zigzags are all that is left us" (35-36). Finally, it is a chronicle, ultimately, of human insignificance and imperfection. "We stood at the feet of a gigantic find, as unprepared, but also as sure of ourselves, as we could possibly be. We clambered up on it from every side, quickly, hungrily, and cleverly, with our time-honored skill, like ants. I was one of them. This is the story of an ant" (36). Ironically, it is that very imperfection that not only causes its failure (through a lack of suitable intellect) but jump-starts the project in the first place – the initial theory that captured neutrinos are carrying an alien signal is inspired by the inadvertent efforts of con artists and pseudoscientists. Hogarth posits that "[e]very great matter has, among its circumstances, some that are ludicrous or pitifully banal, which does not mean that they do not play an integral role. Ludicrousness, anyway, is a relative thing" (60). Our imperfections and the ironies inherent in human activity are baked right into all our endeavors, Hogarth (and Lem) supposes. Although he notes at one point that "I do not know what it was among the people of the Project that determined finally the Project's fate" (72), it seems clear that it is **something** stemming from humanity's fallible nature that does it.

Explanations for the source and purpose of the signal all fail in the absence of proof. Was it sent containing information for starting life? For building an efficient mechanism for processing information? As a precursor to an alien invasion of Earth? As a symbolic extended hand of friendship? Hogarth himself dismisses all these as the fevered dreams of science fiction and the truth of the signal as being ultimately unknowable. "All these hypotheses (and there were more) I considered not just wrong but ridiculous. In my opinion, the stellar code denoted neither a plasmic brain nor an informational machine nor an organism nor a spore, because the object it designated simply did not figure in the categories of our conceptualizations. It was the plan of a cathedral sent to australopithecines, a library opened to Neanderthals. In my opinion, the code was not intended for a civilization as low on the ladder of development as ours, and consequently we would not succeed in doing anything meaningful with it" (121-122). For Hogarth, the Senders broadcast their signal too early in humanity's evolution to be of any use. In addition to the sheer time gap between human and Sender civilization, the project would have been doomed because the definition of words and concepts and contexts would differ between the two so widely. (All

that, even so, assumes that the signal is indeed artificial: one Project scientist, Lerner, presents a reasonable case that it is merely a natural phenomenon.) In the end, the Project and Earth both have failed what Hogarth calls “a test of cosmic—or at least more-than-terrestrial—universality” (41), suggesting that much time will still be needed to straddle the gaps between our knowledge and the nature of the wider universe. In this, *His Master's Voice* is a pointed rejoinder to the old strand of optimism and scientific progress running through classic science fiction, which Lem himself so derided.

I took nothing with me, not even a coat. (1)

So begins the wholly undramatic return to his home planet by *Prometheus* astronaut Hal Bregg, following a long mission of exploration to the star Fomalhaut, some 23 light years from Earth. He comes home to no parades, no media interviews, and no serious reintegration into a society that has long passed him by. (Thanks to time dilation, only a decade has passed for Bregg, while 127 years have gone by at home.) What follows is a perilous new form of navigation by Astronaut Bregg, through a completely altered social order in which his experiences and social mores have no place.

1961 was a prolific year for Lem: in those 12 months he wrote three significant works - his nightmarish riff on Kafka, *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*; probably his most famous work, the graceful *Solaris*; and finally, *Return from the Stars*. *Return* was translated into English in 1980 by Barbara Marszal and Frank Simpson, the edition featured here in this 2020 reissue. Of those three 1961 works, *Return* may be the least memorable, but it is still a very interesting, even poignant exploration of the relativity of the utopian concept. And there are moments of literary brilliance: I am always taken with the dizzying and disorienting mood of the first chapter, in which Bregg is emptied out back onto Earth and forced to weave his way through a vast, confusing, and alienating metropolis. His emotional burden is extreme: “[f]rom the very first moment I was invariably behind in everything that went on, and the constant effort to understand the simplest conversation or situation turned that tension into a feeling horribly like despair” (2). He sees things whose function he cannot uncover, geographies he cannot follow, behaviors he cannot decipher; all this, as Lem accelerates the pace and the mass of details, contributes to Bregg’s growing fear and sense of alienation (which the reader keenly feels as well). The contradiction between Bregg’s decade spent inside spacecraft with a small group of fellow crewmembers and his new life in a sprawling city of countless strangers creates a feeling of real unreality that never leaves the reader (and it is a literary precursor to the disorientation felt some years later by American soldiers returning home from Vietnam, thrown back into unfamiliar civilian life with little or no assistance after a year or more of intense tours of duty) in the course of the novel.

That feeling of unreality, of unease, sets *Return* apart as a utopian novel, wholly appropriate because the Earth to which Bregg has returned is a utopia from the inside, less so from Bregg’s 127 year-out of date viewpoint. Poverty on Earth is gone, war is gone. Resources appear to be unlimited and free to all. People are happy, and no one is being turned into food or killed at the

age of 30 or relying for their good condition on the abuse of one single poor child. But... social stability relies on a process called 'betrization', a medical procedure performed universally across the globe that eliminates the psychological need or capacity for aggression. As a result, Bregg and his fellow returnees, who go unbetrized, find themselves even more isolated and foreign, in a world where the mission for which they gave years of their lives is no more than a footnote from Earth's aggressive and assertive past. At one point in the novel, Bregg has a conversation with an aged doctor who notes:

"There is a great deal you do not understand, Bregg. If you intended to live like a monk for the remainder of your days, your 'I don't mind' might be in order, but... the society to which you have returned is not enthusiastic about what you gave more than your life for... Apart from a handful of specialists, no one cares about it, Bregg. You know that?..."

The society to which you have returned is stabilized. Life is tranquil. Do you understand? The romance of the early days of astronautics is gone... You are alone. A man cannot live alone. Your interests, the ones you have returned with, are an island in the sea of ignorance. I doubt if many people would want to hear what you could tell them" (75-76)

Bregg, still a man wracked by strong emotions (among them guilt for causing the death of a fellow crew member), is shocked to hear that, thanks to betrization, "everything is now lukewarm" (82): no hatreds, but no passions; no danger, but no need for adventure; no risks, but no rewards for challenging risks; no struggles, but no strivings. It is a world that runs neither hot nor cold. Lem asks us to consider whether a utopia is truly so—even if want has been eliminated—if human nature has been neutered or cast out of society. And are those qualities that Bregg possesses and notes the absence of, truly desirable parts of ourselves? Do we need them to be truly human, else our existence is ultimately sterile? It is in these questions that *Return from the Stars* may be of particular interest to researchers of utopian studies or scholars of SF concerned with the exploration of the human condition.

Bregg's solution to his crisis is to flee the city, abduct a young woman named Eri (certainly today the most troubling portion of the novel), and wrestle with his emotions, eventually reuniting with several of his fellow returnees and questioning the importance of their deep space mission that ended up robbing them of their lives and identities. It is in the light of a utopia made for others that Bregg clearly comes to see, in the end, a true understanding of himself as a contradictory human being. As Simon Ings puts it in his helpful introduction to the novel, *Return* is less about a future Earth and more about the story of a single man. "About his impulse towards solitude and his need for company. About the nonheroic risk and beauty of exploration, and about what it means to carry wounds and beauty home to a world that does not care" (xii). These are facets of ourselves that so many of us wrestle with in the real, and Lem asks whether a society can deny space for those of us who think, and act, and feel differently and strongly, and whether that society can still be called a utopia.



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# MEDIA REVIEWS



*Image by Anja*



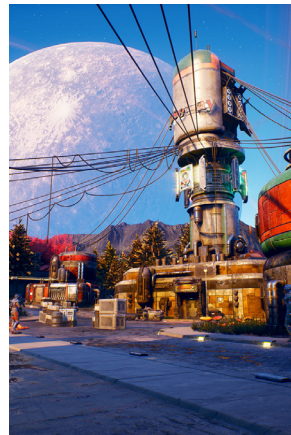
### *The Outer Worlds* (video game)

Sara Walker



*The Outer Worlds*. Private Division, 2019.

The Outer Worlds is an open-world science-fiction roleplaying game. Released in 2019, the game is inspired by the *Fallout* series of games, with the directors of the game, Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky, also being the creators of the *Fallout* franchise. The story follows “the Stranger,” a customizable character, who has been in cryostasis for 70 years aboard the *Hope*, a derelict ship floating through the Halcyon system. Dr. Phineas Welles, a mad scientist, boards the *Hope* to save the colonists. He only has the resources to wake the player up and, after joining him, the player is sent on a series of missions to collect resources to wake up their fellow colonists, which leads them to different planets and settlements in the Halcyon system. Along the way, they recruit people to their team: their objective changes into taking on the Board and the corporations that run the system.



The game shines with its writing, which is at times humorous and serious, but always thoughtful in its execution. The player is given absurd response options when communicating with various characters, but the writers understand when and where to pull back the humor enough to allow the significance of the events within the game stand for themselves. The player will sometimes be penalized for a certain choice—they may choose not to take on a quest, for example—but the dialogue options are not designed for “scoring” or punishing the player needlessly, though the actions still feel consequential. Like in the *Fallout* series, communication and player choice are important parts of the game, and the emphasis rests on these features rather than the combat, which is a standard first-person shooter.

The Halcyon system does not have a government in the traditional sense; instead, it is governed by ten corporations who together form the Halcyon Holdings Corporation (HHC). The HHC, referred to throughout the game as “the Board,” represents the primary antagonizing force in the game. Almost all the colonies and every planet are claimed by at least one corporation, with each one creating its own unique products and operating its own paramilitary force to protect its assets. Loyalty to corporate interests is paramount among Halcyon citizens, and the corporations go to great lengths to ensure workers are loyal and rebellions are quashed quickly. One HHC memo states, “please be reminded that acting against the interests of the corporations is acting against the interests of humanity,” emphasizing the connection between human status and the role of labor in the system.

Corporations are a common feature of many science fiction media, though their roles vary. For some, the corporations remain in the background, only existing to provide the reader, viewer, or player some level of recognition or worldbuilding. For others, particularly in the cyberpunk subgenre, corporations take on the role of government and represent the merging of consumerist and political spheres. In these media, a further subgenre is the self-referential parody, the texts that both portray the corporation as an evil entity, while presenting a distinct self-awareness. *The Outer Worlds* doesn't necessarily break the mold in this regard, but it does provide an interesting text through which to examine corporate parody, and the setting in space allows the game to plausibly experiment with corporatism as the governing economy and philosophy. That the game is cognizant of its own depiction and active association with corporate interests allows it to provide a setting in which a player can fully realize the ubiquity of corporations without affecting those interests in the real world.

The overall tone of *The Outer Worlds* is humorous—a deep contrast to the *Fallout* titles and many other science-fiction video games. The use of humor in the game is not unlike the novel *Snow Crash*, where Neal Stephenson parodies the science fiction romp to imagine a dystopic world governed by corporate interests. In this game, the use of humor emphasizes the absurdity of not only the situation, but how corporations are governing the system. The humor is physical and dialogical. For example, the slogan of one of the corporations, Spacer's Choice, is “you've tried the best, now try the rest—Spacer's Choice!” This slogan, a required statement by all Spacer's Choice employees, is catchy and boasts an uncomplicated and easily memorable rhyming pattern. Upon consideration, the slogan is expressing just how mediocre Spacer's Choice products are. And yet, SC is one of the governing companies in the system, with the CEO of its holding company, Charles Rockwell, serving as Chairman of the Board of the HHC. The company should, in a perfectly meritocratic environment, be a failure, and yet, in this system, the corporation is successful, ostensibly pointing out the emptiness of meritocratic systems.

Because of the game's focus on the absurdity of the corporations, it is debatable if the full scope of the corporate greed that established civilization in the system can be fully experienced by the player—while the horrors of the corporate machine are seen, the emotional connection to them is one of ridicule. Dr. Welles is the voice of reason and adds weight to the unethical corporate actions, but the gravity of the situation he presents is broken up by farcical events, such as the frequent mechanical failures that plague his ship. While it makes for excellent storytelling, such events take away from the game's anti-corporate messaging, making it feel hollow and self-interested. But to its credit, it would be nigh impossible for any corporate product to simultaneously possess an anti-corporate message that included itself to the point of affecting consumer behavior. Here, then, the role of humor is integral: the text's message is presented as an invitation to the player to join the game at the shallow end of the pool. Rather than shoving them out into deeper waters, the player is left in their comfort zone to synthesize the game's message with their own ideology. At some point, they may wade out into the deep end—but the responsibility of the game is squarely in the shallow side.

**Sara Walker** recently completed her Master's degree in English/Creative Writing at the University of West Florida. Her thesis, a creative piece titled "Moderator," features a fictional social media company that uses algorithms and AI to manipulate its users. She writes short science-fiction stories and published "Pensacola 2045" in the student literature and art journal, the *Troubadour*. She is a nonprofit consultant currently living in Virginia.



### *Wonder Woman 1984* (film)

Jeremy Brett



*Wonder Woman 1984*. Directed by Patty Jenkins, Warner Brothers Pictures, 2020.

“Nothing good is born from lies. And greatness is not what you think.” So says Diana of Themyscira, or Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot), to villain Maxwell Lord (Pedro Pascal) towards the end of *Wonder Woman 1984* (WW84). The nobility of truth is at the heart not just of this film, but of Diana’s entire character across much of her publication history. The physical, cinematic conflict between Diana and Lord in the film is almost secondary to the psychological struggle produced by the seductive nature of lies, and to the objective heroism of truth. One of Diana’s most significant character traits, in her recent films and in her comic career, is her determination to serve truth – her most emblematic symbol is her golden Lasso of Hestia, which in the early days of Wonder Woman was a method of forcing adversaries to her will but which in more recent decades has the overt power to compel the truth from those it binds. The theme of truth and lies is not only a familiar one across the superhero genre, but one that echoes the film’s sf intertext.



In *Wonder Woman 1984*, the audience finds themselves nearly seven decades on from the first film. Diana works as a scientist at the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History, while secretly fighting crime as Wonder Woman. She and her new colleague Dr. Barbara Minerva (Kristen Wiig) encounter a mysterious artifact – a crystalline stone desired by businessman/huckster Lord. The ‘Dreamstone’ (created, it is revealed later, by an ancient god of lies and deception) has the power to grant a single wish to anyone; any viewer who has ever read the W.W. Jacobs story “The Monkey’s Paw”, knowingly referenced in the film, will anticipate the results, namely that every wish comes with an unseen cost, the loss of what is most precious to the wisher. Lord gains the Dreamstone and transfers its power to himself, becoming the granter of wishes and the taker of people’s money, power, resources, and life force. Diana and Barbara both inadvertently make fateful wishes – Diana to have her dead love Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) returned to her, which he does, in the host body of another man. This is the most troublesome aspect of the film, in that this consequence-free violation of bodily autonomy is entirely glossed over by everyone. Within the film’s context, however, the hijacking of another person is presented accurately as an unnatural lie that both Steve and Diana end up rejecting as false. Meanwhile, Barbara is granted the strength and confidence of Diana. Towards the end of the film, Barbara doubles down on this false identity with her transformation into ‘apex predator’ Cheetah.

A commitment to truth as a noble virtue is one of the things that characterizes Diana as a superhero caught between two worlds. In her traditional origin story, Diana is born and raised on the all-female island of Themyscira, a place of peace, calm, and strict codes of honor. Yet she finds herself consigned to the outer world, where she fights evil on an Earth torn by war, crime, social injustice, and little men who grasp at power. Diana carries the tenets and lessons of her home within her and is a living embassy for Themysciran truths, but at the same time she binds herself to a humanity where both those truths and her honor can seem radically out of place, quaint, even unnatural. In a world of deconstructed superhero media populated by broken, damaged and traumatized heroes marked by bitterness (the motley crews of *Umbrella Academy* or *Doom Patrol*), built-up heroes who dramatically fail to rise to the necessary occasion (John Walker in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*), and false heroes who are secretly corrupt and evil (the Seven from *The Boys*), watching Diana stand firm in her colorful costume and pronounce the value of love, honor, and truth may appear to jaded and cynical audiences in this post-truth era to be a Captain America-like relic of more innocent days. However, Diana's ethical fortitude—like that of the MCU's Steve Rogers or Sam Wilson—is a boldly refreshing counternarrative to the post-*Watchmen* age of flawed heroes.

It seems to me more than a coincidence that the new film is set in 1984, the same year providing the title for Orwell's classic set in an oppressive society where truth is not merely relativized but reshaped and obliterated as necessary to ensure the continuation of an unjust, brutal society. In Oceania, truths are lies, and vice versa. Indeed, truth as an objective fact has no real existence or place in an Orwellian world. This perilous situation is even more relevant to readers today in the age of 'fake news' and Colbertian 'truthiness'. The Diana of *WW84* stands for something else. The exact opposite, in fact: for her, lies are lies. The one moment in the film where she herself embraces a lie (namely, that Steve's return to life is acceptable rather than a dubious, magic-caused aberration) is, near the film's conclusion, reversed not only to regain her powers but because Diana knows that to live a life is to live it in the world that is, not what we pretend it to be. Steve's death at the end of the first film was the truth; his return violates that truth.

Unlike Diana, Lord is a small man who wants to become bigger. In television ads and in face-to-face encounters, he continually promises that "Life is good! But it can be better!," almost an affirmation of and a call to utopia. His reputation and his career are built on facades and not reality (tellingly, the office for his company Black Gold Cooperative consists of a beautiful and well-apportioned lobby that fronts a nearly empty, barebones office space). He is composed completely of false promises and baseless hopes. In this, as in everything else, Lord is presented as Diana's opposite: insecure in himself while Diana is serenely confident; needing to be seen, heard and followed while Diana lives her life of heroism covertly and without fanfare; emotionally connected to his son Alistair while Diana lives an isolated life of solitude and loneliness.

Unlike the climax of the first *Wonder Woman*, a standard comic book-style fight between Diana and the war god Ares, in *WW84* Diana practices moral suasion, in keeping with her traditional character trait of seeing the good in humanity. She pleads to her worldwide audience:

“This world was a beautiful place just as it was, and you cannot have it all. You can only have the truth, and the truth is enough. The truth is beautiful.” It is a Keatsian sentiment very true to Diana’s love for her adopted world and her courage in facing the truth—an experience that can be sad or painful, but which contains its own nobility. A superhero that defeats a villain through an appeal to morality and reason is rare indeed, and it makes *WW84* a much more significant film in this genre than its mediocre reviews would suggest.

*Wonder Woman 1984* is not a great film, certainly compared to its predecessor. The narrative holes are gaping at times, and shaky comic book logic—common to this film subgenre—sometimes takes hold. Overall, however, *WW84* is useful to researchers and scholars as an examination of the traditional role of the superhero as expressed in modern times. Superheroes have always embodied certain societal values of their age: what does a figure like Diana represent and mean as a referent to commonly-held ethical principles, especially in our current age of shifting truths? Diana’s light in the postmodern darkness might be dismissed as mere nostalgia, but there is real psychological and cultural power in appeals to traditional societal values like honor and truth. Analyzing that power within the context of *Wonder Woman 1984* would be a worthwhile scholarly endeavor.

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