

**52/3**  
Summer 2022

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*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**

# FROM THE EDITORS

Summer 2022

Ian Campbell



The heat wave that struck Western Europe and killed a couple of thousand people was different from other heat waves, not because of its lethality, and certainly not because of its singularity: heat waves will continue and only grow in intensity. What made this latest heat wave unusual was that it was the first heat wave to be given a name: Zoe. Just like hurricanes/typhoons, heat waves are now such a common part of our lived experience that we have engaged in the oddly human habit of naming them. Easier than overthrowing the oil companies, I suppose. The lived experience of an unevenly-distributed (and unevenly-dystopian) science fictional future/present is something inherently science-fictional, in that our reality is always already estranged by technological distortions, not least among them the algorithmic social media feeds that distort the thoughts of even people well aware of how these algorithms work and why.

In this issue, we have three primary perspectives on SF, in addition to the usual run of reviews of non-fiction, fiction and media. We have a group of short papers on various topics in our Features section. We have a group of papers derived from a conference addressing the medical humanities in the fantastic: perspectives on disability, trauma, autism and multiple embodiments. We also have our frequent contributor Adam McLain's curated collection of papers on sexual violence in SF. Needless to say, readers of this last collection should be forewarned that some of the papers are likely to trigger or otherwise disturb by virtue of their topic and content, though of course none of them is intended to cause anxiety or suffering.

Please also investigate our call for papers on conservative/right-wing SF. We look forward to reading your perspectives on this all too influential discourse, as the continuing resurgence of right-wing values is one of the most puzzling (and least welcome) aspects of the science-fictionality of our contemporary world. And stay away from Zoe.

### 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 [sfrarev@gmail.com](mailto:sfrarev@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.

FROM THE EDITORS  
*Transition to Partial Peer Review*

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 Steve Buissinne*

## From the President

Gerry Canavan



We now are getting dangerously close to my last note as president of SFRA! It has been my genuine honor to serve this organization in this way and I look forward to staying on in the role of immediate past president for the next three years. I really want to encourage anyone who is interested in taking on an enlarged service role in the group to respond to Keren Omry's recent calls for candidates for election this fall (including the next secretary and the president, as well as the two new "at-large" positions) as well as a US-based candidate for the outreach and publicity officer. And if you have experience with grants and/or with investment, we would love to talk to you about the development office position; please reach out! Also note Ida Yoshinaga's recent call for the "Support a New Scholar" grant—and, if you're eligible, consider applying! If you have any questions about any of these opportunities, please, reach out.

Last month's conference in Oslo was a true highlight of my time as president; I want to thank Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay and the CoFutures collective for putting on a simply incredible event that I know people will be talking about for a long time. As discussed at the business meeting on the last day of the conference, the next two conferences for our group will be Dresden 2023 and Estonia 2024; I'm glad to say we have secured US sites for 2025 and 2026 and will publicly announce those as soon as we've worked out all the details. If you're interested in hosting SFRA in 2027 or beyond, reach out! It's truly never too early to start thinking about this.

As always, if you have an event you'd like SFRA to distribute through its media lists, or any other idea or concern about the work the organization is doing, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at [gerry.canavan@marquette.edu](mailto:gerry.canavan@marquette.edu). I'd love to hear from you. These are hard times, and getting harder, but, as I said in my little speech at the awards banquet, the people in this organization lift me up, and bring me hope.

## From the Vice President

Ida Yoshinaga



Dear colleagues,

Thanks to all participants in our “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging” (DEIB) hybrid session, held on June 29 during our Oslo summer conference. We on the Executive Committee appreciate Simran, Sabiha, Athira, Founder, Aishwarya, Manuel, Ingwill, SC, Larisa, Tânia, Flip, Jaak, Kara, Steve, Candice, Sara, Andrew, Sarah, Priteegandha, Chris, and others who attended, including those who shared these critiques and suggestions:

- This conference expanded the areas of representation compared to previous ones.
- The yet-unbalanced dynamic between whiteness/white scholars (often speaking for/about other cultures) and marginalized/regional groups (Indigenous peoples, etc.) remains the “elephant in the room.” Power still tends to flow in 1 direction.
- Accept conference papers/panels based in part on their DEIB balance issues; rethink paper-acceptance policy or conference-site proposal selection, by being more conscious of such issues.
- Fund projects with hands-on approaches to sf in regional communities (e.g., those working with child readers in India).
- Greater visual accessibility for presentations, with prepared subtitles or transcripts; or use the hybrid format to display papers’ words onscreen.
- The antiracism workshops should not only deal with U.S.-based racism but also European and other forms; we could also focus on methodology such as addressing ethics of researchers’ positionality/intersectionality; or such as ethics of Indigenous literary research in Europe (etc.).
- Appoint a careers-research officer and an equality/diversity/ inclusion officer. [Note: the EC decided to approach DEIB from many angles among various responsible charges, rather than hold 1 person responsible.]
- Support networks of emerging scholars from around the world, especially the Global South (being done in Germany and in Canadian studies); also, networks of early-career scholars in Europe and the Americas.

## FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

*From the VP*

- Conference format marginalizes online participants. Facilitators should engage all participants including virtual ones. Greater inclusion in webinars may help online attendees feel less lonely, more engaged. [Note: In Europe, there are privacy issues with some online formats; signed author forms, however, might aid in this, and help address the question of why not distribute emails of all presenters?]
- Address larger question, “What is science fiction?” from the perspective of different global populations.
- The sheer power of one keynote (Laura Ponce) unapologetically giving her talk in Spanish was appreciated.
- Consider providing child care (accessibility). [Note: Other conferences have found this issue tricky.]
- Give attendees the choice of 10- or 20-min. papers.
- Volunteer positions include conference committees and awards committees; however, compensation is an issue many.
- More formal mentorship is desired esp. for BIPOC folk.
- Better time zones needed for the bulk of the sessions.
- A roundtable, not of regular SFRA committee members, but of others, to discuss careers research and/or DEIB issues, might be a good idea.
- A Counter Space and a Keynote panel would be helpful, too.
- Join in on a global-sf translation publication project which includes fandom-generated works, put together by Larisa Mikhaylova (larmih@gmail.com) towards facilitating diversity in the field.

Keep sharing your ideas,

Ida Yoshinaga, VP

## 2022 SFRA Award Winners



The following awards were given at the most recent SFRA convention. The *SFRA Review* congratulates the winners and all those nominated for awards, and hopes that their contributions to the discourse will be otherwise rewarded.

### SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship

Originally the Pilgrim Award, the SFRA Award for Lifetime Contributions to SF Scholarship was created in 1970 by the SFRA to honor lifetime contributions to SF and fantasy scholarship. The award was first named for J. O. Bailey's pioneering book, *Pilgrims through Space and Time* and altered in 2019.

This year's awardee is **Roger Luckhurst** (Professor of English, Birkbeck, University of London).

### SFRA Innovative Research Award

The SFRA Innovative Research Award (formerly the Pioneer Award) is given to the writer or writers of the best critical essay-length work of the year.

This year's awardee is **Amy Butt** for her essay "The Present as Past: Science Fiction and the Museum" from *Open Library of Humanities* 7.1 (2021). The selection committee also awarded an honorable mention to **Katherine Buse** for her essay "Genesis Effects: Growing Planets in 1980s Computer Graphics" from *Configurations* 29 (2021).

### Thomas D. Clareson Award

The Thomas D. Clareson Award for Distinguished Service is presented for outstanding service activities—promotion of SF teaching and study, editing, reviewing, editorial writing, publishing, organizing meetings, mentoring, and leadership in SF/fantasy organizations.

This year's awardee is **Gerry Canavan** of Marquette University.

## Mary Kay Bray Award

The Mary Kay Bray Award is given for the best review to appear in the SFRA Review in a given year.

This year's awardee is **Nora Castle** for her essay "Review of Upload (2020, TV series)" (*SFRA Review* 51.1).

## Student Paper Award

The Student Paper Award is presented to the outstanding scholarly essay read at the annual conference of the SFRA by a student.

The winner of the 2021 award is **John Landreville** (Wayne State University) for his paper "Speculative Metabolism: Digesting the Human in Upstream Color."

## SFRA Book Award

The SFRA Book Award is given to the author of the best first scholarly monograph in SF, in each calendar year.

This year's winner is **David M. Higgins** for his book *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*.

## Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize

Awarded by the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies program at the University of California, Riverside, 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.

This year's winner is **Sherryl Vint** for *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First-Century Speculative Fiction* (Cambridge University Press). The committee also chose to recognize **Jayna Brown's** *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press) with a special honorable mention.

# FEATURES



# FEATURES

## Call for Papers: Conservative/Right-Wing Science Fiction



### The Editorial Collective

While the dramatic resurgence of conservative, right-wing, and openly fascist movements became more visibly mainstream once the Trump 2016 campaign began to develop momentum, the SF world had already been introduced to this growth in unapologetically right-wing discourse via the controversies surrounding the various Puppies movements and their attempts to hijack the major awards in the years immediately prior. With the dramatic success of right-wing movements in the years before and since 2016, we of the SF community are well-suited to explore the works and worlds of SF created by right-wing authors as well as authors estranging right-wing discourse.

The *SFRA Review* is interested in short papers addressing conservative/right-wing SF in all its manifestations: literature, film, other media, games. We are also interested in papers addressing the science-fictionality of right-wing discourse outside of explicitly SF media.

- Papers should be from 3000-5000 words in length, with references in MLA style and few if any discursive footnotes.
- Our primary areas of interest are how right-wing discourse manifests in SF, how SF estranges right-wing discourse and how 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservative discourse takes on a science-fictional aspect.
- Papers *by* conservative writers, or papers that take a conservative stance on works or the genre of SF, are absolutely welcome. Racism, etc., will not be tolerated, but a good-faith conservative argument is well within the purview of this collection.
- Papers that engage with conservative theorists or media figures are also absolutely welcome, insofar as the papers address the science-fictionality of their discourse. Again, good-faith argumentation is our goal here; so long as the argument of the paper itself does not engage in (e.g.) gender essentialism, we welcome papers that address such tropes in the writing/speech of conservative theorists or figures.
- Papers that engage with conservative/reactionary approaches by fandom to changes in works, genres or the overall discourse of SF, broadly defined, are also welcome.
- Metacommentary about (e.g.) the Puppies is welcome; however, we are more interested in literary analysis, in the broadest sense, of works of SF and/or right-wing discourse.
- Much right-wing SF is of questionable literary quality: we are less interested in papers whose primary rationale is to point this out than we are in how and why right-wing tropes manifest or are estranged in works of right-wing SF or discourse.



FEATURES  
*CFP: Conservative SF*

- Images should be at least 2000 pixels wide; given that this is literary analysis, the exceptions to copyright for fair use will apply.
- Please send email to Ian Campbell ([icampbell@gsu.edu](mailto:icampbell@gsu.edu)) with the subject line *SFRA Conservative SF* and a brief description of your paper by **15 September 2022**. Any other queries should be sent to this address, as well, with the same subject line.
- Complete drafts are due **15 November 2022**.
- Edits will be due **15 January 2023**.
- Papers will be published in the Winter 2023 issue (53.1) on **01 February 2023**.

We sincerely hope that you will be interested in what we feel is an important aspect of SF in these current times and encourage you to submit.

### Melancholia, Assimilation, and Genre in Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*



Cynthia Zhang

In Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, the existence of multiple universes is an established fact, AIs are accepted as middle managers and drinking buddies, and time travel is a quotidian practice. When time machine technician Charles Yu (referred to as Charles for the remainder of this paper) shoots his future self and becomes trapped in a time loop, he is reassured by his AI companion TAMMY that "it happens to everyone, some even by choice" (Yu 97). Yet despite the prevalence and normalization of many recognizably sci-fi tropes, Yu's novel is in many ways less recognizably science fiction than it is Asian American. Time travel may drive the plot of *Science Fictional Universe*, but it is an examination of the promises and disillusionments of the American Dream that forms the novel's thematic center. Given the prominence of such themes, *Science Fictional Universe's* main departure from a paradigmatic model of Asian-American literature would be its status as science fiction. As *Science Fictional Universe* is a novel more interested in questions of immigrant struggle than the implications of time travel or multiverse theory, one must ask why Yu chooses to work in science fiction and not literary realism.

In this paper, I argue that Yu deliberately works to destabilize the lines between literary fiction, Asian-American literature, and science fiction. By using science fiction to frame a story of immigrant angst, Yu reframes the dream of multiethnic assimilation itself as a particular form of science fiction, one whose conventions and expectation are just as restricting as the familiar tropes of genre fiction. This inability to assimilate fully—to be just 'American' as opposed to 'Asian-American'—produces a profound sense of racial melancholia, a term I borrow primarily from David Eng and Shinhee Han's work on the subject. Ultimately, through using the language of science fiction to capture the melancholia of racial assimilation, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* contests the hegemony of realist fiction to depict psychological states as well as the necessity for delineating between genre and literary fiction in the first place.

#### The Genre Question

Before proceeding to *Science Fictional Universe* itself, it is useful to contextualize Yu's place within the contemporary literary marketplace. On the one hand, Yu's status as the recipient of awards such as the Sherwood Anderson Prize (for "Third Class Superhero" in 2004) and the National Book Award (for *Interior Chinatown* in 2020) speak to the cultural standing of his work among arbiters of literary prizes ("About"). On the other hand, Yu's work has also received attention from speculative fiction awards such as the Locus Awards and the Campbell Memorial

Award, and Yu in 2017 was the guest editor on that year's edition of *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Adams). Historically, literary fiction has defined itself as against genre fiction in negative terms, with genre fiction viewed as formulaic mass entertainment while literary fiction is thoughtful, elevated art. Yu's status as an author with footholds in multiple fields blurs the traditional division between literary and science fiction, instead pointing to a literary landscape where the genre boundaries are not fixed but perpetually porous.

Yu's status as a Taiwanese-American author further complicates his engagement with science fiction. As Sami Schalk traces in *Bodyminds Reimagined*, marginalized groups have historically tended to regard literature as a vehicle through which authors can combat dominant stereotypes "by offering positive, realistic representation" (19). Because of this commitment to authenticity as well as the greater prestige afforded to 'realistic' fiction, minoritarian writers often favor realism as "an effective way to create cultural change" (19). By contrast, science fiction with its robots and faraway galaxies comes to be regarded as a genre too fantastical to address pressing social issues in the 'real' world. Further, science fiction is a genre marked by a historically troubled relation with race, one which can be traced from H.P. Lovecraft's fear of racial miscegenation to cyberpunk's representations of menacing Japanese corporations. To be a writer of color in science fiction thus adds another challenge in the form of a "double-layered negotiation with authorial legitimacy within the genre community and with genre legitimacy within the literary community" (Huang 98).

Given the prevailing biases against both writers of color and genre fiction, it is certainly possible to read Yu's success within the literary mainstream as a story of meritocracy, one in which Yu's persistence and natural talent allow him to achieve success despite the odds against him. However, I want to propose a counternarrative of Yu's writing career, one in which Yu's engagement with science fiction as a minoritarian writer is also a deliberate engagement with systems of legitimation. Proceeding from the observation that genre fiction "share[s] a history of marginalization with Asian American literature vis-à-vis mainstream and academic literary establishments," Yu's choice to work within science fiction can be read as an embrace of the minor position with all its perils and potentials (Huang 6). Though *Science Fictional Universe* straddles multiple genre categories (literary fiction, science fiction, and Asian-American literature), it ultimately refuses to be neatly assimilated into any one genre, insisting instead on its position at the interstice of all three.

### **Racial Melancholia and the Minor Subject**

In analyzing *Science Fictional Universe* as a critique of the American Dream, I will focus on the two characters most affected by its failure: Charles and his father. As a child, Charles works with his father, a structural engineer working for an unnamed company, to develop one of the first working theories of time travel. However, flaws in execution mean that their time machine fails to impress a visiting research director from the prestigious Institute of Conceptual Technology. As a result, it is another researcher—one who possesses significantly more financial means than

Charles's father and lives in an idyllic town where the children's playgrounds are "painted red and white and blue"—who becomes the credited inventor of time travel, confining Charles's father to the margins of history (Yu 193). As an immigrant to a "new continent of opportunity," Charles's father is a believer in the narrative of immigrant aspiration in which hard work always pays off and success proceeds "in direct proportion to effort exerted" (174). The failure of his machine thus produces a profound sense of disillusionment in Charles's father, one which extends beyond disappointment with the American Dream into disappointment with himself. Eventually, this disappointment leads Charles's father to build a "darker, more powerful" version of a time machine and to become subsequently lost in time (197).

Even as Charles's father internalizes a sense of inadequacy, *Science Fictional Universe* points to the ways in which his success is precluded by barriers of race and class. When Charles and his father first meet the director, the differences in status between the two are evident in their appearances: while Charles's father is a short man dressed neatly but thriftily in too-short slacks and cheap glasses, the director is an authoritative figure dressed in "cuff-linked shirtsleeves" and an impressively knotted tie, "the kind neither my father nor I ever seemed to be able to do" (172). The class disparity between Charles's father and the director is one which is also described in racial terms, with Charles describing his father next to the director as looking like "an immigrant [. . .] a bewildered new graduate student in front of the eminent professor, a small man with a small hand in a large foreign country" (184). Despite the many years Charles's father has spent studying and working in his adopted country, he continues to be regarded as an immigrant and a foreigner, a perpetual Other never fully belongs to their adopted country. Celebratory accounts of multicultural diversity may champion the potential for all newcomers to become a part of the national fabric, but race persists in circumscribing the extent to which non-white subjects can assimilate into an implicitly white national consciousness.

Reading *Science Fictional Universe* as a narrative of how race haunts the American Dream, one can read Charles and his father's experiences as ones of a particularly racialized melancholia. As theorized by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia," melancholia differs from mourning in that it is a) an indefinite state and b) one in which the subject is unable to let go of the lost object (245). Freud attributes the longevity of melancholia to the fact that, unlike mourning, melancholy involves "a loss of a more ideal kind," one in which the melancholic knows "*whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him" (245). Unable to understand the true nature of their loss, the subject is unable to let go of their attachment. Instead, the melancholic is marked by "an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object," one which causes the subject's psychic attachments to retreat inward and, "by taking flight into the ego," thus remain intact (249-57). When the subject's feelings towards the lost object are ambivalent in nature, the introjection of the object causes those ambivalent feelings to migrate inwards so that the negative feelings towards the lost object become transformed into self-recriminations. For Charles's father, the process of melancholic introjection means that his failure becomes not a technical error, "but an actual failure of his own mind, his own concept" (Yu 184). Disappointment with the promises of immigrant aspiration

becomes directed inward, and Charles's father begins quite literally drifting back into the past in a manner that literalizes how attachment to a lost object anchors Freud's melancholic to a past moment. Unable to let go of his lost dream and all that it represents, Charles's father is borne melancholically back into the past until he becomes ultimately unreachable to his family.

While Freud's original account of melancholia characterizes it as a pathological state, theorists since have questioned this reading of melancholia as an inherently unproductive state. David Eng and David Kazanjian, for example, argue that "melancholia's continued and open relation to the past" opens up the possibility of "new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects" (4). In this way, the process of staying with melancholia can prove productive in both analyzing the past and also "rais[ing] the question of what makes a world of new objects, places, and ideals possible" (4). Thus, while melancholia proves paralyzing in *Science Fictional Universe*, trapping characters in loops of memory and stranding them outside of time, for Charles at least melancholia also provides an opportunity for him to revisit and reinterpret his past experiences. Killing his future self may trap Charles in a melancholic time loop of his own memories, but it also forces him to directly confront his past instead of attempting to ignore it or push it aside. Given that Charles is a character whose avoidance of the past has led him to spend ten years living inside a time machine, melancholia here offers Charles an opening for self-transformation if he is willing to undertake the arduous task of examining both the past and himself.

In addition, following Ann Cvetkovich's call to interpret "depression as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than a medical disease," melancholia can be read as less as an individualized malady than a collective condition resulting from the shared experience of trauma (1). For racialized subjects, shared trauma takes the form of "histories of racial loss," with racial melancholia naming the way in which those historical losses "are condensed into a forfeited object" that continues to haunt the racialized subject (Eng and Han 1). Regarding melancholia as a cultural condition complicates Freud's account by raising the question of ethical responsibility. If melancholia is a response to historical trauma and structural violence, then detachment becomes a form of forgetting, one which may be necessary for the subject's survival but which does not engage in transforming the structural injustices responsible for producing melancholia in the first place. Racialized subjects can become legal citizens, but because the "standard of assimilation" remains whiteness, their ability to become fully American as opposed to hyphenated American stops "short of the color line" (Cheng 69). Promised Americanness but perpetually figured as foreign to the white nation, Asian-American subjects experience the call to assimilation as "a repetitive trauma," one which can very much entrap the desiring subject within its structures (67).

Stuck reviewing memories of his father in a melancholic loop, Charles as an adult is able to gain a new understanding of how race has structured his and his father's dreams. However, *Science Fictional Universe* does not end with its protagonist trapped in memory and regret. Instead, Charles steps out of the time machine and lets himself be shot by his past self, thus allowing time to continue its normal forward flow. The melancholic loop is closed and Charles, while injured, survives to face a future that he now has the tools to properly confront. By the standards of a

classical Freudian account, Charles's trajectory illustrates the path of proper mourning, one in which Charles is able to let go of his investment in the ideal of immigrant assimilation and instead invest his attachments in a new model of subjectivity, one which affirms his ability to be "kind of a protagonist after all" (Yu 233). Still, it is notable that it is Charles's experiences while stuck in a melancholic time loop that allow him to achieve this state of peace with himself. Existing in the space of melancholic attachment allows Charles to reexamine his relationship to the immigrant assimilation narrative and, with the aid of an adult perspective and an AI interlocutor, gain an increased understanding of how that narrative forecloses the very promises it offers. Faced with the systemic inequalities that underlie the American Dream, Charles is able to view his father in another light—not as a failed dreamer, but rather a racialized subject whose theories, even without institutional acceptance, "would have been good enough for the director, for the world, good enough to be a serious contribution to the field of fictional science, good enough for me" (Yu 194). Per Freud, melancholia very much possesses the power to trap Charles and his father within its structures. However, when examined as a symptom of structural forces such as systemic racism, melancholia can become a useful tool in analyzing individual relationships with larger structures and ideologies.

### **Science/Fiction: The Genre Question Returns**

Reading *Science Fictional Universe* as a rejection of the conventional assimilation narrative, Yu's approach towards genre can be interpreted as an extension of his resistance to assimilation. While *Science Fictional Universe* straddles the boundaries of Asian-American literature, literary fiction, and science fiction, it ultimately refuses to fully belong to any of them. By doing so, *Science Fictional Universe* implicitly disputes the primacy of naturalism for realistic representation while reframing the American Dream as itself a form of science fiction.

For many minoritarian authors, the burden of representation means that realism is seen as a more robust mode for telling "authentic" depictions of marginalized communities. Yu's decision to use science fiction to tell a story of immigrant longing can be read as a challenge to such long-standing dynamics, one which implies that there are certain experiences that science fiction can capture more fully than literary realism. In *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, Seo-Young Chu notes while few people would debate realistic fiction's ability to depict the life of a university professor, objects such as "the infinitely remote future, the infinitely remote past, and whatever lies on the other side of death" are far more elusive (7). Rather than viewing science fiction and literary realism as opposites, Chu thus proposes that we see the two as poles on a spectrum, with SF offering a way of accessing objects that would be otherwise "impossible to represent in a straightforward manner" (3). In particular, Chu argues that science fiction's tropes of time travel and alternative selves make SF a productive genre for representing trauma as an experience that alienates the subject from themselves and disrupts an ordinary relationship with time (155). One reason for deploying SF in *Science Fictional Universe* would thus be the narrative elasticity the genre provides, with science fiction as a mode allowing Yu to portray Charles's relationship

with the past in a manner that reflects how Charles experiences his memories of racial and familial trauma.

In addition to opening narrative space for the depiction of trauma, SF further allows Yu to reframe the narratives of immigrant assimilation and the American Dream as themselves SF constructs. Throughout *Science Fictional Universe*, Yu describes the country to which Charles and his father live in terms of science fiction. Charles's father is a "recent immigrant to a new continent of opportunity, a land of possibility [. . .] the science fictional area where he had come, on scholarship" (Yu 71). Though immigrant narratives of America have frequently described the country's promises for economic improvement in hyperbolic terms, Yu here explicitly frames it as a science fictional construct. The American Dream as SF emerges as an elusive, illusory object, a promise extended to immigrants which the racialized subject can never quite achieve.

Yet if the American Dream is an SF text, then Yu offers an antidote in Charles's final confrontation with himself: a heightened awareness of how imposed narratives frame our experience of the world and a willingness to revise or reinvent those narratives when necessary. If Charles is trapped in a world whose laws prevent him from being more than a minor subject, then the only way for him to be "kind of a protagonist after all" is to create an alternative world, one structured by narratives which do not bestow humanity according to racialized processes of assimilation.

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## FEATURES

### “I’m a Node Worker Too”: Mexican Cyborgs as Resources and Resistance in *Sleep Dealer*



Karen Dollinger

In 2008, filmmaker Alex Rivera wrote and directed *Sleep Dealer*, a science fiction film set almost entirely in Mexico, centering on “node workers,” people who are plugged into machines run by multinational corporations so their work can be exploited around the globe. The film centers around three characters, all of whom have cybernetic enhancements. Memo works in construction, virtually controlling a giant robot in a country he himself is not allowed to enter to make skyscrapers he will never see with his own eyes. Luz works for TruNode, a corporation that allows customers to virtually experience the memories of others, selling her memories and creating memories on demand as a form of virtual tourism. Rudy, the only (Mexican) American in the film, is a drone operator, able to kill others from thousands of miles away.

An allegory for Mexican immigration in the United States, the film constructs a future with roots in Oaxaca, Mexico, in which the United States is able to receive all of the benefits of laboring Mexican workers without ever seeing actual Mexicans. Natural resources such as water are controlled by corporations, and farmers in Oaxaca must pay in U.S. dollars to have access to it. Indigenous people who would take control of their own resources or are even suspected of it are killed at the push of a button in another country. Nonetheless, the node workers, who can be considered cyborgs, discover that they can do more than merely survive, and use the very nodes that drain them as a form of resistance, creating a community of cybernetically enhanced humans to improve the lot of those subjugated by corporations.

This paper will examine the narrative and symbolic function of the protagonists through the lens of Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, specifically, her definition of a cyborg:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation of the other. (151)

In *Sleep Dealer*, turning a human into a cyborg (or cybracero, another term for node worker) is meant to exploit human beings as natural resources without agency, and yet it is as cyborgs that effective resistance becomes possible. New relationships and new ways of being are created through nodes by the three protagonists, demonstrating the transformational possibilities of a post-human future.

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The film begins when Memo's father in Oaxaca is unjustly killed by a drone controlled from the United States after being mistaken for an aqua-terrorist. In order to support his family, Memo travels to Tijuana to work in a *maquiladora*, a type of factory. In this future, though, workers ship their labor north via "nodes," cybernetic implants that allow them to control robots located thousands of miles away, while connected to giant machinery in the Tijuana maquiladoras, also called "Sleep Dealers," nicknamed thus because they eventually drain the life force of the node workers. Before he can find work, Memo must locate a *coyotec*, an illegal dealer in the much sought-after cybernetic implants which transform ordinary human beings into something more—or lesser. The name is also a play on "coyote"—someone who assists undocumented migrants from Mexico to the United States—and "tech"—as in node technology. By chance, Memo meets Luz, a cybernetic journalist who makes her living uploading her own memories directly to the Net, allowing anyone with nodes to experience them. She is able to transform Memo into a node worker, and the two begin a romance.

Before she had gotten to know him better, Luz had uploaded her memory of meeting Memo on a bus, intending to highlight the plight of migrant workers. A mysterious client offers to pay her to create more memories of Memo, which she does without Memo's consent. It is revealed to the audience that the mysterious client is Rudy, the American drone pilot who killed Memo's father and now has doubts about the dead man's guilt. Using the memories Luz had uploaded Rudy is able to track down Memo.

At this point, the film defies audience expectations. Rudy is not there to investigate or arrest Memo; neither is this a tale of Memo avenging his father's death. Instead, it is a tale of connection, of community, for as Rudy observes, "I'm a node worker too." Being a node worker unites Memo, Rudy, and Luz across ethnicities, nationalities, and genders. Rudy seeks to make amends to Memo and his family for the harm he has done, and Memo decides to accept them. The three protagonists concoct a plan to destroy the dam that has devastated the farming community where Memo was born, specifically using their cybernetic abilities. The idea is the culmination of the dream of Memo's father, who had explained to Memo in the beginning of the film that the dam choking off the river made farming nearly impossible. In a life-affirming act that harms no one, they become the aqua-terrorists the United States government feared and sought to destroy.

While initially being controlled and repressed by becoming part machine, Memo, Luz, and Rudy are all able to find liberation utilizing the very tools of their repression. They fit the model of the cyborg proposed by Haraway. As she writes of what it means to be a cyborg:

Taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so means embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts. It is not just that science and technology are possible means of great human satisfaction, as well as a matrix of complex dominations. Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we

have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the supersavers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. (21)

We see this tension throughout the film. The negative aspects of the futuristic technology of *Sleep Dealer* are highlighted by the plot, beginning with the dam which has nearly destroyed Memo's family's *milpa*, an indigenous farm in rural Oaxaca, then the drone technology which permits Memo's father to be murdered by someone thousands of miles away, to the Sleep Dealers which are slowly killing node workers, to the exploitative TruNode which colonizes memories.

While this paper examines the characters with nodes as cyborgs, there is also something vampiric about the apparatus associated with the nodes. Many scholars have pointed this out, such as Micah K. Donahue in "Borderlands Gothic Science Fiction: Alienation as Intersection in Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* and Lavín's 'Llegar a la orilla':

The needle-like injection point of the wires that the cybraceros insert into their bodies, an insertion that doubles as the debilitating extraction site of labor and willpower, additionally reprises the longstanding Latin American tradition of the parasitic vampire . . . The dangling cables in *Sleep Dealer* and the bulbous machines above them form part of that (techno)gothic archive: cybernetic spiders descend from the rafters of the infomaquilas to suck the life from victims snared in their bioluminescent webs. Memo directly addresses the vampiric nature of the transnational Sleep Dealers. "Me estaban drenando la energía y mandándola lejos (They were draining my energy and sending it far away.)" (61)

The impersonal disembodied transnational corporation takes the role of the villainous bloodsucker here. It is not, however, the only way in which our invisible vampire casts its shadow. Luz captures moments of life—both her own and others—which are then consumed through TruNode. Rudy swoops down from the sky and deals death. Even the dessicated farm and village of Memo's youth can be seen as a vampiric victim, drained of the lifeblood of the river by the private transnational water corporation.

So does this mean that the nodes themselves are evil? It's complicated. The node technology, which blurs the boundaries of organic and machine and even spatial location, also leads to powerful connections. It is the character of Luz who first sees this. She explains that she became a reporter for TruNode precisely because she wanted to bring to light—which is what "Luz" means in Spanish—the lives of diverse people and to create connections and community through her memories of them. She doesn't see what she is doing as exploitative until Memo confronts her. Luz realizes Harraway's promise of cyborg relationships when she suggests to Memo that they make love while connected to one another via their nodes so they can experience the act through the

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sensations of the other person. Binaries and boundaries—and what human experience means—is blurred in this scene. Luz is the bridge between Memo and Rudy as well.

If Luz wants to use her cybernetic nodes to make human connections, it is Rudy who sees the connections that are already there. He muses, “I’m a node worker too,” highlighting this similarity to Memo: they are both cyborgs. This contradicts and complicates what should be very different subject positions. Rudy is American, while Memo is Mexican. Rudy is middle class, while Memo is poor. Rudy grew up in a highly technological society, while Memo grew up on an indigenous farm in Oaxaca. Rudy is a member of the military, while Memo obtained his nodes illegally from a coyotec. Rudy controls a murderous drone, while Memo controls a construction robot. Yet Rudy sees Memo as an equal, and one he has wronged. Rudy saw Memo’s father die through cybernetic eyes, but still saw the humanity of the man he killed, which made him question everything he had been taught.

Ultimately, though, Memo is the one who must take the final steps in creating a new community blending both his indigenous roots and his new position as a node worker. He is the one who chooses to forgive Luz for appropriating his memories and experiences and to forgive Rudy for having killed his father. By choosing connection over repudiation, he is able to come up with the plan to return the river in his home town to his people by having Rudy pilot his drone to destroy the dam. The farms in Oaxaca will once again thrive and will no longer have to pay the exorbitant prices demanded by the foreign corporation for life-giving water. Ultimately, technology defeats technology. The unity of node workers led to the survival of Memo’s indigenous family and community.

Cravey, Palis, and Valdivia in their article “Imagining the future from the margins: Cyborg labor in Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*” point out that the three cyborg protagonists of the film are able to learn via their nodes to recognize and value their connections with a wider community: “The three central characters also gain insight about ways in which their own individual fates are ineluctably entwined with others and with humanity; and each struggles to act with more empathy. In this regard, each of the protagonists wrestles with a specific dilemma about the consequences of one’s actions in a world of globally-extensive, densely-intertwined, social interconnections” (872). Their nodes allow them to see connections in ways none of the cyborgs could have predicted, but they realize that humanity has always been connected, nodes or not.

It can be easy to dismiss the role of Luz as superfluous, as merely the love interest of Memo. But without Luz’s work as a TruNode cyborg reporter, Rudy and Memo would never have made their connection, and they never would have made the plan to destroy the dam, freeing the river for the citizens of Memo’s village in Oaxaca. As China Medel writes in “The Ghost in the Machine: The Biopolitics of Memory in Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*”:

TruNode’s simultaneous position as public forum and private marketplace for sharing memories reveals the ambivalences structuring the production of collective memory and shared images environments within neoliberalism. TruNode writer Luz becomes like the

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sex workers and domestics of the transnational economy whose affective labor generates social relationships. Yet her labor also enables the film's narrative shift from a story of romantic love to the transnational love of solidarity. (116)

It is Luz, through her work as a sort of cybernetic interpreter, who helps Rudy and Memo come to understand one another. And it is Luz who performs the vital role of *coyotec*, the person who illegally transforms Memo into a cyborg. Notably, she does this for free. Luz is both Memo's introduction to the world of the node workers and the point of contact between Memo and Rudy across national boundaries.

The climax—the redemption for Rudy, Memo, and Luz—occurs when the trio blows up the corporate dam. No one (that we see) was killed by this act, whereas the existence of the dam had already cost lives. Is it terrorism? Orihuela and Hageman write in “The Virtual Realities of US/Mexico Border Ecologies in *Maquilapolis* and *Sleep Dealer*”:

Blowing up the corporate dam is coded within the film itself as an act of eco-terrorism. Occasionally, shots linger over the graffiti-portraits of masked figures with the letters “EMLA” standing for the Mayan Army of Water Liberation, thereby using the backdrop of Tijuana to imply that Memo's plan is a self-conscious act of eco-terror. Additionally, the television media in the film, consistent with current US media discourse, reports the dam-destruction as an act of ecoterrorism. As such, the film's conclusion seems a deeply problematic prescription. But, as Rivera pointed out . . . the destruction of the dam brings some hard contradictions about ecology, borders, race, technology, and gender to the forefront. (183)

One such contradiction is in who is allowed to define the word “terrorist.” Why is Rudy a terrorist but not the transnational corporation denying water to the indigenous community that had relied on it for generations? In Orihuela and Hageman's interview with Rivera, the director says: “Words like ‘terrorist’ and ‘freedom fighter’ or ‘revolutionary,’ ‘patriot’ are obviously used by one kind of player in history against another, depending which side of the struggle you are on. ‘Ecoterrorism’ is a word that could be used with as much moral authority against Monsanto as it could against Earth Liberation Front” (qtd. in Orihuela et al., 183). So who, precisely, are the villains here? The node workers blowing up the dam is coded as an act of heroism. Throughout the entire film, we only see two direct acts of violence against individuals: when Rudy kills Memo's father, and when Memo is robbed in Tijuana. Most of the suffering is systemic and caused by faceless corporations. Instead of a specific enemy, the cyborg protagonists must fight systemic oppression.

In the final scene, Memo is planting corn in Tijuana, and Rudy is heading deeper into Mexico to hide from the authorities. We realize that Memo still has his nodes, and the entire film was composed of Memo's memories on TruNode, most likely uploaded by Luz. The cyborgs are still

resisting, literally putting down roots in the case of Memo, but are also making new connections. Memo vows to keep resisting by staying connected. The past, as Memo's father would say, now has a future.

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# Mother's Madness: The Silent Struggle of Mothers in African American Literature and Film



Aileen Fonsworth

While existing in a racist, patriarchal society, women are not in control. The mother is responsible for the duties of the home and children. In Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and the television miniseries *THEM* directed by Lena Waithe, sociopolitical and cultural pressure to perform physically traumatizes and mentally destroys the mothers of the house. Each of the matriarchs of these texts and program are tormented by the situational circumstances of their lives. Oppression and the illusion of freedom keep these women in unstable mental states. The silent struggle of these mothers drives them to insanity, self-destruction, child abandonment, and experiences of various forms of death.

The coupling of what is socially acceptable and what they know is wrong gives birth to their behavior and, as a result, a generational curse. In "Bloodchild" by Octavia Butler, Gan's mother, Lien, is constricted by her internal conflict. She watches and is arguably complicit in the age-inappropriate courting and ultimate rape of her youngest child by an alien creature. She does this because of a pact that she made with this creature for status. As much as she hates the idea of what is going to happen to her son, she raises him to honor his captor and to believe that his sacrifice is an honorable elevation instead of a condemned social station. She assists in the grooming of her child to elevate the rest of the family but denies herself any of the available comforts during the process.

The aliens, called Tlic, provide sterile eggs that act as an age-defying intoxicant for humans. Lien refuses to partake in the nectar's comforting effects as not only a silent act of rebellion but also as self-flagellation. Lien hates the alien T'Gatoi and the calamity that her family is in. She struggles through the story not sleeping or eating enough, which expedites her aging process and leads to her eventual death. This is an act of defiance that Lien exhibits as her own way of protesting. She refuses the nectar but is coerced to partake in it. T'Gatoi gaslights Lien constantly saying, "this place is a refuge because of you, yet you won't take care of yourself" (Butler 5). When Lien takes the bare minimum, the creature disregards her volition, forcing her to ingest more.

Against the wishes of the matriarch, the creature captures and stings her. In a venom-induced lull, Lien babbles that she wishes she would have killed T'Gatoi: "I should have stepped on you when you were small enough" (7). While this is presented as a joke between the two, Lien suffers as she bears the knowledge of what is to befall her child. The sociopolitical climate renders the humans (called Terrans) inferior and at the disposal of the Tlic. Lien promised her youngest child to the creature to secure provisions and safety for her family out of obligation, not by choice.

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Absent the intoxication-induced admission, she never discusses the exchange. In the stupor of the sting, Lien futilely protested, "Nothing can buy him from me" (7). She is only mocked and stung again.

The family's social ascent is dependent on Gan being the carrier of T'Gatoi's eggs. For fear of harming herself, Lien is forced to facilitate his impregnation through sodomy. When T'Gatoi takes Gan outside the designated area for his people, his mother instructs Gan to "take care of her" (5) even though he is only a child. When they do get out of the compound, there is chaos. Terrans are fighting and clamoring in fear and filth while the aliens are arguing for access. In fear of the unknown terror of the outside world, Lien becomes an accessory in the victimization of her son. Rather than risk her family being exposed to the unknown, Lien decides to protect her family at the expense of her youngest child.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe is physically aware of the horrors of the plantation Sweet Home, where she was formerly enslaved. After the overseer's nephews rape pregnant Sethe, by stealing her milk, she escapes enslavement. After a tumultuous escape, she reunites with her mother-in-law to live in a false sense of socio-political and economic security. When the overseer, schoolteacher, comes looking for Sethe and her family, she decides to free her children eternally to prevent her daughters from suffering the same plight. When faced with the possibility of losing her children to the torment of a known oppressor, Sethe sacrifices her baby's life to keep her safe. Haunted by the memory of the dead child, Sethe is tormented by her past and her actions.

When Paul D, one of the formerly enslaved men of Sweet Home comes into town Sethe is comforted by his presence. They share the history and because of it they connect and communicate with each other. When Paul D calls into question Sethe's choice to take the child's life, "a forest sprang up between them" (Morrison 194). While he tried to defend his statement or offer other options, he insults her saying "you got two legs not four" (191). Sethe explains that she not only knows what she did but made the choice with the surety of knowing that anywhere would be better than Sweet Home. "I stopped him . . . I took and put my babies where I knew they'd be safe" (193). Sethe denies herself the love and comfort of a partner in standing by her decision. Like Lien, Sethe refuses herself pleasure and sacrifices her child to keep the family safe. The rejection of pleasure and comfort is often the cost of security for mothers in oppressed situations.

In the television miniseries, *THEM*, directed by Lena Waithe, a 1950s African American family decides to move to California from South Carolina after the mother, Lucky, is raped and the youngest son killed. The intention behind their move is to give the remaining children access to a more progressive environment and better education. Although they have family in the Watts area of Los Angeles, Lucky's husband buys them a house in predominantly Caucasian Compton. From the day they move into their new home, the racist neighbors begin to harass them relentlessly. Lucky expresses her unease in their new place. After realizing that their neighborhood had previously prohibited African Americans from living there, she explains to her husband, with a gun in her hand, that if any of her neighbors get too far out of line, "they ain't getting' a warnin'"



("Day 1" 19:34). The decision to stay in Compton wears on her mental state.

To cope, Lucky seeks refuge in the familiarity of family. Taking a day to visit relatives in town, Lucky goes to her cousin's house to fellowship. What starts as relief ends in a triggered escape. In the scene, Lucky is getting her hair done by a cousin who also offers children's services. During their conversation, she asks Lucky about her son's age and hair length. "What his name . . . Chester right?" ("Day 4" 21:15). Lucky panics and leaves hastily in a mentally foggy state. It is obvious that her cousin was uninformed of the situation. After being brutally raped and having her child murdered in front of her, Lucky silently suffers that trauma alone.

While being tormented at home by neighbors, the children are also taunted at school. The eldest daughter, Ruby, is mocked constantly by her classmates and haunted by an imaginary friend. The apparition that befriends Ruby helps her navigate the social climate of her new school. Ruby's suffering is compounded by the treatment of her family and particularly that of her mother. When she paints herself white at school to fit in, Lucky blames herself and begins to insist that they leave that house and neighborhood. The homes in *Beloved* and *THEM* are both vehicles of fear and suffering for their matriarchs.

In these texts and in the television series, the mothers sacrifice their peace to do what they think is best to protect the lives of their children and families. While these characters represent various points of contention on the oppressed freedom spectrum, they are all similar in the sense of sacrifice. None of them are willing to allow the harshness of the outside world to invade their homes and negate the little bit of control that they have. At the cost of their safety and sanity Lien, Sethe, and Lucky are willing to suffer the consequences of extreme actions for the sake of preserving their families.

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### Transcendence: Facing Intergenerational Trauma through Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and "Bloodchild"



Candice Thornton

In "Bloodchild" and *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler's characterizations and use of time travel permits readers to examine the implications of their own intersections of identity within existing and imagined societal infrastructures. *Kindred* illustrates the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual impact that descendants of enslaved Africans experience, inherit, embody, and transcend. In "Bloodchild," Butler depicts the complex dynamics and intergenerational implications of colonial hegemony for the Tlic and Terran people. Through the characters in *Kindred* and "Bloodchild," alongside her manipulation of time and setting, Butler contextualizes moral dilemmas in multi-dimensional perspectives. Butler's works convey the persevering implications and infrastructures of capitalistic cisheteropatriarchy that contribute to the commodification, erasure and subjugation of, and violence against, marginalized individuals and communities.

In *Kindred*, Dana's relationships with Rufus, her enslaver ancestor; Alice, her enslaved ancestress; and Kevin, her Caucasian husband; illustrate the long-reaching impact of chattel slavery on African American people's bodily agency and ability to safely engage in consensual, equitable, and loving relationships. Dana, who is an interracial wed African American woman, is transported from her middle-class California life into enslavement in antebellum Maryland. In "Bloodchild," Gan's relationships with his mother Lien and T'Gatoi highlight how oppressive infrastructures limit marginalized peoples' ability to consensually engage in relationships that respect their bodily agency. In "Saying 'Yes': Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," Marisa Parham asserts that "Butler immediately concretizes the uncanny sensation, as she makes the briefly unfamiliar domestic present double as the site of an unfamiliar domestic past, a slippery traversal made possible by the convergence of race, gender, and history—a convergence which, once revealed, resituates Dana's home as a place of danger and vulnerability" (1321).

In *Kindred*, Dana's relationship with Rufus is inherently non-consensual because she is unable to consent to being summoned to Rufus's era and is only transported back to her own era when faced with the threat of death. After being transported with Dana to the Weylin plantation, Kevin asserts that he will not leave Dana alone to be harmed. Dana replies, "You'll try. Maybe that will be enough. I hope so. But if it isn't . . . I'll have a better chance of surviving if I stay here now and work on the insurance we talked about. Rufus. He'll probably be old enough to have some authority when I come again. Old enough to help me" (89). Kevin counters, "It still might not work. After all, his environment will be influencing him every day you're gone" (89). As Rufus ages, he does, in fact, assume more authority; however, as Kevin suggests, he does not grow into a helpful person.

On the contrary, Rufus develops into an entitled, immature, and violent man. In the chapter titled “The Fight,” Dana is once again transported to Rufus’s era. She finds him beaten with “his nose . . . bleeding. His split lip . . . bleeding . . . His face was a lumpy mess, and he would be looking out of a couple of black eyes for a while” (121). Rufus was beaten by Alice’s husband, Isaac, after having assaulted Alice. In her private thoughts, Dana expresses that she “should have been used to white men preying on black women. I had Weylin as my example after all. But somehow, I had hoped for better from Rufus” (119). Dana asks Alice, “wasn’t Rufus a friend of yours? I mean . . . did he just grow out of the friendship or what?” Alice responds “Got to where he wanted to be more friendly than I did . . . He tried to get Judge Holman to sell Isaac South to keep me from marrying him” (119). Learning that Isaac is enslaved, Dana advises them to run while she tends to Rufus, to mitigate the chance that they will be killed once Rufus regains consciousness.

After Alice and Isaac leave, Rufus awakens and asks Dana where they’ve gone. Rufus threatens, “He’s going to pay!,” to which Dana responds by attempting to persuade Rufus to blame his injuries on a fight between drunken men. Rufus vehemently retorts, “What in hell are you talking about? You know Isaac Jackson did this to me!” Dana reminds him that “You raped a woman—or tried to—and her husband beat you up . . . You’re lucky he didn’t kill you. He would have if Alice and I hadn’t talked him out of it. Now what are you going to do to repay us for saving your life?” (122). Dana asks if he managed to rape Alice, and Rufus “looked away guiltily.” She asks him, “why would you do such a thing? She used to be your friend,” and he responds, “When we were little, we were friends . . . We grew up. She got so she’d rather have a buck nigger than me!” (122). Dana counters, “Do you mean her husband?” and in her interior thoughts, admits that “Kevin had been right. I’d been foolish to hope to influence him” (122).

Dana tends to Rufus, and “after four days of freedom together . . . [Alice and Isaac] were caught” (143). Alice was terribly beaten, and Isaac was sold South after having his ears cut off. Dana realizes that “Rufus had done exactly what I had said he would do: Gotten possession of the woman without having to bother with her husband. Now, somehow, Alice would have to accept not only the loss of her husband, but her own enslavement. Rufus had caused her trouble, and now he had been rewarded for it” (149). Through this heartbreaking series of events, Dana and her enslaved ancestress Alice are subjected to Rufus’s violence. They are continuously stripped of their agency, yet reliant upon one another for survival.

In “Beloved and Betrayed: Survival and Authority in *Kindred*,” Novella Brooks de Vita provides insightful perspective about Dana’s relationship with Alice and Rufus. She asserts that Dana “holds some authority over Rufus as his instructor and protector” (18). Arguably, Dana’s authority over Rufus is limited at best, in that Rufus ultimately impacts Dana’s agency. It is through Rufus’s near-fatal encounters that Dana is transported to his side. Brooks de Vita further explains that “Dana grows to see Rufus as both a detestable chore and a pitiful child. She is unable to create in her mind an effective balance between the two views” (18). Through Rufus’s rape of Alice and attempted rape of Dana, Butler illustrates the perpetual legacy of sexual violence against African

descendants by European and Anglo-American people in order to commodify, control, and otherwise subjugate them.

In “Bloodchild,” Gan and his Terran family are non-consensually enmeshed with the Tlic person T’Gatoi. Although Butler describes both the Tlic and Terran as people, the Tlic are the ruling class and differ from humans in that their reproductive survival relies upon using the Terran people as hosts for their eggs. The short story begins with the protagonist, Gan, describing the last night of his childhood. Gan recounts his Terran family being visited by T’Gatoi, the Tlican government official. Gan explains that “when [he] was little and at home more, [his] mother used to try to tell [him] how to behave with T’Gato—how to be respectful and always obedient because T’Gatoi was the Tlic government official in charge” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 3). Although Gan’s mother, Lien, explains that “it was an honor . . . that such a person had chosen to come into the family,” Gan observes that Lien “was at her most formal and severe when she was lying” (4). Gan’s last night of childhood begins with T’Gatoi offering the family some sterile eggs that “prolonged life, prolonged vigor” (3). Despite their life-sustaining and euphoria-inducing qualities, Gan’s mother Lien declines the offering, which causes Gan to question “why [his] mother denied herself such a harmless pleasure” (3). He also reveals that his father, “who had never refused one in his life, had lived more than twice as long as he should have. And toward the end of his life, when he should have been slowing down, he had married my mother and fathered four children” (3). As the story unfolds, Gan explains that T’Gatoi’s people, the Tlics, “wanted more of us made available . . . we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people” (4). While Gan naively describes his people as independent, the dynamics and subsequent exchanges between the Terran and Tlic people illustrate the hegemony that strips the Terran people of their agency.

Although Butler does not rely on time travel in “Bloodchild,” she infuses elements of science fiction to create a society that reflects the breeding practices and societal dynamics which are akin to the institution and practices of chattel slavery. Despite the characters in “Bloodchild” having fictionalized racial identities, Butler’s classifications of each race and the subsequent dynamics are similar to those between European and Anglo-American people and people of the African diaspora. The Tlic people’s survival is contingent upon their ability to procreate, and their procreation is sustained by depositing their eggs into Terran hosts.

In *Kindred*, Dana is unable to choose when she will be transported to rescue and otherwise care for Rufus, Alice, and other enslaved people; in “Bloodchild,” Gan’s family has little agency to liberate themselves from the breeding practices of the Tlic people. Similar to Dana, Gan and his mother understand that their safety and survival are reliant upon their compliance with and participation in the harmful practices and systems established by the ruling class. The protagonists in *Kindred* and “Bloodchild” “survive the tension between understanding their bodies as their ‘own’ and also recognizing their bodies in relation to pasts that exceed, leak into, the present moment” (Parham 1318). Butler uses the protagonists and their families to depict how race, gender, and class impact one’s agency. Butler’s juxtaposition of enslaved and enslaver/ ruler and ruled, contextualizes how marginalized peoples are forced to negotiate what little

agency they possess to preserve and protect themselves and their loved ones. Ultimately, through her manipulation of time and setting, along with her characterizations, Butler illustrates the persevering implications and infrastructures of capitalistic cisheteropatriarchy that contribute to the commodification, erasure and subjugation of, and violence against, marginalized individuals and communities.

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# Fictional Foresight and Autism Advocacy: The Role of Science Fictional Narratives in Unearthing Eugenic Motivations



Ryan Collis

At the end of August 2021, a research project named “Spectrum 10K” launched in the United Kingdom. Its goal: to collect the genetic data of 10,000 autistic people to “investigate genetic and environmental factors that contribute to the wellbeing of autistic individuals and their families” ([spectrum10k.org/](https://spectrum10k.org/)). This quickly became a lightning rod for controversy as the autistic community wrote articles and circulated petitions against the project. The backlash eventually grew so strong that the project voluntarily paused, with project representatives “apologiz[ing] for causing distress, and promis[ing] a deeper consultation with autistic people and their families” (Sanderson). The reason for the strong condemnation of the project, as well as the formation of a community specifically to oppose it, is the subject of this paper. The fears of the potential eugenic use of DNA brought together a community that had a unified understanding of what DNA, genetics, and eugenics are, which was mostly based on the way they are presented in the fantastic. While there are real world examples of DNA editing, such as CRISPR (Le Page), most people’s understanding of what genomic medicine is comes from science fiction. Further, through the proliferation of autistic-coded characters in SF (such as Spock, Data, and the Terminator), negative stereotypes and misrepresentations of the autistic community further influence public perception of what it means to be autistic. The claims by Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen, one of the lead researchers, that the purpose of the Spectrum 10K project is benign, must be viewed in light of fantastic representation of genetic science and eugenics.

Non-autistics consider Baron-Cohen to be one of the most knowledgeable voices in autism research. Autistics have a significantly less positive opinion of him, because while his claims have a wide reach, they are mostly “bad takes”—a slang term used to flag what is commonly seen on social media as a clear error in judgment made even more regrettable for having been published at all (Dias). He once ran a study that produced results so improbable that the authors of the software he used objected to its publishing (Bach and Dakin). To end the controversy, the research team ran the experiment again and had to retract their original results (Tavassoli et al.). To expand the scope and source of Baron-Cohen’s negative impact on the autistic community, we can also turn to science fictional representation. In SF, the autistic-coded alien/non-human (e.g., Spock or Data) often does not understand or experience emotions, thereby placing them outside the realm of the human. I use the term “autistic-coded” because the authors of these texts were not necessarily intending the character to be autistic, but there is a link between this type of dehumanized character and the archetype of the emotionless autistic who lacks empathy. That depiction of ‘what an autistic person is like’ comes from Baron-Cohen’s “empathizing-systemizing theory,” which claims that males are systemizers and females are empathizers, a conclusion he reached based

on a study where baby boys looked longer at an object and baby girls looked longer at a person. However, these results could not be replicated (Spelke). Science journalist Angela Saini argues that Baron-Cohen overstates the significance of his findings and notes that his foetal testosterone level studies have provided no evidence for his argument (Saini). This clear lack of scientific viability is significant given that Baron-Cohen is one of the creators of the autism-spectrum quotient, a common questionnaire that is used in diagnosis (Baron-Cohen et al.; “Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ)”). It has been criticized for its overuse of stereotypes as the basis for diagnosis—for instance, an interest in math increases the score while an interest in literature or art decreases it—which further reinforces stereotypes linking math skills and autism (McGrath). In his book, *The Essential Difference*, Baron-Cohen presents the idea of autistic mind blindness, the idea that autistics cannot understand the minds of others. A review of the book, published in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, described his work as “very disappointing,” noting that Baron-Cohen has a “superficial notion of intelligence,” and concluding that the book’s major claims about mind-blindness and systemizing–empathizing are “at best, dubious” (Levy 315, 316). Baron-Cohen’s response to criticisms has been to agree that while his results have not been replicated, he “remains ‘open minded about these hypotheses until there are sufficient data to evaluate them’” and yet he does not see a problem with publicising his theories before there is evidence to confirm them (qtd. in Buchen 26). With this attitude towards the necessity of evidence for his theories, Baron-Cohen problematically offers pure speculation as science, suggesting that he may be content to remain within the realm of science fictional thought experiments without care for the way narratives influence both science and public perception. Scientists rely on existing cultural narratives to explain the significance of their work, and so SF that presents autism or autistic-coded characters both reflects and influences the goals, understanding, and direction of actual scientists (Hamner, Introduction).

What does genetic research with dubious justification and a researcher with a history of publicizing stereotypes about a minority have to do with the fantastic? The answer comes from the link between how people understand advanced science and SF. SF can provide an understanding as to how and why resistance to ‘advances’ formed as it did regarding the Spectrum 10K project. For most people, knowledge of genetics comes from their exposure to fiction rather than formal education, but Hamner makes the claim that scientists, too, use cultural narratives to explain their work; science both shapes and is shaped by fictional narratives (Introduction). There is no shortage of fantastic works that imagine the role of genetics in possible futures. In *Jurassic Park*, egotistical scientists “were so preoccupied with whether they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should” (Spielberg) while in *Gattaca*, testing DNA determined who was a member of the elite and who was condemned to the lowest rungs of society (Niccol). The autistic understanding of biomedical research is, in part, shaped by fictional media representations, such as those above, that often show it as “an unscrupulous enterprise that exploits individuals for the sake of advancing knowledge and/or profit” (Cottingham 285). Cottingham calls on Foucault to argue that just as texts shape and construct reality, fictional media is more than mere representation (285). Rather, fictional narratives have the power to shape public perception and public discourse and, in turn,

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can help us better understand the public and community-driven response to the Spectrum 10K project. To provide evidence for this claim, I will illustrate key connections between the following three concepts: that media (and specifically SF) influences public perceptions of science; that autistic people are exposed to this media and internalize the message that future scientists may weaponize genetic screening for eugenic purposes; and that this distributed knowledge has led to the formation of a community predicated on social justice objectives: specifically that there should be no research on autism that is not guided by autistics, or, as per the motto of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), “nothing about us without us” ([autisticadvocacy.org/](http://autisticadvocacy.org/)).

In pursuit of my first assertion—that media influences public perceptions of science—I turn to an additional example. Kirby examines the 2002 film *Blade II* (del Toro), and notes the plot is a retelling of the story of aristocratic purebloods (those born with vampirism) worried that newly turned vampires are degenerating their race. The leader employs genetic manipulation to remove flaws (e.g., weakness to silver and sunlight) preventing vampiric ascendancy, mirroring how historical eugenicists argued against the dilution of pure bloodlines in pursuit of a master race. Kirby notes that “eugenics, it seems, is a clear-cut means of making vampires more evil. By implication, the film condemns any person utilizing gene-altering technologies to achieve social control” (“The Devil in Our DNA” 100). In his two-part story *Beyond This Horizon*, Robert Heinlein claimed that “Only under absolutism could the genetic experiments . . . have been performed, for they required a total indifference to the welfare of individuals” (Heinlein, qtd. in Clayton 324). Heinlein’s narrative cautions that if humanity learns to pick and choose what traits are permitted to pass on, we risk “homogenization of the species, or its opposite, overspecialization” (Clayton 324). Other fantastic literature echoes this claim. For example, Kirby notes that in Frankenheimer’s 1996 adaptation of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, “Even though Moreau feels he can save humanity from its genetic demons, the film makes it clear that the devil is embodied in a scientist’s willingness to manipulate humanity’s molecular soul” (“The Devil in Our DNA” 100). One of the most explicit examples of fundamentally non-human beings who appear human are the replicants in Ridley Scott’s 1982 film *Blade Runner*, based on Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). Like the stereotype of autism promoted by Baron-Cohen, these simulacra lack the ability to empathise (a trait that is used to identify them so they can be executed) and these less-than-human beings are used to do the tasks humans cannot or will not do. The film asks if beings who are biologically similar to humans can be considered “human” despite their lack of empathy and artificial nature. Like autistics, “the replicants do not want to be considered ‘superior’ to humanity, rather they want to be considered an equal part of humanity” (“The Devil in Our DNA” 95). Often in SF there is a link between being human (with all its rights and privileges) and possessing empathy. This connection is demonstrated by the treatment of the white female protagonists in both *Alien: Resurrection* and *Species* (see Stacey 82).

My intent is to demonstrate how SF influences both scientific aspirations and public perceptions and responses to genetics projects. At the same time, SF representation of autistic-



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coded characters also influences perceptions of autism, giving rise to stigma and stereotypes.

Three threads intertwine here:

- The representation of autism influences and is influenced by stereotypes, such as Dustin Hoffman's Raymond in *Rain Man*, and those presented by SF and the fantastic like She-Ra's Entrapta;
- Expansive projects like Spectrum 10K are inspired by these representations and by the veneration of scientists' speculation;
- Communities also have SF as a resource to see potential futures and to push back against problematic research using SF texts as speculative narratives that illustrate their fears.

SF texts provide a way to examine possible futures, which is why SF “has come to be seen as an essential mode of imaging the horizons of possibility” (Csicsery-Ronay 1). Texts opposing genetic research argue a society which allows selection or screening of genetic traits is the opposite of a free, individualistic (and thus Western) society. These texts have alerted the autistic community to the dangers of genetics research that leads to eugenic ends. SF becomes a space where we argue the ethics of science.

When the Spectrum 10K project was announced it caused quite a stir, because anything that has the potential to be used to prenatally screen for autism holds the potential to exterminate a minority group. This is not hyperbolic: after screening programs for Down Syndrome became commonly available in Iceland, abortions of fetuses that tested positive reached 100%: no babies with Down Syndrome have been born in Iceland since 2017 (Rogers). This elimination—or as Chambers calls it, genocide—of those who have a detectable condition is feared as the fate of any group that carries a marker in their genes. Research has shown that over half of parents who had their child (aged 2-6) genetically tested for biomarkers of autism would have chosen to have the results at conception or birth (Wagner et al. 3118), recalling the warning of the film *Gattaca* “that the eugenic mentality of the early twentieth century might return with even greater discriminatory force in the twenty-first” (Hamner Ch. 1)—a world where human futures are decided before birth. Stacey traces the idea of the “encoded body as a threat” back to the 1950s and 1960s “body rebellion films” making it a site of suspicion and a space for potential rebellion requiring, as Gonder explains, “special and extreme levels of surveillance by scientific experts” (qtd. in Stacey 72) to quash rebellion and ensure conformity. Autistics and their allies, drawing on narratives that clearly articulate the genocidal consequences of genetics screening, began to organize a resistance against the project almost immediately.

The internet has led the creation of many communities of people who would have otherwise never encountered each other (Nicolaidis et al.). When word of the Spectrum 10K project's plan to collect large numbers of DNA samples circulated online, a community of autistic people formed to resist this project. Botha et al. note that autistic community connectedness (ACC) plays a role in protecting the wellbeing of autistic people. Here, community is defined as a group

of people united by a collective identity and shared values (Botha et al. 3) working together toward a common political goal (16), and “refusing to take part in genetic research which may lead to the potential for the removal of autistic genes or a cure” because they feel “detached and dehumanized by autism research” (19). Botha et al. specifically reference ACC’s connection to “an awareness of shared grievances (genetic research and a fear of eradication), [and the identification of] adversaries with whom they have a power-struggle with (researchers and professionals who advocate for these genetic understandings)” (Botha et al. 20). Boycott Spectrum 10K, a coalition of autistic advocates, identified a number of red flags, including issues surrounding transparency and consent (Boycott Spectrum 10K). Spectrum 10K’s rationale for collecting DNA was suspect, and participants were required to allow unknown third parties in the future to have access to the anonymized data. The collective noted that the Common Variant Genetics of Autism and Autistic Traits (GWAS) Consortium grant funding the project is “solely focused on identifying ‘several genetic variants that contribute to the development of autism’” with no mention of aiding “co-occurring conditions,” despite that being the reason given by Spectrum 10K for collecting genetic samples. This immediately led to fears that the data could be used to create screening tools to eliminate autistics before birth. Baron-Cohen is on record in 2019 agreeing that “there’s no way that we can ever say that a future political leader or a scientist won’t use the [genetic] research for eugenics” (qtd. in Opar), which is part of the reason that autistics fear having their genetics exist in a database with unclear regulations for who will be granted access. Quinn, host of the Autistamatic YouTube channel, argues that one of the reasons autistic people are drawn to SF is because SF involves clear distinctions between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ guys, alleviating the difficulties that autistics have with “the ambiguity of people’s motivations” (Autistamatic). An SF outlook on a mistrusted scientist leading a mysterious, well funded project that collects people’s DNA (for reasons they represent differently in the grant and in public) and can share with unknown parties in the future can only be read one way: as a potential threat. Bruno Latour wrote of the power of fiction to, “through the use of counterfactual history, thought experiments, and ‘scientifiction,’” see connections that are otherwise hidden (82). SF empowers marginalized groups in their resistance against violence by helping them articulate their fears of the consequences of potential research in a way that the public can understand, given the wide-spread proliferation of fictional narratives that depict such possibilities. SF becomes a space of empowerment.

The connection between autistics and SF has been written about before. English professor, and father to a non-speaking autistic son, Ralph James Savarese, writes that he “had a sense, a strong sense really, that autism and sci-fi went together. They were like two astronaut peas in a spaceship pod” (89). While one cannot say “all autistics love SF,” there is some research to show that it is popular with autistics (see, for example, Davidson and Weismer) and even Baron-Cohen noted that the “more systemizable” SF had greater appeal to autistics than “pure fiction” (“Autism, Hypersystemizing, and Truth.” 72). SF is influential in how people negotiate futures (Reinsborough) and “both proponents and opponents of any given technology or scientific advancement turn to science fiction narratives” when there is uncertainty about research and its social impact (Lynch 37). In some cases, books, television, film, and video games inform public

perception of scientific research and public debate more than the actual developments in research (see, for example, Reinsborough; Kirby, “The New Eugenics in Cinema”; Clayton). Weingart et al. describe the SF trope of the scientist who starts out idealistic but becomes corrupted when their ambitions cause them to “lose sight of the consequences of their work; and, most importantly, they grow willing to violate ethical principles for the sake of gaining new knowledge.” (Weingart et al. 283). They further note that:

The utopian or dystopian views about science are clearly dominated by concerns about the manipulation of human and animal life. Not surprisingly, medical research is, again, most often associated with fictional developments, followed by genetics, physics, psychology, and chemistry. (286)

When the geneticist in *Gattaca* meets with Vincent’s family, he is eager to impress on the prospective parents that the genetic selection process removes traits that would be socially disadvantageous: baldness, poor vision, obesity. His playing on existing beliefs and attitudes is a representation of what parents, given the opportunity to secure what they see as the best possible future for their children, would experience should genetic testing and pre-implementation screening become more accurate and available. Hamner notes that “even when genetic fantasies have little to do with actual biology, they often powerfully shape science’s public reception” (Introduction). Yet the message of *Gattaca* is that it is because of Vincent’s defective genes that he has honed a trait the genetically enhanced characters lack: “inner strength or ‘spirit’” (Kirby, “The New Eugenics in Cinema” 207). Hamner, writing about similar issues of genetics in the *X-Men* movies, notes that there is a double reality at play: while the “genetic specifics might be ludicrous,” science fiction “is often deeply insightful about the ultimate inseparability of biology and culture” (Introduction).

Hamner argues that the lesson of the *X-Men* universe is “less about the effects of personal genome testing or new gene therapies than whether experiences of prejudice and injustice should inspire reform or spark revolution” (Introduction). In the case of Spectrum 10K, the result was a revolution that demanded reform. In Botha et al.’s definition of ACC they employ a broader definition of community: a shared form of collective identity, values, and emotional cohesion that is not limited by proximity, which “reflects the cognitive and affective components of community; emotional bonds or ideological solidarity” (Botha et al. 3). They note that political ACC has been described by others as either a connection to a “power grid of activists” promoting social justice or a “grand counter-culture” (15). The connection to other autistic activists gave members of the group a sense of purpose, a feeling of control, and a network of like-minded individuals fighting for similar goals (Botha et al. 16). Those active in political ACC work to end stigmatizing depictions of autism, educate the public, ban unethical ‘cures,’ and direct research funding towards areas considered important by the community (Botha et al. 13).

As a result of the attention drawn to it by autistic resistance, Spectrum 10K paused its research. Not only that, but, because of the “significant amount’ of feedback about the study” they received,

the Health Research Authority and the Research Ethics Committee have requested further information from the research team about “social or scientific value; safety or integrity risks to participants; the study’s feasibility; the adequacy of the site or facilities and the ‘competence or conduct’ of the study’s sponsor or investigators” (O’Dell). Operating from a common understanding of the risks of genetic research, an understanding that was in no small way the result of the Fantastic influencing popular culture and the social understanding of science, a group of autistic advocates and their allies formed a community. This community had fewer resources (funding, public reputation, the cachet of ‘science’) yet was able to prevent, at least for now, a well-funded scientific project helmed by a world renowned ‘expert.’ Even after the announcement of the study’s pause, a group of autistic advocates engaged in a physical protest at Baron-Cohen’s research center. When autistic advocates announced they would protest at his center, Baron-Cohen, who was knighted in 2021 for his “services to people with autism” (Brackley), threatened the protesters with police officers and dogs, something he later apologised for and admitted “there were ‘no plans for police, or police dogs’ to be present” (Pring). The research center did, however, get a new chain to secure the front gate causing one protester to note, “Literally, they’ve locked us out completely. And that’s how it is in reality, we are locked out of any research or anything about us and it shouldn’t be like that, there should be nothing about us without us” (Pring).

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*Autism and Eugenics*

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# Race, Utopia, and the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Zombie Narrative



Julia Lindsay

The post-apocalyptic zombie narrative has experienced an astounding resurgence of popularity in the last fifteen years. This is in part due to their symbolic flexibility, as they are often mobilized for cultural critique. According to editors of *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead* (2008) Shawn McIntosh and Mark Leverette, the contemporary zombie's adaptability to the shifting cultural zeitgeist is indeed one of its defining features. However, tellingly for this project, they find that zombies often reflect cultural interest or underlying anxiety in contagion and the Other. Indeed, a backdrop of racial politics shapes many texts of the "zombie renaissance" (Hubner 2014). Despite the post-race narrative common to these post-apocalyptic depictions, several scholars have pointed to the anti-Blackness structuring their often racialized presentation.<sup>1</sup>

If "post-racial" describes a condition where race no longer matters because racism no longer persists, it, in other words, denotes the state of being beyond race. Of course, the idea of the post-racial exists as a fantasy, both in the colloquial understanding of the word fantasy as the opposite of reality but also in the sense that, to some, ceasing discussions on race and ending social movements and policy geared towards creating equitable futures is something to be fantasized about. Many zombie renaissance narratives enact the post-race fantasy, projecting into their visions of the future their desire to consign racial issues to the past. Exploring undead narratives from the eighties to the aughts, Annalee Newitz writes that these narratives "are preoccupied with the way anachronistic race relations exist alongside those of the present day, like zombies among the living" (91). Caravan points out an even greater degree of racism in contemporary zombies. Noting that open violence upon the zombie is justified as it is a threat no longer considered as human, he argues that these narratives can function as a means for white-dominant cultures to exercise fantasies about doing violence against the racial other (439).

### The Post-Race Utopian Fantasy and the White Utopian Reality

Some contemporary zombie narratives reflect the naive progressivism of their authors who use the zombie apocalypse trope to imagine a more equitable future, imagining essentially a post-race utopia-within-dystopia. In *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers: Race and Crisis Capitalism in Pop Culture*, Camilla Fojas casts this post-race fantasy as an important constituent element of what she terms the "Postcrisis zombie narrative." Many zombie television shows and films after the 2007–2008 financial crisis, she notes, manifest fantasies about the end of late-stage capitalism. These zombie stories "explore race relations through the lens of capitalism, as both a function of it while signaling a reprieve from its onslaught" (62). At best, post-racial narratives—whether

it be the belief that we are a post-race society, the belief that the end of racism is nearing, or the projection of a naive desire for the end of racism into the world-building of fictional futures—are still dangerous, reflecting an ignorance towards the anti-Black violence and micro-aggressions Black people experience and witness everyday. Though one may be more malicious, these two camps, so to speak, of people touting post-racial narratives equally participate in obscuring the scope and depth of racism in American history, likewise ensuring it will continue in the future. Moreover, even well-intentioned post-race zombie narratives at best fail in creating a post-race utopia-within-dystopia, as Canavan points out, contemporary zombie narratives often reinforce white dominion over minority groups.

Justina Ireland's alternate history novel *Dread Nation* (2018), in which zombies rise from the dead in the midst of the Civil War, remixes the zombie narrative trend, calling upon the zombie not only to foreground the historical abuses faced by Black Americans but also the legacy of systemic racism in the present. Reading the novel in the context of contemporary zombie narratives highlights the erasure of both historical and contemporary anti-Blackness inherent in post-racial discourse. Particularly focusing on the novel's white supremacist utopia, a small frontier town called Summerland, I argue that *Dread Nation* undermines the post-race utopian ideal common to post-crisis zombie narratives and in fact magnifies the failure of such an ideal to come to fruition. The post-race fantasy and fallacy are reflected in the structure of their communities in—and moving across—space. The real utopian fantasy here is the maintenance, if not the enhancement, of white heteropatriarchal status quo. Summerland models the homogenizing function of America's race-centered utopian ideal.<sup>2</sup> It exemplifies how perceived threats to the prevailing social order engender the creation of reactionary utopias intimately tied, in various forms, with apocalyptic projections.

*Dread Nation* follows protagonist and first-person narrator Jane McKeene, who is saved from her fate as a slave when the zombies (called “shamblers” in the novel) rise shortly after her birth, effectively ending both the war and chattel slavery. The novel's legal novum, however, establishes a new form of forced labor. After the Years of Discord, the chaos period following the initial outbreak, a restructured United States government passes the Negro and Native Reeducation Act which “mandates that at twelve years old all Negroes, and any Indians living in a protectorate must enroll in a combat school ‘for the betterment of themselves and of society’” (Ireland 116). Seventeen years after the outbreak we find Jane at Miss Preston's Combat School for Negro Girls in Baltimore. This white-run school teaches Jane and her cohort combat skills such that they may one day “work” as Attendants for aristocratic white women, essentially serving as body guards and “protectors of virtue” (Ireland 10).

We then move to Summerland, where Baltimore's mayor, Abraham Carr, sends Jane as punishment after she steps out of bounds one too many times. Summerland is organized around the ethos of the Survivalist party, which promulgates rhetoric on racial difference and amasses a following through the promise of safety and greatness. This segregated town is run by Sheriff Snyder—a former plantation overseer in South Carolina—and his pastor father. They force Jane

and other Black captives to patrol its outer walls and exterminate any zombies attempting to breach. The importance of the wall in Summerland and the novel's references to "greatness," an invocation of Trumpian rhetoric, make it quite clear that *Dread Nation's* alternate history also reflects and critiques material and socio-political realities of the present.

Summerland may appear as a foil to the world presented in post-crisis zombie narratives wherein multi-ethnic groups move freely across previously policed spatial and social boundaries. However, we may in fact read Summerland as a *magnification* of the ethnoscapas inherent in the post-crisis narrative as characterized by Fojas. In these narratives:

Race and ethnic differences are surmounted and absorbed into a primitive and *utopian* community formation that is outside any social ordering and institutions but remains fundamentally patriarchal, heterosexual, and white. This community is a refuge from the predations of the dead and represents the remaking of institutions, reforming and revising them to more conservative, autocratic, and morally rigid formations.  
(Fojas 62, emphasis added)

In creating a literal utopia that is governed by white-supremacist Christian fundamentalists through Summerland—one that is indeed built upon the reinstallation of conservative and morally rigid institutions—Ireland's novel magnifies the fact that the communities in post-crisis narratives, and the real world from which they are derived, fail to reflect a post-race society. She likewise highlights the fallacies inherent in the post-race fantasy, a goal as Ramón Saldívar and Cameron Leader-Picone both point out, is common to many Black authors today.<sup>3</sup> As the government in *Dread Nation*, like the zombie itself, rises from the dead after a period similar to the post-crisis zombie narrative world and proceeds to cooperate with racist communities such as Summerland, Ireland suggests that the world in these shows is always liable to return to previous forms of oppressive rule.<sup>4</sup>

### **The American Small Town: A Case Study in the National Ideal**

Utopian narratives are ingrained in the national imagination, and after John Winthrop's infamous "City on a Hill" speech, the New World's utopian promise became centered on small towns and communities.<sup>5</sup> As this narrative developed in social discourse and literature, the small town came to represent the embodiment of American ideals and a model to emulate. This model undoubtedly was (and is) white and heteropatriarchal, a homogenizing force. Historically, small towns have been intentionally created on frontiers and in heterogeneous pockets in order to enforce such an 'ideal' (Poll). *Dread Nation* dramatizes this reality, highlighting the racist foundation of the American utopian ideal. If not already clear in the town's name, Mayor Carr has clearly been inculcated in the American utopian fantasy and its promise of safety. He tells Jane: "Imagine it, a utopia on the Western plains, safe enough to withstand any shambler attack. . . . America, as it should be, once more . . . a city on a hill, a place where people can raise their families without worrying about any of this nasty shambler business" (Ireland 181). He thus co-opts Winthrop's language, positioning Summerland as a model for other towns to emulate.

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### *Race, Utopia and Zombies*

Ireland's speculative utopian small town is a distinctly fruitful example of America's race-centered utopian project because it is situated in a virological zombie narrative: utopia, in its pursuit of perfection, is by necessity built upon exclusion and eradication in both an ideational and material sense.<sup>6</sup> An individual or group that conflicts with the norm, or that represents ideologies that go against the norm, are treated as contagions that must be homogenized or eliminated through various means.<sup>7</sup> The virological zombie thus serves as a parallel for this practice. Moreover, *Summerland*, and the novel as a whole, reflects how this exclusion and fanaticism are built upon fears of cultural annihilation, literalizing such fears in its apocalypse setting and through the apocalyptic rhetoric of its reactionary characters, as this paper will later explore. The project of assimilation and eradication in the American utopian ideal is best reflected in its model, the utopian small town, which reveals how this project is enacted through scapegoating and through creating geographic and temporal isolation.

Ireland's project here aligns with many SF authors of color who highlight how SF tropes and figures reflect their own experience.<sup>8</sup> In her exploration of contemporary SF by authors of color Joy Sanchez-Taylor coins the term "double estrangement," linking Darko Suvin's concept of "cognitive estrangement" with W. E. B. DuBois's "double consciousness" (7). As many SF authors of color are "more likely to identify with the alien other," SF offers the opportunity for cultural critique, to "presen[t] the unfamiliar as familiar" (Sanchez-Taylor 7). Moreover, "altering established SF tropes," Sanchez-Taylor writes, SF authors of color also turn this critique inwards, drawing attention to and combating SF's white normativity" (7). *Dread Nation's* context and intertextuality bring to light the ways in which fears of contagion and annihilation are intertwined with racism and/or racial anxiety both in the diegetic world of contemporary zombie narratives and in the culture and contemporary moment that shape them and drive their production. In other words, fears of social change lead to apocalyptic imaginings and utopian fantasies that reinstall, as evidenced in their community dynamics, the white hetero-patriarchal norm.

*Summerland's* racist impetus reflects the fears of the "annihilation" of a racialized order in the face of societal changes. In *Summerland's* church, Jane meets an unnamed white man who tells her: "We have no need for Attendant companions to live alongside our fair blossoms, no matter what Mayor Carr has instituted in those heathen cities of the east. Here, we have worked to reestablish the Lord's natural order" (Ireland 229). Its homogenizing project is further on display in that Jane is barred from entering the church for "bearing the Curse of Ham" (228). The racist and heteropatriarchal ideals of the town are channeled through religious symbology and terms. The term "Curse of Ham" was used to cast Black people as moral contagions, which are contrasted here with a symbol of white (female) purity, and this language is then weaponized here to police Jane's movement, pushing Black people out of spaces central to the town.

Ireland translates pre-existing Christian-supremacist rhetoric into her speculative world. This then informs Pastor Snyder's sermon to the population of *Summerland* within its segregated mess hall. He attributes the zombie apocalypse to God's punishment for the Civil War and the abolitionists who "unleashed the Sinners Plague of the Dead" (Ireland 254). He claims that they

are a violation of “God’s order” and “God’s plan,” which is specifically racialized as he condemns thoughts of racial equality—and implicitly Black people—saying, “It was hubris to think we are all equal in His eyes, friends. Not in this world . . . For failing to understand this law,” Snyder goes on, “He has unleashed His wrath upon us” (Ireland 246). He thus scapegoats anyone believing in racial equality for this apocalyptic epidemic. Snyder’s scapegoating—and its foundation in pre-existing racialized religious rhetoric—reveals how projections of apocalypse relate to social structures; fears of annihilation amount to perceived threats to an existing social order. Such fears are then mobilized to scapegoat Black people and allies which is essential in the maintenance of his utopia, as it becomes a mechanism to reinscribe white supremacy and normativity.

The relationship between scapegoating (an ideational apparatus to control the community) and geographic isolation (a material and spatial enforcement of control) becomes clear in this scene. After his sermon, Snyder pointedly looks to the space in the mess hall—far removed from where he stands amongst the tables of aristocratic supremacists—reserved for Black captives and other people perceived as (or actively) threatening the social order.<sup>9</sup> His gaze in this context not only reinforces this scapegoating and exerts his control, it demonstrates how scapegoating works in tandem with the town’s spatial logic, seemingly authorizing their segregated place at the periphery. The mess hall is indeed a microcosm of the town, as the Snyders drive Black people and other “social deviants” to the margins. The utopian ideal in small towns is often situated in the center, typically around a Main Street or town square.<sup>10</sup> Progressive movement away from this center marks a shift in population ranging from the “less than ideal” to the social outcast to the sub-human Other. The position Black people occupy at the extreme limit of Summerland patrolling the outer wall serves as a reminder that they must adhere to the community’s racist regulations, as they are always vulnerable to being cast beyond the wall. In fact, we learn that the Sheriff has done just that with dissidents, pushing one of Jane’s older classmates from Miss Preston’s over the wall, defenseless, to be attacked by zombies.

This project of segregation and isolation also occurs on a broader scale. Summerland falls in line with other utopian towns and communities in literature that rely on geographic isolation<sup>11</sup>—evident here in its frontier position and its walled structure—and temporal isolation.<sup>12</sup> This town’s social order is permitted by its distance from what we’ve seen the unnamed man in the church refer to as the “heathen cities” of the East. Such a characterization of cities, in fact, reflects the interrelationship between geographic and temporal isolation as it pertains to the homogenizing project. In reading the small town as a source and function of national identity, the locus of dominant narratives, Ryan Poll posits in *Main Street and Empire* that the small town symbolizes the past, a foil to the “modern” city. Cities emerging in the nineteenth century were places where black and white people frequently crossed paths, sharing social spaces unmediated by plantation politics, and, as a result, became places with comparatively (I say this lightly) more progressive politics. In the white supremacist mindset, “city” was synonymous with racial mixing, with dangerous and contagious ideas.<sup>13</sup> When read alongside Mayor Carr’s framing of Summerland as restoring order by way of “going back,” this comment on “heathen” cities shows that the

geographic isolation of and within this small town is also a temporal project—fighting against the modernizing cities by reinstating, and attempting to spread as model, the plantation society past. The rejection of modernity in this backward-gazing small town engenders a crisis of futurity for Black people quite literally, reflecting, as GerShun Avilez has pointed out, the distinctly spatial element of injury to the injury-bound subject.<sup>14</sup>

Both within the diegetic world of the novel and the (zombie) apocalypse narrative mode that it evokes, *Dread Nation* highlights the function of apocalyptic rhetoric/apocalyptic projections in this spatio-temporal isolation, serving as a mechanism in the maintenance of white supremacist utopia. Apocalypse, in other words, can serve as a homogenizing force that is intimately tied with the production of space and conceptions of time. *Dread Nation* dramatizes a particularly Southern way of thinking that Anthony Hoefler terms the “Southern Apocalyptic Imaginary” (SAI). Part of the South’s eschatological obsession stems from the white evangelical protestant conception of Biblical apocalypse—the rhetoric of God’s judgment was (and still is) discharged as a threat against those challenging the prevailing social order. Hoefler argues that religious apocalypse plays a large role “in the production of southern spaces and places, particularly the never-ending discursive work necessary to assert and reassure the division between black and white” (12). This results in assumptions that God sends punishments to the earth when “divine” (read: white heteropatriarchal) order on Earth is threatened. “Within the cosmology of southern evangelical Protestantism,” Hoefler writes, “cataclysmic consequences are often ascribed to any violation of the radically bivalent order” (23). We’ve seen this rhetoric on display in Snyder’s sermon wherein the zombie plague is cast as an apocalyptic consequence of the moral, material, and ideational “illness” or “contagion” of free Blacks, racial integration, and racial equality. Despite the ubiquity of racism across the United States, these fears manifest in apocalyptic discourse specific to the American South, consequently informing the creation of Summerland and its isolationist spatial logic. The South’s racist eschatological fixation in turn shapes the spatial organization of Summerland; it informs the hegemonic mechanisms of control dominant in the utopian small town.

### **Temporal Logics in Post-Race Discourse and Apocalypse**

Whether it be the white supremacist utopia in Summerland or the false post-race/post-capitalist utopia-within-dystopia of many zombie renaissance narratives, the construction of these spaces and communities is deeply informed by conceptions of temporality. It goes without saying that as a literary mode, apocalyptic texts—be it the Book of Revelation or contemporary post-apocalyptic SF—revolve around the creation of a new time. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, apocalypse issues a new order, a new time after a great Revelation of absolute truth, and many zombie renaissance narratives maintain this formal concept of apocalypse in creating a radical break in time.<sup>15</sup> This is evidenced in the portrayal of clock time as anachronistic as well as in the characters’ conception of time based on “before” and “after” the apocalyptic event. In these contexts, apocalypse as a literary and discursive mode falls within a long history of exclusionary practices that reinforce white dominion over the perception of temporality, specifically here within what historian Lloyd Pratt identifies as the historical desire to create “homogenous, empty time”

(qtd. in Nilges 135). Matthias Nilges highlights the racial implications of this “aim to singularize and unify time” historically and in our present moment in *How to Read a Moment: The American Novel and the Crisis of the Present*. He illustrates how it “emerges particularly strongly in the context of the tension between diversity and racial and national identity” (135). The creation of such identity, of course, is the American utopian ideal, historically built upon racial exclusion that is manifest and modeled in the utopian town/community.

Such temporal homogenization is reflected today in the narrative of contemporaneity that divorces our moment from the past, or, in other words, from the history of racism, anti-black violence, and systemic oppression. “The singularization of the contemporary,” Nilges writes “serves as a central mechanism . . . of the homogenization of our social and racial imagination, and as such it is directly bound up with mechanisms of racial segregation, cultural exclusion, and historical erasure” (126). Creating this gulf between the long now and the way back can thus enable discourse that social difference based on race is or can be “resolved.” Applying this history to apocalypse studies, I argue that the temporal logics common to the apocalyptic mode mirror the conception of history and time central to the rhetoric of post-racialists; initiating a new time through the apocalypse provides the necessary conditions for, and can be seen as a form of, temporal homogenization. Manipulating temporality through the use of apocalypse therefore fosters the contemporary zombie narrative’s historical erasure, allowing for the post-racial conceit common to them. Indeed, we may even see apocalypse as the literalization of the discourse of contemporaneity. It is completely divorced from the past yet, because post-apocalyptic landscapes are often presented as wastelands, is not associated with movement towards the future: it is the embodiment of the “long now” which defines contemporaneity.

If post-crisis zombie narratives are driven by a naive desire for a society free of social and economic constraints, this desire is paradoxically enacted through a literary and discursive mode that has historically been used to maintain white heteropatriarchal power and to control Black bodies. Creating a fictional apocalypse may thus reflect a desire to bury racism in a distant pastness. The consequences of such desire, wherever it manifests, is that it silences Black voices and obscures anti-Black violence. *Dread Nation*, on the other hand, resists the temporal logics of the post-apocalypse genre—Ireland refuses to authorize this kind of work by creating a zombie “apocalypse” that does not resemble the same rupture in time found in Abrahamic religious apocalypse or the post-crisis zombie narrative. Though we associate the zombie with the apocalypse genre, Ireland’s novel could better be seen as an epidemic narrative, as the relative similarities in the world before zombies and those after undermine the notion of a radical break, and the resurgence of the government promotes instead a cyclical perspective as it pertains to hegemony, further undermining the linear logics undergirding the post-race progressive narrative. Jane’s daily procedures at Miss Preston’s and later at Summerland, for instance, are fully regimented by clock time. Disallowing a full apocalypse, therefore, contributes to the novel’s political work and its criticism of post-racialism, as apocalypse authorizes the post-race fantasy underlying these narratives. Ireland continues this work by subverting past/present/future divides

altogether, pushing readers to rethink conceptions of history by putting the slave narrative in conversation with the contemporary virological zombie and by marrying nineteenth century racist discourse with MAGA doctrine, a counter-hegemonic move common to the neo-slave form.<sup>16</sup>

The myriad racial anxieties inherent in many contemporary zombie narratives makes it a useful lens through which to explore how they appear in other forms of cultural production, political discourse, social narratives, and the like. They variously reflect fantasies of violence on the racial Other, frustrations or concerns with current racial realities—be it the belief that racial tensions are anachronistic, fears of disruption to the white status quo, naive desires to imagine a world free of capitalism and racism, or the desire to disconnect the present from the burden of our fraught past. The zombie narrative proves especially fruitful in examining those societal anxieties and social discourse, as it literalizes underlying fears of contagion and annihilation while simultaneously enacting what lies at the heart of the post-race fantasy: a complete and total divorce of the present from the past. The zombie narrative exemplifies the ethnoscapings common to so many SF tropes, creating a perplexing reality for SF authors of color who have both found a home in and been alienated by the genre. Authors like Justina Ireland rise to this challenge, turning SF on its head to highlight the science fictional experiences of people of color and to make the genre more inclusive, critiquing along the way the ethnoscapings inherent in SF and the Eurowestern society from which they are born. Ireland creates a speculative past with an overtly racist white supremacist utopia not to show us how far we've come, but how much is still the same. *Dread Nation* reveals how the American utopian ideal is ostensibly white and heteropatriarchal, how this ideal was and is maintained through discursive and material mechanisms from policing the movement of bodies to controlling perceptions of temporality, our conceptions of history and of the present. And while these realities are deeply ingrained, the zombie bites back in *Dread Nation*.

## Notes

1. For a history of the cultural appropriation of the zombie in the United States and its racialization in pop culture from the 1930s to today, see Sarah Lauro's *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*.

2. For more on white-supremacist utopias and the role of race in the American utopian imagination, see Patricia Ventura and Edward Chan's collection *Race and Utopian Desire in American Literature and Society*.

3. See Ramón Saldívar's "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative"; Cameron Leader-Picone's *Black and More Than Black: African American Fiction in the Post Era*.



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4. Justina Ireland is not the only Black American author using the zombie apocalypse trope to levy this critique. Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) also features the resurgence of the national government as well as large corporations, and he similarly undermines the post-race conceit.

5. For my argument on the crossover between the utopia and the small town, I am deeply indebted to the research of Zachary Perdieu, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia.

6. While theorists such as Frederic Jameson have developed compelling and fruitful theories on utopia such as considering utopia as praxis, the concept of utopia I am working with here is utopia in the static form, in the early concept of utopia as both good place (eutopia) and no place.

7. For more on the rhetoric of contagion and its relationship with group belonging, see Priscilla Wald's *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*.

8. See Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction*.

9. Jane is actually a double threat to the social order, as her bi-sexual identity goes against the heterosexual "norm."

10. For more on this, see Ryan Poll's *Main Street and Empire*.

11. For example, *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Islandia* (1942) by Austin Tappan Wright.

12. *The Time Machine* (1895) by H.G. Wells, *Looking Backward* (1888) by Edward Bellamy. Some narratives taking place in outer space such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974) can be seen as both.

13. Melissa Stein expounds upon this in "Nature is the Author of Such Restrictions: Science, Ethnological Medicine, and Jim Crow."

14. See Avilez GerShun's *Black Queer Freedom: Spaces of Injury and Paths of Desire*.

15. For additional study on Judeo-Christian apocalypse and its role in twentieth century cultural production, see James Berger's *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*.

16. See Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* and Timothy Spaulding's *Reforming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*.

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## FEATURES

# “But the planet’s what matters, right?”: The Entangled Environmentalism of Three *Final Fantasy VII* Remake Communities



Andrew Barton

An evil corporation siphons energy from the planet, slowly converting natural resources into money as the world slowly suffers and dies. The corporation, intent only on generating profits, disregards any environmental concerns from the general public, leaving vocal citizens limited avenues in which to redress complaints against the corporation. Such is the world of late stage capitalism. This is Shinra, the megacorporation-turned-world-government featured in *Final Fantasy VII*. But it could also describe Square Enix, the publishers of the game, who recently announced their intention to sell NFTs as an additional revenue stream. Within the game, a team of disaffected youths join together to stop Shinra and save the bioenergy of their planet, often engaging in violence and ecoterrorism to advance their cause. Similarly, fans of the game have condemned Square’s embrace of environmentally devastating technology and noted the company’s hypocrisy in the endeavor, though they have yet to endorse violence in support of the environment. As such, the team within the game, the fans of the game, and the publisher create three communities with different outlooks on environmentalism. This entangled environmentalism of these three communities demonstrates how video games, despite largely being produced by huge multinational corporations, can metatextually provide opportunities for fans to engage in critiques of capitalist ventures, especially/in particular in *FF7* as they relate to the desolation, destruction, etc. of the natural world.

Cloud, the player character in *Final Fantasy VII*, is hired as a mercenary to help a group called AVALANCHE stop Shinra’s abuse of nature. Slowly, Cloud (and the player) become embroiled in AVALANCHE’s politics. Despite his aloofness, Cloud finds himself supporting his new teammates, and actively works to support their goals out of genuine interest, not merely for his paycheck. Barret, the leader of the local chapter of AVALANCHE, is more radicalized than the larger organization, and orchestrates an act of ecoterrorism: destroying a reactor to limit Shinra’s ability to convert mako, an energy source connected to the planet’s health, into electricity. Barret and the rest of the player’s party members frequently engage in similar violent tactics, attacking Shinra soldiers and destroying its infrastructure.

Cloud and his party illustrate the strained relationship that often occurs in late capitalism between a concerned, politically active group and megacorporations. Nick Dyer-Witford and Grieg de Peuter refer to this as a conflict between “activists” and a “multinational conglomerate” that operates as a “weapons developer” turned “world government” which “cause[s] massive ecological destruction” (236). Here, we should recognize AVALANCHE’s status as activists rather than ecoterrorists. Dyer-Witford and de Peuter validate the party’s stance with this

tacit approval. Activism downplays the violence of AVALANCHE's methods, and condones their actions as an appropriate response to the damage caused by Shinra. In contrast, Shinra's description emphasizes the facelessness and ultimately violent nature of the company. Shinra's recognition here focuses on its role in weapons manufacturing rather than their efforts at city-building, modernization, and the supply of electricity to a city of millions of people. Here, Shinra is cast as the violent one and the player's party is innocent, or at least absolved of any implication of instigating violence. Shinra is the guilty party, and with the megacorporation's monopoly on violence, the player is forced into violent actions as the only remaining resort. Thus, the player and their party are validated: destroying power reactors is an acceptable choice when faced with a potential biological collapse. The locus of violence is clearly situated with Shinra and not the AVALANCHE cell. Within this conflict, the small collection of individuals is heroic, and the corporation-governmental entity is antagonistic.

We should note that the ecopolitics of the player's party are made all the more appealing by their depiction as cool, attractive people who want to better the world in which they live. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter refer to the party as "fantastically good-looking ideal characters" and "disaffected youth" fighting against a "multinational conglomerate [. . .] whose attempt to drain the planet's vital energy sources makes it both a world government and the cause of massive ecological destruction" in "a saga that strangely connects the postnuclear legacy of the dissident *shin jinrui* to today's anticorporate movements" (17). *Shin jinrui*, which here translates to *new breed* or *new generation*, references a youth movement of dissident politics and engagement that roughly corresponds chronologically with the punk movement in the United States. Games critic Jessica Howard echoes this analysis, claiming *Final Fantasy VII* is "an *extremely* punk game, abundant with political sentiments," (Howard) and the party members certainly resemble that aesthetic, with their machine-gun hands, exposed hardware sticking out of their armor, and wild spiky haircuts. The party embraces punk; their angry, disaffected edge makes them relatable to young players of the game. Their status as righteous ecowarriors only enhances the cool: they care, and so should the player, because that is the only way things can change.

The game channels the party's cool energy and desire for change into the conflict with Shinra, and we must recognize that this conflict originates from a capitalistic desire to extract profits from natural resources. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter connect mako to Foucault's concept of biopower: by harnessing a substance that sustains all life on the planet, Shinra asserts control over all the people—or all the living creatures—in its domain (236). In this way, access to mako enables Shinra to reach otherwise unattainable levels of power to regulate and control any biological entities within their influence. Mako provides Shinra with significant riches, granting a capitalistic power to the corporation, and also allows the company to tap into the metaphysical life force of the planet, so that Shinra's reach extends beyond economic power and into a mystical control of not just humanity but indeed all forms of life. Shinra dictates who lives, who dies, what occupations are available to individuals, and even conducts experiments on citizens. Possession of mako energy is thus significantly valuable along multiple avenues of control, and ties to its position as a natural

resource. Shinra's control of mako is a severe environmental concern. This is why the player's first mission in the game is to destroy the mako reactor: AVALANCHE intends to cause significant loss of capital to Shinra, and simultaneously deny the corporation the ability to consume as much mako, thus protecting the planet's life force. In retaliation, Shinra flexes its biopower by destroying a section of the city, killing thousands of people, and blames the attack on AVALANCHE, calling it a second terrorist attack. Shinra is able to use this as a pretense to assume tighter political control over the populace, enhancing their biopower. All these exertions of influence, control, and even the conflict between Shinra and the player's party are expressions of how the exploitation of natural resources can be used to create biopower.

The heroic representation of the party in *Final Fantasy VII* as plucky underdog ecowarriors in a noble fight to save the natural world has had a profound effect on the fanbase of the series. In his focused discussion on how fans react to game narratives, Mattias van Ommen suggests that an affective component plays a crucial role in connecting the players with the characters and world of *Final Fantasy VII*, asserting “[t]his narrative approach towards emotions can help clarify why certain games, featuring narratives in which the player guides forth the growth of characters over the course of many hours and play sessions, may be more successful in producing a longer-lasting affective relationship between player and game world than games in which each play session concludes a mini-narrative” (24). Jessica Howard reinforces van Ommen's analysis when she calls a member of the player's party a “childhood friend of mine,” and demonstrates how this game “abundant with political sentiments and messages regarding the distribution of power, our treatment of the environment, and the evil found in complicity” ultimately speaks to her. Hence, game narratives, especially longer ones, hold a special ability to elicit affective reactions in their players, and, as van Ommen recognizes, Japanese Role-Playing Games often take a distinctly narrative-forward approach, which indicates that *Final Fantasy VII* engenders a stronger affective relationship with its players than many other games in different genres that feature shorter narrative elements. In this way, players may respond affirmatively toward narrative decisions made by party characters that are nonetheless out of the player's control; the affective relationship between player and party encourages the player to view characters just as they would friends, supporting their actions and adopting their ideological outlook.

Moreover, we should note that such connections are not limited by the narrative components of the game, but rather that the ludic mechanics also contribute to strong affective responses with players. Gameplay structures within *Final Fantasy VII* induce a deep emotional association within players, who are allowed to customize the various party members and experience a steady growth of character statistics, which rewards the player for significant investment of time and engenders a sense of ownership over the characters. Such customization may, for example, take the form of equipped weapons, magical augmentations called materia, how the player chooses to respond to in-game questions, or even whether or not to indulge in side quests. As van Ommen observes, “statistical progression and creative customization are often at the core of creating a personalized experience, which has the potential to generate affective relationships with character worlds that

are simultaneously intimately personal as well as shared with other fans” (23). This personalized experience invokes an even deeper affective connection to the in-game characters and world than may be otherwise possible. By tailoring the various characters to their personal whims and desires, the player forms an affective bond with the party. Personal stylings through equipment and upgrades, as well as minor choices in gameplay, such as how Cloud answers questions, do not affect the narrative at all, and yet gives the player a sense of ownership over their gaming experience, inextricably drawing the player in closer to the characters and the world. In this way, the affective response here is made all the stronger through the gameplay mechanics. Players thus feel invested in the party’s success within the narrative, and this affective association may help the players adopt some of the party’s ideology, such as with friendships and relationships, mental health, or, most aptly, environmentalism. As Stephen K. Hirst recognizes, “the game’s radical environmental themes and Shinto-tinged philosophies wound up influencing a generation of environmentalists,” specifically pointing out multiple high-ranking officers of environmental organizations such as Tyler Kruse, the senior communications director at Greenpeace (Hirst). These examples point to the depth of resonance that players feel with the game’s narrative; investment of time and energy into the characters and narrative fosters a strong affective relationship with the game and its outcomes. The *Final Fantasy VII* fan community has embraced a position of environmental concern and activism, largely influenced by the affective response from the game.

It is with this fanbase that, toward the end of 2021, Square Enix announced it would incorporate NFT technology into its games. NFTs, or non-fungible tokens, are units of cryptographic data stored on a blockchain, which acts as a deregulated ledger of ownership, and allows for the sale of data stored on the blockchain. However, because of the computational energy required to process transactions on the blockchain, it has been condemned as an environmentally devastating waste of energy consumption, which some scholars have estimated to be equivalent to that of a small nation in order to process only a few transactions (Das and Dutta). Despite these concerns on the ecological impact of blockchains and NFTs, Square Enix already incorporated the technology into several smaller games, and in November of 2021, suggested an interest in pursuing blockchain gaming with a more “robust entry,” according to games industry analyst Daniel Ahmad (@ZhugeEx). This mirrors other large corporations within the gaming industry, such as Ubisoft, who incorporated NFTs into their popular *Ghost Recon* series in late 2021; EA, whose president Andrew Wilson called NFTs “an important part [. . .] of the future of our industry” (qtd. in Makuch); Take-Two, whose president Strauss Zelnick is a self-described “big believer” in NFT technology (qtd. in Makuch); or smaller publisher Team-17, who famously announced support of NFTs and then backtracked less than 24 hours later after backlash from fans. In short, Square is just one more company searching for an additional revenue stream—one they can exploit to generate significant profits with comparatively little labor. Square’s interest in NFTs and blockchain gaming indicates a capitalistic desire to extract wealth rather than some sort of artistic pursuit.

In its declarations of interest in NFT and blockchain technology, Square has yet to acknowledge the environmental impact this technology may have. In his “A New Year’s Letter from the President,” Square Enix’s President Yosuke Matsuda redoubles the company’s desire to incorporate NFTs and blockchain gaming, specifically noting different incentives to engage new kinds of players, differentiating between the so-called “play to earn,” “play to have fun,” and a new “play to contribute” (Matsuda). Matsuda equates the first with the third, suggesting “explicit incentives” could be used to encourage players to develop user-generated content, with the understanding that we may see “advances in token economies [result] not only in greater consistency in [players] motivation [to contribute], but also creating a tangible upside to their creative efforts.” In essence, Matsuda sees these players as a potential expansion of the workforce, who may be rewarded with a percentage ownership of any NFT generated as a result of the content they create. Matsuda’s view here is explicitly capitalistic. He doesn’t speak on any artistic value or merit in the technology, he neglects to point toward any user-generated content he finds to be particularly compelling, and he never mentions any creative innovation in game mechanics, art design, or narrative structures that could arise from incorporating NFTs or blockchain. Matsuda dismisses “play for fun” immediately after mentioning that as an option; their objection to these new technologies are “reservations,” and Matsuda never elaborates on how these trends will enhance the experience for “play to have fun” players. Any interest expressed by Matsuda in NFT and blockchain technology is couched solely in the financial. Square is in this to make money.

Despite (or perhaps because of) Square’s gleeful interest in the capitalistic side of NFTs, fan response has been less enthusiastic. *Final Fantasy VII* primes its audience to be receptive toward environmental politics, and when ecological concerns entered a realm the players felt secure in—that is, the gaming industry—they were ready to act. Stephen Duncombe claims gamers get “intense pleasure” from a game because it “offers power, excitement, and room to explore” in ways that political involvement often doesn’t (72). Thus, if politics can offer similar avenues of pleasure, gamers may become more politically active. Duncombe continues to suggest several methods through which play can be used to recruit gamers, but sometimes, players have the propensity to mobilize themselves. Square’s announcement of its decision to invest in NFTs triggered a perfect storm for players: a political issue that the players had been taught to care about was entering an arena they were passionate for, all because of the hypocrisy of a corporation betraying the themes of a beloved game. Now, they could bring play to politics.

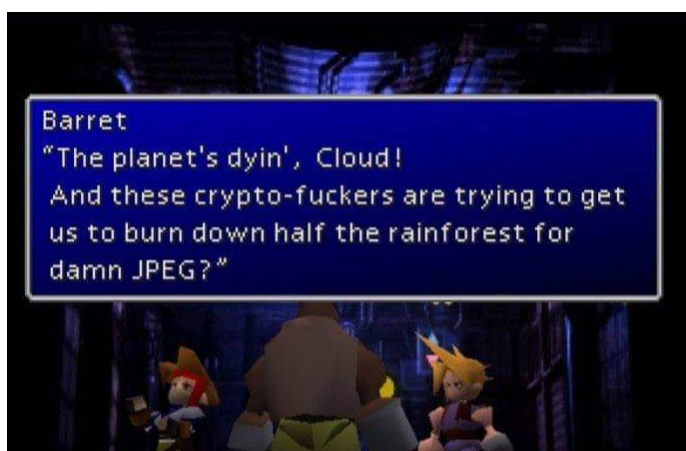
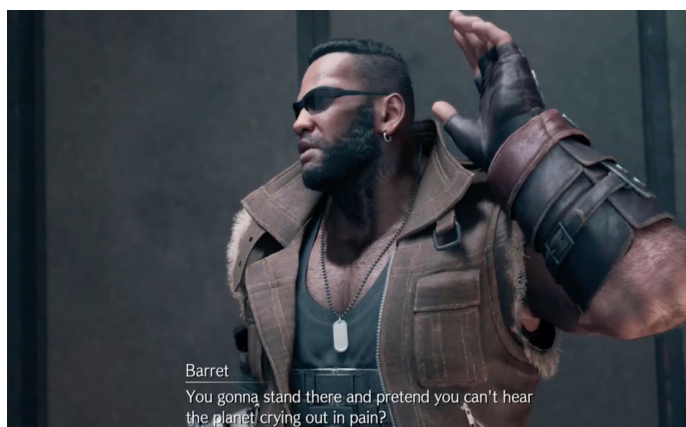
And play they did. Across social media, players have denounced Square Enix’s enthusiasm for NFTs, trolled official company accounts, mocked the decision, threatened piracy in response, and even gone so far as to weaponize Square’s own games against them. Twitter user @TheIshikawaRin declares the company is “sinking lower and lower” because of “the NFT scam” before ending with the very declarative “Fuck you Square-Enix [sic]” (@TheIshikawaRin). @Nicodemus82 says “if you start putting NFT’s [sic] in your games, I’m gonna pirate every single game you put out going forward. Sincerely, A fan” (@Nicodemus82). Other responses attached screenshots from the game featuring the characters, turning these examples of Square’s capitalism into tools that point out



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the company's hypocrisy. Such images often feature Barret, perhaps the most outspoken critic of Square's—I mean, Shinra's—exploitation of the natural world. One such screenshot features the dialogue subtitled at the bottom of the screen, “You gonna stand there and pretend you can't hear the planet crying out in pain?,” drawing the viewer's eye toward Barret's machine gun-arm. Crying out in pain indeed. Another features an altered screenshot of the original game, featuring an early moment in which Barret addresses Cloud, and therefore the player. The original dialogue reads “The planet's dyin', Cloud!” to which has been appended “And these crypto-fuckers are trying to get us to burn down half the rainforest for [a] damn JPEG?” These examples, and countless others, speak to the passion of the fan response. Players have enthusiastically rejected NFTs in gaming more broadly, but Square's interest seems to be an especially brutal betrayal because of the environmental themes of Final Fantasy VII, which holds a special place in many players' hearts. And yet, despite this, and despite the retractions made by many other game companies, Square has yet to change course.



*Screenshots of Final Fantasy VII: Remake featuring Barret. The screenshot is often reposted in fan communities as support of environmental activism, with undertones of violence. The second image has Barret's dialog altered to incorporate what fans believe the character would have thought of cryptocurrency and NFTs.*

This is where we stand as of this writing. Square remains committed to incorporating NFTs into games, and fans remain committed to making fun of them for doing so. But I think the important takeaway for now is rather the mobilization of game fans. Often, video game fans have experienced negative portrayals in popular media, are castigated by public officials, and have become a go-to example of the lazy and aimless. However, the situation around *Final Fantasy VII* demonstrates exactly how that negative image is incomplete—how games can be a positive force on players. Because of the experiences, both narrative and ludic, in *Final Fantasy VII*, many players find themselves politically aware and engaged. They learn that it's okay to be passionate about issues that may be minimized by other people. And, by incorporating a sense of play in political action, we may see a growing involvement of game players. Their new passion can even be directed at the company behind this original lesson, showing the depth of their commitment to the cause. After all, as AVALANCHE member Biggs asks Barret after the party successfully blows up the mako reactor, “But the planet’s what matters, right?”

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### Understanding the Modern Episteme through H. G. Wells



Noah Slowik

At its core, H. G. Wells's novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is a story about scientific ethics. Specifically, it asks how far scientists should be allowed to go to make their contributions successful, even if it causes harm to either animals or humans in the process. One figure in particular whom Wells seemed to be directly addressing is Charles Darwin. The obvious parallels between Moreau and Darwin push the reader to consider the aforementioned ethical question as they read the novel. When put in comparison, Moreau seems like a more malicious figure than Darwin was, but that is part of the artistic liberty Wells takes in this small science fictional island-world he creates. Certainly, the overexaggerated dystopian tone of the novel highlights the way literature offers a distinct opportunity for audiences to make sense of the fragmentation of the real world. Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), wrote at length about the power dynamics of what he referred to as the modern episteme. Instilled within Foucault's epistemology are questions that revolve around the validity of potentially oppressive concepts like evolution. As Wells examined in his novel, however, sometimes the ideas in and of themselves are not dangerous, but it is the means as well as what we do with the knowledge that can become problematic. Therefore, I explore in this paper how Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is an exemplary representative of the modern episteme as defined by Foucault in *The Order of Things*.

Foucault saw Darwin as one of the most important figures of the modern episteme because he was using pre-existing natural sciences to create new ways of thinking about the world. In this way, Darwin was a positive figure because of his subsequent impact on science. On the other hand, exactly like Moreau, his logical conclusions have potentially racist implications, exemplified by the survival of the fittest mentality of social Darwinism. As an illustration of this influence, one need not look further than the diction employed by Darwin and Wells. Much work has been done on the impact that SF language has had on vocabulary used in the actual sciences.<sup>1</sup> When thinking about what words to use for a certain theory or material in science, literature offers a good starting point because of its creativity. The science fiction canon—Wells undoubtedly included—would be one place to look for this linguistic influence. In the words of Foucault, “What civilizations and peoples leave us as the monuments of their thought is not so much their texts as their vocabularies, their syntaxes, the sounds of their languages rather than the words they spoke . . . the discursivity of their language” (87). Taking this one step further, literature influences science just as much as science influences literature. Based upon this logic from Foucault, one might wrongfully assume that Wells was the one influencing Darwin, but Darwin died when Wells was still only a teenager. Building upon Foucault's point, there is a crucial element of the recursiveness of language here, in addition to the discursivity.

According to Foucault, there was a logical line of thinking that led humans to believe they gradually became stronger and smarter over time. In other words, it makes sense that a figure like Darwin emerged during the modern episteme. Interestingly, Foucault did not necessarily see the superiority of humans over other animals as the deciding factor; rather, he saw the connectedness of humanity to nature as the driving force. Foucault wrote, “‘evolutionism’ is not a way of conceiving of the emergence of beings as a process of one giving rise to another; in reality, it is a way of generalizing the principle of continuity and the law that requires that human beings form an uninterrupted expanse” (152). He acknowledges progress as a fundamental force of the modern episteme. What he fails to mention, however, is the cost of such progress—enter Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and other dystopian science fiction. Wells conveyed that humanity’s power over the natural would eventually lead to civilization’s demise in a way that Foucault did not. Through mad scientist figures like Moreau or even Victor Frankenstein, literature posits representations of the simultaneously positive and negative contributions to science for the real-world example of Darwin. Foucault wrote, “The quasi-evolutionism of the eighteenth century seems to presage equally well the spontaneous variation of character, as it was later to be found in Darwin” (153). We can see how the theories of Darwin are necessitated by the line of thought Foucault lays out. Subsequently, it makes sense that a person like Wells would come along to produce Moreau as a mediating character to help the reader make sense of Darwin. In short, important past contributions to science cannot be ignored no matter what means it took to attain them. It seems, however, that Foucault is too complacent with the problematic nature of Darwin, whereas Wells did not shy away from the horror and the terrible implications to follow.

Wells highlights the madness of Moreau through contrast with the degeneration of the protagonist, Edward Prendick. When Prendick is picked up early in the story in a little dinghy somewhere near the Galapagos in the Pacific Ocean, he makes it clear that he is familiar with the dominance of science as a field having studied under T. H. Huxley, but it is not his area of expertise. He says, “I told him my name, Edward Prendick, and how I had taken to natural history as a relief from the dulness of my comfortable independence.” Prendick goes on to explain, “He was evidently satisfied with the frankness of my story, which I told in concise sentences enough—for I felt horribly weak,—and when it was finished he reverted presently to the topic of natural history and his own biological studies” (Wells 11). This being said, Wells is establishing that there is going to be a metacognitive awareness of arts and sciences in the novel. In other words, by Prendick drawing attention to his familiarity with both natural history and biological studies from the start, he is revealing that they will eventually be central components addressed throughout the story. In the context of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, it is also interesting to think about the development of science as a concrete subject originating around the Renaissance roughly aligned with what he refers to as the Classical age. Talking about conducting surface-level analysis versus a truly formal one, Foucault wrote, “one is limiting one’s view of language to its Classical status. In the modern age, literature is that which compensates for (and not that which confirms) the signifying function of language” (44). Like what was discussed above with the influence of SF on real science vocabulary, one may see a way in which Wells is capitalizing on the linguistic

sophistication of scientific terms over time. The fact that Wells is demonstrating this sequence of thought articulated in language is part of what makes it a perfect representative of the modern episteme. In addition to discursivity, Foucault clearly saw intertextuality as one of the indicative markers of the thought from this time—more so than times preceding—especially as it pertains to looking backward for informing future progress. While the titular character, Moreau, is the most obvious subject that comes to mind when thinking about a comparison to Foucault's modern episteme, Prendick shows how Moreau's work can be dangerously influential in an everyday philosophy.

Given the interconnectedness of thought in the modern episteme, Prendick is plagued by an uncanny feeling of remembrance when he first meets Moreau. It is as if the figure of Moreau was inevitably going to become naturally actualized regardless of whether it was Moreau himself or someone else. To highlight how far back Moreau is reflecting in history, Prendick notices texts from antiquity while Montgomery, the stereotypical evil henchman, is showing him around their little island's base hut: "He called my attention . . . to an array of old books, chiefly, I found, surgical works and editions of the Latin and Greek classics—languages I cannot read with any comfort" (Wells 32). Drawing upon the aforementioned epistemological nature of Foucault's project, this is no surprise because one would expect Moreau to be well-versed in ancient teachings since a compilation of previous knowledge is one of the central elements of the modern episteme. Once again, however, the reader's attention is pulled toward Prendick's interpretation of Moreau as opposed to prompting us to come up with an objective judgment of the mad scientist ourselves. From the outset, we see the amount of respect the stranded visitor has for Moreau, and this is something that he toils with throughout the novel. While Prendick really wants to believe there is some scientific benefit behind Moreau's creations, he cannot look past the immoral means of achieving such advancements. At any rate, this dilemma is evident from the first utterance of his name: "'Moreau,' I heard him [Montgomery] call, and for the moment I do not think I noticed. Then as I handled the books on the shelf it came up in consciousness: where had I heard the name of Moreau before?" (Wells 32). As the first mention of Moreau's name mostly functions to foreshadow the eerily despicable actions to come, it also serves the purpose of showing how the scientist is somewhat of a universal character representing the many dangers of modern science. Just because something—like vivisection, for example—could be possible does not mean that we should experiment and find out, but that desire is the inescapable drive of the modern episteme.

Like Darwin, a significant figure of the modern episteme, Moreau draws upon past scientific practices to inform his own. Foucault understood the importance of implementing revolutionary methods unlike anything that has been conducted before for the purposes of generating new knowledge. Moreau, explaining to Prendick the origin of his experiments, notes, "mediaeval practitioners who made dwarfs and beggar cripples and show-monsters; some vestiges of whose art still remain in the preliminary manipulation of the young mountebank or contortionist. Victor Hugo gives an account of them in *L'Homme qui Rit*" (Wells 72). This line of thinking is representative of the modern episteme because Foucault acknowledged that people were

conceptualizing science and engineering epistemologically in a way that has never been done before, hence the emergence of groundbreaking technological movements during the Industrial Revolution. Wells's novel is getting at the heart of a crucial question of whether innovative scientific ideas can be executed without malicious acts. For example, Moreau references other manipulative, deformative sciences that inspire his Beast People: "creatures as the Siamese Twins . . . And in the vaults of the Inquisition. No doubt their chief aim was artistic torture, but some at least of the inquisitors must have had a touch of scientific curiosity . . ." (Wells 72). Interestingly, these examples Moreau references are only possible through the colonization of vulnerable populations. Again, that makes the novel a perfect representative of the modern episteme because it takes a postcolonial world to make scientific discoveries like Darwin did, something Foucault recognized. While Moreau enlisted the corporeality of the Kanakas (native Hawaiians) as slaves to help him create his Beast People, the accomplishment of his abominations is still impressive. If anything, the colonial element of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is what sets it apart as more representative of the modern episteme than, for example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Victor Frankenstein's monster was made using the body of a white man combined with animals, whereas Moreau abuses the labor of the colonized to make his creations. Embedded within Moreau's philosophy, therefore, is a dense history of exploitation never before represented in this manner.

Prendick's adoption of Moreau's interdisciplinary approach to life and science at the end of the novel exemplifies Foucault's use of multiple disciplines to represent the modern episteme. After Prendick eventually makes it back home off the island and re-enters normal, civilized society, one might expect him to commune with others given the traumatic experience of interacting with Moreau, the henchman Montgomery, and the Beast People. On the contrary, Prendick returns to a life of seclusion and study not dissimilar to the lifestyle he observed by Moreau: "I have withdrawn myself from the confusion of cities and multitudes, and spend my days surrounded by wise books, bright windows in this life of ours lit by the shining souls of men" (Wells 131). This hermetic existence goes to show that the problem with Moreau did not lie in his approach to science—in actuality, Moreau is a terrible but accomplished doctor the same way Voldemort is a terrible but great wizard. When Prendick decides to live his life similar to how Moreau lives after his adventures on the island, it reinforces Foucault's emphasis on the ability of concentrated effort in a single discipline influenced by many to produce substantive, positive change: "What new modes of being must they have received in order to makes all these changes possible, and to enable to appear, after scarcely more than a few years, those now familiar forms of knowledge that we have called, since the nineteenth century, *philology*, *biology*, and *economics*?" (Foucault 220). To put it simply, Prendick represents everything that is good about the modern episteme while Moreau represents everything that is bad. The difference between the two of them lies in their sets of ethics that they implement in their approaches to scientific practice. Therefore, the last lines of the novel beg the reader to speculate whether Prendick will go on to make great contributions to science given everything he has learned: "There it must be, I think, in the vast and eternal laws of matter, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than

animal within us must find solace and its hope” (Wells 131). There is potential in all knowledge to change the world for the better, but it is entirely dependent on what is done with said knowledge. To a certain extent, Moreau is a perfect example of a modern scientist because he saw a gap in the research and praxis, and he then went on to perform experiments that he thought would fill that gap based upon his area of expertise. The problem was in his horrific use of animal brutality through vivisection with the enslaved labor of Indigenous peoples. In other words, the ends are not problematic for Moreau, but the means through which he arrives at those ends are. As Wells suggested at the end of the novel, and as Foucault wished for the modern episteme, Prendick and other real-world scientists like him should be able to arrive at those desired ends without the use of such malicious means.

## Notes

1. See, for example, B.L. King’s “Is That From Science or Fiction? Otherworldly Etymologies, Neosemes, and Neologisms Reveal the Impact of SF on the English Lexicon.”

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### Same As It Ever Was?: Portrayals of Appalachia in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*



Jennifer Krause

This paper will investigate representations of Appalachia and Appalachian communities in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*. In his novel, Gibson sets one of two alternative futures in Appalachia, though he does not clearly name it as such. Yet instead of leaning into one-note depictions of backwoods drug dealers and fundamentalist preachers preying on rural white trash, Gibson presents a complicated picture of the region that views Appalachia as an internal colony within the United States. He also layers his near future Appalachia within a second layer of colonialism, a colonialism defined by the far future reaching into the past to monetize and manipulate alternate versions of history. This layering allows Gibson to create an intriguing commentary about place-specific stereotyping and the need to create communities that insulate themselves from critique. I therefore posit that by presenting Appalachia as an internal colony within the United States and emphasizing the idea that place matters, *The Peripheral* complicates and questions both the colonialism more overtly present in the relationship between the different timelines in the novel, as well as the usefulness of colonial models for understanding such complicated and paradoxical relationships.

To begin such an analysis, we need to look into Gibson's ties to the mountains. Gibson was born on the coast of South Carolina, but lived most of his early life in Wytheville, Virginia. As Gibson mentions in his autobiographical essay "Since 1948," his experiences in southwest Virginia influenced his own interest in things not of this world. He notes, "I'm convinced that it was this experience of feeling abruptly exiled, to what seemed like the past, that began my relationship with science fiction" (Gibson, *Distrust* 22). In a question-and-answer session during a book signing in 2015 at Joseph-Beth Booksellers in Lexington, Kentucky, someone in the audience asked Gibson where the book was set. Gibson answered that he had originally thought the book was set in southern Ohio, somewhere rural, but the more he thought about it, the more he suspected that the book was set very close to Wytheville, where he grew up ("Questions"). In an earlier interview for Tor.com in 2014, Gibson is less willing to point to Wytheville as the setting of the novel, however. He mentions that he wanted the setting to be in Pennsylvania, "right across the Virginia line" ("Gibson on Urbanism"). Yet Gibson goes on to say, "But inevitably, in spite of my wanting that, I think what happened was that my experience of my own childhood colored it all. And so it feels more like a southern small town than anything else. [. . .] There's a kind of inadvertent generic quality to it that stems from that idea I had that I could make it kind of Everytown. But in the end I guess it's not really." Interestingly, all the locations Gibson mentions fall within the traditional boundaries of Appalachia, so even if the novel does not take place in Wytheville exactly, it is still affected by its location somewhere in Appalachia. And though, as Steve Fisher notes in a

discussion of Appalachian cultural identity and political activity, “many use the term ‘Appalachian’ in a way that glosses over the diversity of the region and some ugly parts of its history,” there is still a cultural (mis)understanding of the region that allows readers to pick up *The Peripheral* and know exactly where it takes place (Fisher 58-59). The main character’s hometown may not be Wytheville exactly, but its feel, its undercurrents, and its customs reflect an Appalachian way of life, even if its geography doesn’t.

We must therefore next tackle an understanding of how popular notions of Appalachia and Appalachian stereotypes play out, in scholarship concerning the region as well as in popular adaptations, including Gibson’s novel. The Appalachian way of life most readers will pick up on is usually based on very specific stereotypes. In a discussion of stereotypes in Appalachia, Barbara Ellen Smith mentions that “within the national imaginary, Appalachia is a land of backward, inbred (always implicitly white) hillbillies whose very degradation—in the manner of most binary oppositions—functions to valorize the intelligence and culture of the normative, middle-class American, who is decidedly not from Appalachia” (54). The hillbilly, as a representation of all who live and work and function in Appalachia, is therefore the opposite of everything America stands for, yet still resides within the limits of American culture: worth less than the rest of country, but still white; and deserving of poverty and ridicule and hopelessness perhaps because of their rejection of the rules and strictures they are supposed to live up to.

To combat this view of Appalachia, Helen M. Lewis and Edward E. Knipe suggest the colonialism model as a way to understand Appalachian social, cultural, and economic structures. This model:

describes the Appalachians as a subsociety structurally alienated and lacking resources because of processes of the total economic political system. Those who control the resources preserve their advantages by discrimination. The people are not essentially passive; but these ‘subcultural’ traits of fatalism, passivity, etc. are adjustive techniques of the powerless. They are ways by which people protect their way of life from new economic models and the concomitant alien culture. (15)

Viewing Appalachians as native inhabitants attacked by alien invaders calls into question multiple assumptions made by the stereotypes projected onto the region by both internal and external sources.

In their study, Lewis and Knipe therefore turn to a definition of colonialism, specifically internal colonialism, first introduced by Robert Blauner in a 1969 study of African Americans in the inner city. Blauner’s definition includes multiple steps in the ongoing act of colonization, including “a forced, involuntary entry,” “rapid modifications in values, orientation, and the way of life of the colonized,” “a relationship by which members of the colonized group tend to be administered by representatives of the dominant group,” and finally, “a condition of racism” (Lewis and Knipe 16). A comparison between the situation of African Americans in the late 1960s and inhabitants of the Appalachian region is overtly problematic, on multiple levels, yet the

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introduction of a social model that considers issues of colonization in the region have been fruitful and provide a useful way to think about how Appalachia is often seen.

So how does all this come together in the novel itself? To begin my analysis, we first need a quick overview of the novel's plot. In the introduction to an interview with Gibson, Tasneem Raja quips, "The new book, meanwhile, stars a bunch of downtrodden trailer park residents who get caught up in the deadly games of some time-warping elites from 70 years hence" (61). Though this description sums up the plot quickly, it also reveals inherent biases. Yes, the novel's heroes are rural and poor and trapped by a society that has no use for them, but the main characters don't live in a trailer park, nor are they as downtrodden as the word implies. The stereotypes in such a description highlight the ways in which place matters in the text. A better description of the plot might read: "The book follows a woman, Flynne, and her community as they deal with the impact of what happens when a group of time travel hobbyists from seventy years in the future decide to meddle with the past. Flynne witnesses a murder in the future, though she thinks she is playing a video game. This leads to two rival powers from the future using her present as a gameboard for their ongoing feud. Flynne must therefore travel to the future through the use of a peripheral body, which allows her to live in her world but interact with theirs, in order to personally identify the murderer and stop the violence that rages in her own timeline."

This is where a reading of the text from an Appalachian studies perspective becomes useful. If we read Flynne's hometown as doubly colonized, invaded by the future and internally ostracized by the rest of the United States, we can begin to understand not only how we are supposed to react to her world, but also how we are supposed to reflect revelations within her world back onto our own society. The far future's colonial attitudes toward the near future are introduced very clearly in a conversation between three main characters. No one knows much about this time-travel hobby, so Lev, a prominent hobbyist, tries to explain it. He says, "The act of connection produces a fork in causality, the new branch causally unique. A stub, as we call them" (Gibson, *Peripheral* 103). Lowbeer, a high ranking member of what amounts to a police force in the future, asks, "But why do you? [. . .] Call them that. It sounds short. Nasty. Brutish. Wouldn't one expect the fork's new branch to continue to grow?" (103). Lev replies, "We do [. . .] assume exactly that. Actually, I'm not sure why enthusiasts settled on that expression" (103). In response to this confusion, one of Lev's employees interjects, "Imperialism [. . .] We're third-worlding alternate continua. Calling them stubs makes that a bit easier" (103). This conversation very clearly introduces an imperialist, colonialist agenda into the novel's use of time travel. Thinking back to the definition of internal colonization Lewis and Knipe use, we can read this as "a forced, involuntary entry," one recognized as blatantly capitalist and hypocritical by onlookers who are not enthusiasts (16).

This becomes all the more complex if we view the near future, Flynne's world, as an internal colony within greater U.S. culture. We can see that internal colonization within the fabric of Flynne's community even before it is touched by Lev's hobby. The "forced, involuntary entry" in this case is not coal companies that Lewis and Knipe highlight in their study, but drug manufacture, a clear reference to the opioid crisis in rural America. In an assessment of the

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economy in Flynn's timeline, one of Lev's employees in far future London states, "County's economy is entirely about manufacturing drugs" (Gibson, *Peripheral* 108). Tommy, a cop in Flynn's world, explains to Flynn that building drugs is the only way to make real money in their community: "if we all woke up one day and [ . . . ] that building economy had been taken up to heaven, after a few weeks most people around here wouldn't have any money for food" (233). The drug trade therefore serves as a mechanism of colonization, bringing a type of predatory capitalism into the region that, like coal, doesn't actually boost the economy or bring any development for the region or investment in the people.

For Lewis and Knipe, the second step of internal colonization is "rapid modifications in values, orientation, and the way of life of the colonized" (16). We can see this second step both within Flynn's world before the intervention of far future London as well as through that intervention. Flynn's community reflects these modifications, as the novel contrasts her childhood home and the homeplace feel of much of the countryside with the modernization and capitalist neglect of the town and its drug dealer leaders. Flynn's world, though ruled by technology in some respects, is grounded in its sense of place: the endless fields, the rushing creeks, the wind in the trees. This closeness with nature is contrasted by one of the novel's villains, Corbell Pickett, a politician and community celebrity who also runs the local drug syndicate. His power serves as a reference to the third aspect of internal coloniality that Lewis and Knipe also reference: "a relationship by which members of the colonized group tend to be administered by representatives of the dominant group" (16). When characters drive to Pickett's home, they pass "a long stretch of white plastic fence, fabled to look like somebody's idea of Old Plantation" (Gibson, *Peripheral* 291). As for the house itself, "They'd painted everything white, she guessed to tie it together, but it didn't. Looked like somebody had patched a factory, or maybe a car dealership, onto a McMansion, then stuck an Interstate chain restaurant and a couple of swimming pools on top of that" (292). All of these details speak to Pickett's status as both a colonizer and a representative of the effects of colonization. Pickett's home, like Pickett himself, reflects a different worldview than Flynn's homeplace. While Flynn's family has been in their home for over a century, and that home reflects its connections to the past and to family ties, this is obviously a new building, frankensteined together out of consumerist kitsch. The influence of the drug trade is stark here, revealing the paradox of the region: the modifications the drug trade has made to the community and the power money has over everything else.

The interaction between far-future London and Flynn's world only deepens the us versus them mentality set up against Flynn and her community. The changes in their way of life, as well as the implication that Flynn's world is not actually in charge of what is going on, is most clearly obvious in a conversation Flynn has with Macon, a friend of Flynn's who is one of the first know that they are dealing with interference from the future. Macon asks:

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“Know what ‘collateral damage’ means?”

“People get hurt because they happen to be near something that somebody needs to happen?”

“Think that’s us,” he said. “None of this is happening because any of us are who we are, what we are. Accident, or it started with one, and now we’ve got people who might as well be able to suspend basic laws of physics, or anyway finance, doing whatever it is they’re doing, whatever reason they’re doing it for. So we could get rich, or get killed, and it would all still just be collateral.” (*Peripheral* 279)

Flynn, her brother, her friends, her family, all have to deal with the reality of this situation. They are part of this plot not because of who they are, but because they were originally preyed upon by Lev and his hobby. All of this randomness leads to Flynn and Macon and all the rest being collateral damage, for good or ill.

This is also where an understanding of Appalachia and the internal colonial model reveals a more nuanced reading of the text. This model creates an intriguing picture of insider versus outsider and what that means for how we can read communities and citizens who have been stereotyped as backward and dispossessed and downtrodden. Barbara Ellen Smith and Steve Fisher lay out why such a model is so enticing for Appalachian scholars, even as it is also problematic. They note:

The analytical power and emotional appeal of the internal colony model lie in its capacity to interrelate spatial or place-based exploitation (Appalachia as dispossessed *region*) with cultural degradation (Appalachia as America’s *Other*). It thereby creates Appalachia as a regional collectivity, no longer pathologized but oppressed, and enables us to situate ourselves within a shared cultural geography that recognizes all residents as heirs to a special, place-based identity. Although [. . .] this depiction obscures internal class processes and relationships (along with much else), the stark invocation of thievery, arrogance, and smug condescension by outsiders draws an undeniably powerful line between innocent victims inside the region and profiteering elites on the outside. (Smith and Fisher 76)

The internal colony model allows citizens of the region to create a narrative that sets them not as the Other, but as the protagonist in a plot aimed against them. This understanding of self, founded on a place-based myth of righteousness against outside aggressors, gives Appalachians a way to see themselves as heroes, innocent victims, and righteous underdogs.

Within that context, we can begin to understand why it is so easy for readers to side with Flynn and her community against outside forces, be those forces internal colonizers or colonizers from the far future. Flynn’s identity as part of an already marginalized group helps us to understand her plight and allows us to easily see her as capable and heroic, even if she does live in a place and time that most would consider backwards and primitive. Interestingly, Gibson’s

description of his inspiration for *The Peripheral* echoes these sentiments. In an interview in *Mother Jones*, Gibson says:

I'm interested in how we came to automatically think of the inhabitants of the past as having been rubes. [. . .] The people in my 22nd century initially assume that anyone they're dealing with back in 2025 or whenever is just kind of a hick" (Raja 62)

Just like the inhabitants of Appalachia, the inhabitants of the past are much more than they seem, and the internal colony model reinforces the agency, intelligence, and resourcefulness of people who have normally been overlooked or underestimated.

This doubled coloniality in the novel bolsters how we might view the end of the story, too. The final two chapters of the book present a conclusion that seems a bit too easy. The story jumps several years ahead, presenting Flynnne happily married to Tommy, with a child on the way. Most of Flynnne's family and friends seem to have paired off nicely, and everyone lives together in new buildings in and around Flynnne's original homeplace. Several critics, scholars, and reviewers have called it a happy ending and left it at that. Others, however, see it as rather more sinister. This ending—which Gibson himself has said, “gave me the creeps!” (“Gibson on Urbanism”)—becomes that much more creepy when read from the vantage of a doubled coloniality. In explaining his rationale for being disturbed with how the novel ends, Gibson continues, “Really, its potential for not being good is really, really high. [. . .] I mean, she's lovely, but what are they building there? It's got all kinds of weird third-world bad possibilities. . . . I wasn't expecting that actually, and it completely weirded me out, and I still haven't really gotten my head around it” (“Gibson on Urbanism”). Gibson's reference to “third-world bad possibilities” brings Flynnne and her community back to where they started, in a sense, though they are no longer the poor denizens of Appalachia just trying to make some money and get ahead. Now, Flynnne and her people have joined the colonizers, both in the future and in their own society. We want to root for Flynnne because she is an underdog, one of the oppressed workers in Appalachia, but once she crosses the line and can no longer be seen as an underdog, we must question what we think of her and her future.

This becomes especially apparent if we read the end through an Appalachian studies lens. One of the major arguments against the internal colonial model is that it hides what Smith and Fisher call internal exploiters. They note:

[B]laming “outsiders” for regional economic problems is an over-simplification, if not outright distortion. When we focus on where people are *from* as the main problem, we run the risk of exonerating everyone in the region as good and implying that we who live here are, in this most fundamental respect of residence, all the same in our righteousness. Race, class, gender, sexual orientation—all are secondary to our zip code. Perhaps most important, this perspective conceals and exonerates *internal* exploiters [. . .] without whose actions the exploitation of Appalachia would not be possible. (47)

From this perspective, using the internal colony model to help understand Gibson's text, Flynne and her family can seem to have a happy ending, and we can feel good for them because their potential for chaos and harm is hidden from view by the assumption that where they are from defines who they are. Their hillbilly-ness, their rural ways and Appalachian values, mask the possibility that they could be something else, something far more in keeping with their own colonizers than anyone, including the reader, would want to acknowledge.

Place is therefore of utmost importance in this novel, even if that place is never clearly stated outright. Flynne's world, as both situated in a version of the past that is our near future, as well as situated in an Appalachia eerily similar to today's, is ruled by multiple colonialities. This doubled coloniality questions both temporal and geographical stereotypes because of the way Gibson approaches his characters and their places in both time and space. The complex nature of the internal colonial model, however, causes us, as readers, to make certain assumptions about the characters. We see them as capable, intelligent individuals, but they are also flattened because they are defined by place in a way that homogenizes them, ignoring the complex intersectionalities of the region as well as the lived reality of people who are there right now. The internal colonial model that seems to be written into the cosmology of the text therefore also affects our understanding of how the future looks back at the past. Whether or not Flynne's community is able to save themselves, they still have to rely on the future for security, money, and power. The colonial model in that scenario flattens them as well, creating temporal myths that counteract stereotypes but also build a future that is probably going to look very much like the one they are trying to avoid. Saving the world probably doesn't actually save the world. *The Peripheral*, then, asks us to pay attention to how place matters in the text. It also asks us to interrogate the usefulness of colonial models, not only for understanding place-based marginality, but also for expressing the complexities of communities that can't and shouldn't be defined by just one thing.

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### “You telling me my ass isn’t a werewolf”: Science fiction ontology and representing queerness in Gail Carriger's Parasolverse



Jack Murray

This paper is the result of a number of questions about how representation functions within SF works that construct complex worlds with mechanisms that change how they are understood through their own internally consistent logic. I approach this through the lens of queerness as a way to describe slippery and hard-to-define subject positions and by placing it alongside Gail Carriger’s Parasolverse. I then describe an approach to reading science fiction that I refer to as “science fiction ontology” by drawing on Seo-Young Chu’s lyrical mimesis as a way to understand how science fiction performs the work of representation. Science fiction ontology demonstrates the ways that representation occurs through the internal structures of the fictional world that determine how characters understand themselves as subjects in that world. This differs from allegorical representations which shift the world to be understood primarily from the external perspective of the readers. I read the narrative arc of Biffy the reluctant werewolf alpha, a side plot within Carriger’s Parasolverse, through the framework of science fiction ontology to show how queerness exists within Carriger’s work and how it can be read as a blueprint for queer masculinity.

Gail Carriger’s Parasolverse is a collection of science fiction novels set in an alternate steampunk version of Victorian England. The series consists of three major multibook arcs and several standalone stories that take place between 1850 and the turn of the twentieth century. Within the Parasolverse supernatural elements have influenced the social, cultural, and imperial development of Carriger’s British Empire. The supernatural set is made up of ghosts, vampires, and werewolves, each being a form of the afterlife enabled by the presence of excess soul. When someone with excess soul dies the remaining soul tethers the spirit to their body until the body decomposes and the tether dissipates. Vampires and werewolves, on the other hand, preempt this through a kind of ceremonial death. New vampires are created through the bite of a vampire queen and new werewolves from that of an alpha werewolf, and they become a member of the hive or pack respectively. Carriger positions representations of monstrous beings alongside the social intricacies and romance of Victorian London steeped in science fiction world-building that tends towards the “harder” end of the genre. Representing queerness is complicated in the Parasolverse by the presence of characters whom readers would already understand as queer alongside monsters that are often used allegorically to stand in for queer subjects. Troubling the process of representation also raises questions about how to read representations of queerness in science fiction and fantasy.

Identifying what does and does not count as queer within science fiction literature is particularly difficult due to the inherent ambiguity of the term; the word “queer” expresses a variety of different ideas and performs a variety of linguistic functions. Queer as an identity category gestures towards a multitude of possible gender, sexual, and other identity categories. As Hannah McCann and Whitney Mongahan observe, “queer theory finds its radical potential as a term to challenge, interrogate, destabilize and subvert” (1). The implication is that queer theory is a way of talking about the things that resist definition, description, or otherwise exist outside structural boundaries. Constructing “queer” as a political identity that is “inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality”(Cathy Cohen 411) is at the core of queer theory’s critical praxis. Cathy Cohen explains that queerness is necessarily an intersectional analytic that “recognizes how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate and police the lives of most people”(411) which subsequently expands what it means to be queer. Queer theory identifies structures such as desire and sexuality, then asks how power relations determine what and who get to count as “normal.” Anyone outside of the normative determinations can be said to be queer. Queerness describes an ontological position couched in acknowledging difference while also attending to the concerns about sexuality and gender that give rise to queerness, or as Bo Ruberg poetically puts it, queerness is “a way of being, doing, and desiring differently” (7).

The second part of the question stems from how representation is approached in science fiction and fantasy. If queerness is a question of ontology, then representation is a question of epistemology. That is to say, there is a tension between how we come to know a world and how a diegetic world is known within itself. In a world where the conditions of existence differ radically from ours, how is queerness understood differently? The supernatural and steampunk elements in Carriger’s work disrupt an otherwise familiar Victorian London that would cause a fundamental difference in the characters’ understanding of their world compared to our understanding as readers. After all, how might conceptions of queerness change for a culture where supernatural metamorphosis, monstrous transformation, and definitive proof of the soul’s impact on one’s afterlife is an accepted and commonly acknowledged faction of reality?

Reading the text from our frame of knowledge might approach vampires and werewolves as allegorical for “race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression” (J. J. Cohen 52). Monster theory describes this plethora of intensely transdisciplinary approaches to mapping our own semiotic interpretations onto monstrous bodies. Indeed, part of the appeal of using monsters as signifiers, as queer readings are wont to do, is “the realization that meaning itself runs riot” (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 2). This type of analysis is useful for examining many themes and anxieties regarding cultural, racial, queer, and othered bodies (J. J. Cohen; Wright; Bildhauer; Creed; Asma; Puar and Rai) as well as positive possible potentialities related productive conceptions of monsters (Lioi; Haraway; MacCormack). These readings are almost always focused on the relationship between the self and underlying queerness or an unknowable other. But what does it mean for monsters to represent queer people, when they also already

exist and are actively present in the narrative? Instead, could we use monsters to understand the ontological structures of queerness in Carriger's world?

These questions propose a method of approaching representation that differs drastically from approaches to reading gothic horror and other fiction genres that frequently address the monstrous. Genre boundaries are points of contention and working through this methodology of reading representation in fiction will necessitate describing how I approach science fiction. Indeed, one could rightly describe Carriger's novels as fantasy, yet I have been primarily referring to them as science fiction. I turn to Seo-Young Chu's conception of science fiction as "a mimetic discourse whose objects of representation are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging" (3), a definition that synthesizes broader discourse within the science fiction community. Chu's use of mimesis refers to the propensity of art to imitate or represent the real world, a definition which preempts the complex history of mimesis and postulates "the capacity of language to reflect a reality ontologically prior to representation" (2). In many ways I accept the idea that science fiction operates at a level beyond mimetic representations of the real world because science fiction worlds must be ontologically distinct before signification can occur. Allowing a work to create its own internally consistent ontology functions similar to mythology, in that the ontology of a myth exists prior to what it is attempting to represent and allows meaning to emerge through the act of reading within extended contexts. In the previous examples from monster theory, the object being interpreted points to any number of possible objects. Similarly, myths read as parables rely heavily on the storytelling process to influence the production of meaning. This is possible because fiction exists on a spectrum of mimetic intensities that is bounded by a work's referents' capacity to be comprehended. On one end are works that are interested in representing concrete objects "highly susceptible to understanding and amenable to representation"; on the other hand are "referents virtually unknowable, referents that all but defy human language and comprehension" (Chu 6). Chu positions genres of realism at the low intensity end of the mimetic spectrum, while science fiction and fantasy tend towards higher intensity. A text's position on the spectrum is determined by the relative difficulty of their representational tasks and the difficulty of representation is a function of is the property of referents to be "impossible to represent in a straightforward manner" yet "absolutely real" (Chu 3), what Chu describes as cognitive estrangement. Cognitive estrangement is borrowed from Darko Suvin's definition of SF as a genre of cognitive estrangement induced through imaginative frameworks that differ from the author's actual material reality. In contrast to Suvin's claims that SF's form of representation as non mimetic and purely imaginative, Chu suggests that "all reality is to some degree cognitively estranging" (7) because it is impossible to completely know and understand a referent. The implication is that all works of representation are, at some intensity, science fiction. Affective vertigo is a similar concept to cognitive estrangement in that each "calls into question (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us . . . to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization" (Mittman, qtd. in Weinstock 3). The difference is that one precedes the other. Inducing affective vertigo is necessary to conceptualize a cognitively estranging

referent. Science fiction as outlined here relies on a literalization of figurative formations within a narrative ontology.

Queerness induces affective vertigo by design and as such, queer subjects are often associated with monsters or the monstrous. Characters are forced to confront queer subjects or their own queer subjectivity through their relationship to the monstrous. Fiction is well suited to the task of representing queer identities, while representing the already slippery concept of queerness which necessitates understanding of *being* within the work of fiction. What I propose is reading a system of mimesis in a way that draws on extensive worldbuilding to understand how cognitively estranging referents are understood from within the story world. Admittedly this method of reading a text or group of texts is most effective with more expansive collections or texts that have a strong interest in world building. The text can more easily represent the unrepresentable by codifying the rules of the world and ensuring they function consistently. This has the added bonus of allowing the author to subvert or break the rules for dramatic, narrative, or moralizing effect. Being a work of fiction, the author's episteme impacts the production of the narrative and subsequently its ontology as well as our reading of it. This method and traditional methods are not mutually exclusive. Traditional readings of representation cannot and should not be abandoned; rather, the two approaches supplement one another to encompass a wider scope of analysis.

My interest in Carriger's *Parasolverse* is twofold. First, the presence of werewolves seeks to induce an affective vertigo, which Carriger leans into by disrupting understandings of werewolf monstrosity by embedding them within the veneer of high class Victorian Culture, a move that corresponds to contemporary monster theory's focus on how "subjects are 'monsterized' and the implications of this process" (Weinstock 25). Specifically I am interested in the process of metamorphosis via death and how queer desire, affect, and power interact within pack dynamics and London high society. Second, Carriger's inclusion of a diegetic scientific approach the monstrous and its ability to represent queerness as function of science fiction's "capacity to perform the massively complex representational and epistemological work necessary to render cognitively estranging referents available both for representation and for understanding" (Chu 7). As noted earlier, the epistemological underpinnings of queerness are predicated on disrupting and upsetting interpretative and cognitive categories. Just as Weinstock identifies the emergence of the monster as "the catch-all conceptual category for things that don't fit" at the moment of affective vertigo (Weinstock 2), queerness comes into being at the moment it is identified as queer. Queerness emerges in relation to nonnormative ways of being, knowing, and desiring that destabilize dominant systems of categorization. Werewolves represent affectively destabilizing subjects and their presence in the world of Carriger's science fiction comes to represent a construction of queerness.

This analysis will draw on Biffy's story beginning in the five-book *Parasol Protectorate* arc as a minor character and then continues through to the follow-up series, *The Custard Protocol*, and into a number of standalone novellas where he takes on a more central role. In *Soulless*, Biffy is described as a dandy with extensive espionage training, a marked preference for men, a penchant

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for women's fashion—hats in particular—and lover to flamboyant vampire Lord Akeldama. In *Blameless*, Biffy is kidnapped as part of a hostile vampire plot and is rescued by Lord Maccon and Professor Lyall, the London Pack's Alpha and Beta, respectively. During the rescue Biffy is fatally shot, and to prevent him from dying Lyall convinces Lord Maccon to metamorphose Biffy into a werewolf. Biffy's successful change causes friction between the pack and Lord Akeldama. In *Heartless* we get glimpses of Biffy's struggle to reconcile the loss of his potential future as a vampire alongside Lord Akeldama with his new place as a werewolf within the London Pack. In Parasol Protectorate book 5, *Timeless*, it is discovered that Biffy has the traits of an Alpha werewolf and plans are made for Biffy to replace Lyall—who has also become Biffy's new paramour— and become Lord Maccon's Beta before taking eventually over as pack Alpha when the strain of holding the pack together eventually forces Lord Maccon to retire. This replacement occurs during the second book of the Custard Protocol series after which Biffy and the London Pack's stories are picked up in the standalone novellas *Romancing the Werewolf* and *How to Marry a Werewolf*.

Werewolf metamorphosis is a literalization of becoming-wolf as Deleuze and Guattari describe it: when man and wolf are made from matter shifted into different configurations, an individual's relationships with social assemblages and desire is fundamentally restructured. Desire is “never separable from complex assemblages” and “results from a highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 251). The restructuring of desire comes at the expense of previously existing social flows (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*). In becoming-werewolf, Biffy's shifting conceptualization of death fundamentally alters his relationship with desire and social subjectivity. Carriger provides insight into the precarious nature of mortal and immortal desire through Biffy's reflection on changed relationships with mortal friends and newfound empathy for his former lover,

Lord Akeldama's love, such as it was, was always transient and shared. Now Biffy understood why. True, Biffy was a young immortal, but he was almost fifty, and he'd seen his mortal friends grow old while he had not. Or die in the attempt to become like him. He wasn't yet old enough to have grown the protective thickness around his heart, the one that made Lord Akeldama's smiles brittle, but Biffy knew why it was there. (Carriger, *Romancing the Werewolf* 21)

Desire is a productive force with real, tangible effects (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*). Another way of expressing this idea is to think of desire according to Eve Sedgwick's definition: “the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (Sedgwick). Sedgwick uses this framing to describe homosociality as the desiring relationship that invests men in the affairs of other men as a way to uphold forms of masculinity.

Carriger's werewolf packs disrupt the common conception of normative homosociality with a queer homosociality centered on a politics of care where pack members are attuned to each other's emotional wellbeing. In keeping with wolf tropes, status within the pack outwardly seems

to be determined via physical capability; however, Carriger's world building shows status based on affective capacity and emotional sensitivity to the pack. The tethers that effervesce from the soul remaining post metamorphosis are a literalization of the relationships between pack werewolves. The network itself centers on a tripartite relationship between the pack's Alpha, Beta, and Gamma described by Carriger as:

The balance of the pack, the rule of three. Alpha for the head, evolving, shifting, holding too many tethers, burning brighter than the rest of the pack until he snuffed himself out in madness. Beta for the heart, beating a steady rhythm of care, love, resilience, ever steadfast. Gamma for the strength in arms, the warrior, the challenger, the weapon, to remind the pack of what they really were – hunters, trackers, fighters. (Carriger, *How to Marry a Werewolf* 159)

Biffy's conceptualization of the dynamic of the pack is somewhat incomplete as a result of the impromptu nature of his metamorphosis. As Alpha he recognizes his duty to keep his pack anchored without fully comprehending the bidirectional nature of the relationship. Professor Lyall explains to Biffy, "when you became Alpha of this pack, you tethered to them, to each and every member. Your tether is the last of your soul, so in a way the pack becomes the Alpha's soul. And you are theirs" (Carriger, *Romancing the Werewolf* 102), indicating that while the Alpha provides a stabilizing presence, they also rely on the connection of the pack to stay grounded. Biffy's metamorphosis is a total disassembly of his prior social assemblage and as a result his integration into the pack goes poorly. The multidirectional flows of affect are demonstrated as Lord Maccon and Lyall bring Biffy into a stabilizing relationship with the pack through his participation in investigations related to the pack's overall wellbeing as well as the gradual romantic connection between Biffy and Lyall. As Biffy settles into the pack, his capacity for sensing the flow of affect ultimately identifies him with Alpha werewolf potential (Carriger, *The Parasol Protectorate, Volume One*; Carriger, *The Parasol Protectorate, Volume Two*).

The mechanics of the soul and its relationship to supernatural metamorphosis and pack dynamics is the focus of the Parasol Protectorate. Excess soul is assumed to be the primary determinant in surviving metamorphosis. The only known indication of excess soul is an individual's penchant for creativity, though the correlation is presented as speculative at best. Throughout the Parasol Protectorate there are elements of an anti-supernatural cadre of scientists attempting to determine a way of measuring one's soul for the purpose of identifying those who have supernatural potential. The readings of queer identities are very made very apparent. The efforts to measure soul echo the ways Foucault identifies scientific pathologizing deviant sexuality (63-70) and the way that Halberstam describes medicine's domain over gender identify categories (*Trans\** 24-29). Scientific measurement of the soul is an attempt to identify and discipline non-normative bodies. However, the science fiction ontology of Carriger's world represents queerness as cognitively estranging, something that produces affective vertigo in characters who exist within the narrative world. Rather than representing sexual orientation or gender identity, the politics of the soul represent anxieties around the possibility of being *otherwise* and the fear associated with

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being preyed upon by those who exist or desire in non-normative ways. This theme is also present in Biffy's initial resentment and resistance to becoming a werewolf. The possibility of escaping normative structures following death is perhaps one of the prime draws for metamorphosis as "Werewolves, like vampires, have always been less bound by the limits humans pose on their own desires" (Carriger, *Romancing the Werewolf* 136). The London Pack is never shown to be interested in maintaining normative sexual desires as long as "Both parties [are] agreeable and willing, and capable of undertaking an informed decision" (136), a view that reflects the same values held in regard to the process of metamorphosis that necessitates education in Pack protocol through serving as a claviger. Many pack members and clavigers can be identified as being what we understand as queer, while the protocols themselves represent queer homosociality predicated on ethics of care.

Scientifically foreclosing the possibility of transformation with the threat of permanent death is a mechanism by which power attempts to retain its influence. This functions in a manner that preys upon a natural fear of loss and death. Where queer desire is subsumed by a desire for oppression. This is not to ideate suicide as a liberatory alternative. Suicide, or the act of desiring one's own death (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*), is a tool of what Achille Mbembe identifies as necropolitics that sees power incorporate death into the assemblages of biopower (83-92). Instead, in the Parasolverse, becoming-werewolf is a drastic destruction of the social via embracing queerness that, as Lee Edelman says, "must redefine such notions as 'civil order' through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity" (17). The immortality of werewolves is a fundamental rejection of "the death drive of the dominant order" (17) in the most literal sense. However, the werewolf does not reject the possibility of futurity, instead they "represent a mode of being and feeling that was not quite there" (Muñoz 9) that remains to embrace José Esteban Muñoz's queer potentiality that is "spawned of a critical investment in utopia" (Muñoz 12). The werewolf metamorphosis and pack dynamic based on desire represents the slippery, cognitively estranging idea of queerness in a way that is useful to queer theory because "power centers are defined much more by what escapes them" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 254). The literal becoming-wolf of Carriger's werewolves "contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" (Muñoz 1) which places the subjects in a new relation to the structure of normative power by placing one outside the structures and instead positions them within networks centered on an ethic of care.

Biffy allows us to understand queerness from within his frame of reference as he exists in the world. Treating science fiction worlds as ontologically distinct allows for representation that exist beyond the purely allegorical, opening rendering the unrepresentable visible within the expansive body of a text. By reading the Parasolverse as a science fiction ontology, the werewolf pack is tasked with representing a diagram of queerness that escapes structures of normative power and reimagines the how individuals exist in relation to one another. Using this method of reading ontological representations of queerness in conjunction with allegorical representation and direct

representations of queerness allows us to interrogate who gets to be queer, what it means to be queer, and how we understand queerness in relation to the narrative elements of a work of fiction.

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# Subversion of Patriarchal Norms Through the Metaphor of Mythology in Indian Science Fiction



Simran Gindwani

“While speculative fiction has not yet fully realized its transgressive potential, dominated as it has been White Man’s burden in outer space—there is still a strong undercurrent of writing that questions and subverts dominant paradigms and persists in asking uncomfortable questions.” (“A Speculative Manifesto” 202)

Advocating Vandana Singh’s above quoted remark, this paper attempts to vocalize the social issues and activist concerns associated with women’s bodies by considering three short stories—“The Good King,” “This, Other World,” and “Sita’s Descent”—from *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana*. In these SF short stories, Sita’s character becomes a metaphor of subversion in modern Indian society as the authors aim to substantiate and reinterpret Sita’s character from a different lens. Considering Sita as an emblem of subversion, the paper discusses how her character mutates into an ordinary woman, meta-human, and AI nebula in the above-mentioned short stories, respectively. All the scientific mutations are significant, and these mutations not only keep the myths alive, but continue to compress the truth as well (Disch 22). The core connecting question in this paper manifests as: How does Sita become a metaphor for the #metoo, #ownvoices, and other social movements of India?

### Mythology and Its Contemporary Efficacy

#Metoo, #ownvoices, and other social movements related to feminism emerged as a crucial part of historical discourse in India. The revolution transpired through media, Twitter, and other social media forums; this became crucial as powerful men were exposed by the women who were oppressed by these men. As Jhalak Jain states, “It began in October 2018, with multiple women coming out with their stories of sexual abuse, harassment, rape and, misconduct.” Sita becomes a metaphor for contemporary Indian women who were confronted with sexual abuse, workplace harassment, and rape. Traditional Indian mythology, thus, is not only used as a historical tool to bring contemporary utility, but it is used with creative liberty to compound upon a few factors on how the rebellion could bring a downfall to the most powerful and corrupted men. The usage and contextual meanings of this metaphor lie in knowing its utilities and the roots in the great epic, *Ramayana*.

Anil Menon, in his essay titled “The Speculative Ramayana,” comments on the varied versions of Ramayana written by different authors and considers different types of narratives. In addition, Menon says: “One radical retelling is of special interest. The *Chandravati Ramayana*, composed by a sixteenth-century female bhaktin, barely concerns itself with Rama” (2). The most accepted

and widely read version of *Ramayana* was written by Tulsi Das. The story follows the pattern of any other religious fantasy in which there is an avatar of God who stands against a Monster/Daityas/Rakshas and this avatar rescues the bhaktas (a spiritual devotee) from the ill-treatments of the monsters. In similar trials, *Ramayana* portrays an esteemed set of events wherein Sita (a goddess, a manifestation of Laxmi) and Rama (a god, a manifestation of Lord Vishnu), takes an avatar (form of human being). Sita is a victim but she is interrogated about her purity and has been accused of infidelity. These acts are similar to what happens today: the victim-blaming and oppression of a woman who has suffered. Thus, the mistreatment and misconduct of patriarchal keepers become questionable in this tale. These two situations create a similar political climate, close to giving a voice to the marginalized in not only itihās (Indian history) but relevant in the contemporary Indian environment. Nivedita Menon also comments on how the modern Indian laws do not favour the abused/victims and how they confront the Indian society. Thus, this binary is evinced and analysed through the scientific mutations in Sita's character. In the story, Rama and Sita (avatars of Lord Vishnu and Mata Laxmi, respectively) get married. They are sent away for an exile of fourteen years. Rama is accompanied by Sita and Lakshman. Surpnanka, Ravana's sister, is seduced by the charm and beauty of the princes, Rama and Lakshman. Surpnanka's face, including her nose and ears, are disfigured by Rama and Lakshman. Ravana, Surpnanka's brother, abducts Sita after deceiving Rama and Lakshman by creating illusionary images. Rama rescues Sita and kills Ravana, the Demon king. Rama, Sita, and Lakshman return to Ayodhya but Sita is interrogated about her purity. Thus, when asked to give agni-pareeksha (an ordeal of fire to prove her chastity before she returns to Rama as a wife), she gives agni-pareeksha but has been proven 'pure' and truly faithful to her lawful husband by Agni Deva. She leaves the mortal Earth and is voluntarily absorbed into the Earth. Thus, the victim-blaming and victim-mistreatment, which has its roots in ancient India, begin to emerge. The goddess or god, symbols of idealistic vision of an Indian society, negotiates with the patriarchy in multiple ways by scavenging the beliefs of mankind.

Myths act as tools to endorse as well as compress subjective truths, which are subject to change from era to era. When the truth started to gain this popular meaning of 'meaning' in itself. Thomas M. Disch also addresses the idea of truth, explaining: "Myth aims at maximizing meaning, at compressing the truth to the highest density that the mind can assimilate without the need of, as it were, cooking. (Extending that metaphor, natural philosophy—science would represent truth in a less immediately ingestible form—dry lentils, so to speak.)" (22). In this case, the subjective truths come from distinct communities of women who attempt to raise voice against the patriarchy—whether it is related to marginalized sections of Indian society or the urban class. Activism and resistance have taken the shape through this massive feminist movement.

### **Sita as Metaphor of Defiance against Victim-blaming and Victim-shaming**

Abha Dawesar's "The Good King" begins with the reinterpretation of the great mythic tale, *Ramayana*, in a futuristic world. Ravana has a utopian kingdom, and using the pre-eminent scientific temperaments, he attempts to deceive Sita through virtual illusions, disguising himself as

Rama. During her abduction, she is raped, abused, and mistreated by Ravana in different universes and in different time zones. But the fate of mythology has been creatively used to subvert the patriarchal norms of the great epic. Sita challenges and confronts traditional victim blaming and abuse when she, as a goddess, resolves to leave her mortal body and rebel against mistreatment, and she asserts her individualism and dissolves the ties of marriage:

He besmirched her. The demon in him started to rage. Upset, shaking, equally furious, Sita took up his challenge. She was pure and chaste and she was going back to Earth. Inside it. The tectonic plates shifted; the land cleaved. Sita was swallowed.  
("The Good King" 60)

The scientific mutations within mythology have been constructed to showcase the rebel in contrast to the most powerful man, the hegemonic construct of a man who was placed at a higher pedestal. Nivedita Menon assesses the legal claim of how the understanding of rape by the patriarchal society has disabled not only women's freedom but has given the rapist the opportunity to marry. The victim-blaming and commodification of women's bodies seems to be obvious even when the just laws could protect them. Thus, the voice of Sita, who fought against her mistreatment, becomes the voice of modern Indian women who strive to rebel against their own injustices. Considering some instances from *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Nivedita Menon claims:

In the feminist view, the raped woman does not lose her honour, the rapist does. For instance, the campaign against the rapists of Bhanwari Devi coined the slogan *Izzat gayi kis ki, Bhatari ki*, meaning it was not Bhanwari Devi who lost her honour, but the village defending the rapists. Bhanwari Devi—this Dalit woman who was raped by upper caste men as a punishment for trying to implement the government's law against child marriage in her village—is a heroine for the movement. Bhanwari Devi is the dignified and public face of the campaign against sexual violence against women. (116)

### **Sita as Metaphor of Non-compliance to Social Orders of Patriarchy**

Moving to the next short story, titled "This, Other World" and written by Lavie Tidhar, the myth has been used to speculate on subverting norms through divorce. The incident of judicial separation gives the mythic tale a new perspective, as separation was once a taboo in India. As a goddess, she represents a symbol of tolerance, patience, and endurance in the historical discourse. On the contrary, in the story, the reinterpretation of Sita's character as a meta-human, Rama as an ordinary man, and Ravana as an AI posits some critical claims about how power flows from one tier to another. When Rama follows up a quest in search of Sita, he is more concerned with the production of his clans rather than the relationship between these two. The narrator expresses Rama's frame of reference:

At the mention of her name Rama's face closes. Sita, of Clan Janaka, sister-cousin to Boss Gui of the Kunming Toads. Chinese and Thai and Indian, her genes are the best Kunming Labs could produce. A meta-human, interfaced with cross hatched Other, she is the Queen to rule the houses of both Janaka and Ayodhya. (213)

Furthermore, when Rama rescues Sita from Ravana, she responds to him:

“What brings you to this place?”

“You do.”

“I never asked you to.”

“You are my wife.”

A single perfect eyebrow rises, and she laughs. Her voice is different, a recital when she says: “Divorce proceedings initiated by confirmatory data packet, registered Tong Yun, Mars, approved by trans-colonial Belt by-laws, Asteroid Vesta, date-”

She recites a string of numbers, colons, sub-clauses and legalese. They mean one thing.

“Unmarried?”

“Unmade a long long time ago”

“The clans-”

“Can fuck themselves”, she says, with sudden savagery. “I am not a toy, a thing made for a purpose. An I-loop needs no reason but reason.”

In this particular instance, Sita asserts individualism, self-love, and her own choices over the construct of marriage and goes against the conventional practice of reproducing. Through scientific mutations of power in a SF narrative—where Ravana assumes a place of an AI and Sita is a meta-human, she is already in an inverted structure of the futuristic dystopian society. This endorses Nivedita Menon comments in *Seeing Like a Feminist* on how the bond of marriage (which emerges out of the social order of patriarchy) binds a woman through only her predefined roles and duties. She brings light to the fact that Indian women's unhappiness remains invisible in a marriage but her duties as a wife are only the ones she is accountable for. Menon writes: “There is no explanation available for the woman's unhappiness at her changed state. Can a woman just go back home saying simply: ‘I don't want to be a wife, I don't like this job?’” (*Seeing Like a Feminist*, 44-45).

The reinterpretation of Sita's character is employed as the epitome of revolution against the Indian patriarchal society whose goddess steps up to understand the hierarchy and rebel against it. “This is what a family is supposed to be; as a wife, you are supposed to give up everything that you thought you were; we have expectations of you, which you are supposed to fulfil. This is marriage” (43). The existing ‘expectations,’ ‘roles,’ and ‘maternal duties’ are taken into account while changing the centre of this story/epic.

### **Sita as Metaphor of Dissent against Courtly Injustice**

“Sita’s Descent” by Infrapramit Das proposes a distinct scientific mutation of Sita’s consciousness stored in an AI nebula constructed by Laxmi, a scientist who works with a team of scientists in Bangalore; the evolution of her consciousness takes place within the mythic tale. The mythic tale is revised, and Ravana and Rama (who are seen as the most powerful) play their roles in a cosmic drama. But Sita refuses to play her ordinary role as defined in *Ramayana*; she rather assumes the role as the one who wants to destroy humankind for victim-blaming and mistreatment. Laxmi says in regard to the creation of Sita:

I realize once again that I am talking to a part of myself. I wrote and programmed Sita’s personality. I rebelled against the idea of a partial enactment of *Ramayana* in space, using these multi-billion-rupee constructs that I helped design. In some strange way Sita is trying to honor her namesake. She is doing what I would have done, if I lacked sympathy with the human race, if the only thing I could calculatedly detect was the legendary injustice evoked by any flaming. (162)

But she refuses to reconcile or settle for any injustice, she rather declares herself as a ‘Martyr.’ The consciousness in the story is used as a metaphor in order to evoke a rebellion against men, which generally happens in the sexist courtrooms (qtd. in Menon, *Seeing Like a Feminist* 116-117). Though the roles of other goddesses are also pointed out in other sections of the story: “We have Kali, we have Durga. Sita is not a destroyer. You are not a destroyer.” (163). Thus, #ownvoice is alluded to in these narratives. To support the notion that myth is used to subvert norms, Sami A. Khan in “Goddess Sita Mutates Indian Mythology into Science Fiction: How Three Stories from *Breaking the Bow* Reinterpret the *Ramayana*” says:

With gendered violence still a ruthless reality, the writer speaks up on behalf of all women who are victims of patriarchal setup and refuse to undergo such fire—ordeals. Still, Sita the AI does not seek vengeance. When reminded that she is not a destroyer and innocents must not pay for the sins of a few, she chooses not to engage in a similar gender power—play and exiles herself from this very binary. (20)

### **Conclusion**

Mythology might be used as a tool to expand the truth, state the truth, or subscribe to the subjective truth through a different dimension. Sita’s character as a symbol evolves in these science fiction narratives; therefore, the meaning of the symbol and context of its use rotates within the contemporary period. Concepts like meta-humans and AI nebula not only focus on the scientific contingencies of the short stories but reinterpret them as a way to resurrect the futurisms which welcome a world of dystopia. It chooses to raise the most uncomfortable questions within the historical discourse of India. Other stories from *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana* like “The Other Woman” by Manjula Padmanabhan and “Oblivion: A Journey” by Vandana Singh project the historic gendered oppressions throughout the mythology in India.

These scientific temperaments and mutations subsidize the elements of newly constructed myths which could be juxtaposed within the contemporary culture and socially and politically mutable world. Besides, these novel myths blur the boundaries among culture, caste, and geographical differences by drawing mythology close to global issues.

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### The Relationship Between Solarpunk and Ecofeminism



Meltem Dağcı

Solarpunk is a new genre of literature among ecological utopias that started to emerge in the 2010s and is also categorized as post-utopia in the field of science fiction and fantasy. Rather than focusing on the past or the future, this genre depicts utopian cities by considering current society and environmental conditions and creating realistic fictions based on the present. The most striking feature of these depictions is that solarpunk imagines a life to solve the problems of the twenty-first century.

Solarpunk's notion of justice is a tool for understanding capitalism's exploitation of nature. By blending alternative economic systems of capitalism with science fiction, it depicts realistic scenarios aimed at solving the climate crisis and producing enough to meet human needs. The ultimate goal of every solarpunk story, consciously or unconsciously, is the discovery of an equitable distribution of goods, because without equal distribution societies cannot exist in an ecological way. It is essential to rebuild economic and social structures that will create fair bonds in human-nature relations, as well as between people.

In addition to its social and economic characteristics, solarpunk also stands out for its creative depictions of architecture and aesthetics. Concepts such as "brightness" are described in detail, with emphasis on advanced solar technology in the works. For example, the facades of buildings are usually completely covered with solar panels, and structures similar to trees and flowers built into architectural structures occur frequently. These aesthetic designs hide the functional properties of solar panels and bring groundbreaking innovations to the infrastructure systems of cities. The fact that the technical features of the infrastructure systems are provided by renewable energy sources such as solar and wind reflects the desire of the system to be self-sustaining.

Throughout the history of humanity, women and nature have been controlled and exploited by the male-dominated understanding of humanity. This conflation of women and nature is turned into a tool of exploitation by equating a woman's production function with her body and labor and nature's function of providing production. Nature and women are at the center of the same problems in terms of the situations they are exposed to in the process and are negatively affected by these problems. The problems in question are caused by the domination-based understanding of the patriarchal society mentality towards women and nature (Özdemir and Aydemir 273)

The subordination and oppression of women, their inability to have a say over their body, and their unequal position in social roles and responsibilities exist due to the unequal, unjust, and exploitative understanding of the male-dominated system. Since the basis of the inequality and domination system is pervasive, the women's issues have started to be handled with different

approaches in the feminist movement, for example, liberal feminism with gender inequality on the political plane. Every feminist approach deals with gender inequality in a complementary way, such as gender-based wage inequality with Marxist/socialist feminism, racial inequality with Black feminism, gender inequality in internet and technology with cyberfeminism. Thus, feminism gave birth to various feminist branches in the twentieth century, branches that look at women's problem from different perspectives. Due to postmodernism, branches that deal with women's issues in different contexts—such as radical, Marxist, socialist, Islamic, existentialist, cultural, ecofeminism—have developed. Özdemir and Duygu argue that the source of women and environmental problems is the male-dominated understanding, and argues that in a world woven with relations based on domination, an egalitarian, just, non-oppressive, livable life can only be achieved through a feminist approach to environmental problems (Aydemir 1).

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees the connection between the exploitation of the natural world and the oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s with the impetus of second- and third-wave feminism alongside the green movement. Ecofeminism combines feminism and environmentalist understanding in the same pot by striving for the solution of natural and environmental problems while struggling with the sexist understanding that feminism struggles with. At this point, it is important to examine the common points of feminism and ecological approaches. I summarize the common points of feminism and ecological approaches as follows:

- Patriarchal domination is associated with rationality and technocratic values, which it holds responsible for the destruction and exploitation of nature. Feminism's criticisms of science and philosophy shaped by a masculine point of view, and criticisms of ecological approaches to the position of human in the ecosystem align. (Soper, qtd. in Üzel)
- According to the common point that both feminism and "Greens" emphasize, the integration of the ecosystem and its interdependence with the human create a necessary relational ethics. This ethic, according to Ruether, "must be an ethic of environmental justice that recognizes the interconnectedness of social domination and domination over nature" (189).
- The reactions of ecologists to the exploitation of nature and their demands for a change in the view of nature are parallel to the demands of feminism, the domination of women and the change of stereotypes associated with femininity. Another common point of ecological view and feminism is that the Enlightenment thought sees nature and animals as lower than human beings and makes them a means of discovery for humans, and that women are positioned lower than men (Soper, qtd. in Üzel 112-113)

Women, who came together to discuss the intersections of feminism and environmentalism, underlined the need to respect women and nature and stated that throughout human history, women and nature were associated and both were kept under pressure (Plumwood 33). As a result of a male-dominated understanding, women and nature are generally chaotic, irrational, and controlled; men, on the other hand, are generally described as rational and controlling beings.

(Aydemir 1). Therefore, throughout history, nature and women have remained under the order and control of men. Ecofeminists argue that this arrangement empowers men and leads to a hierarchical structure that allows the exploitation of women and nature, especially as long as the two are interrelated. King explains the source of women and nature problems in the ecofeminist movement as follows:

Eco-feminism is about the integrity and commitment of theory and practice. It shows the special strength and integrity of all living things. We are a movement that defines women and we believe we have a special job to do in these challenging times. We see the destruction of the land and its assets by corporate fighters and the threat of nuclear annihilation as feminist concerns. It is the masculine mentality that deprives us of our rights over our own bodies and sexuality and has multiple systems of domination to possess them. (King qtd. in Salleh).

The main purpose of ecofeminist research has been to reveal the connections established between women and nature throughout history and to weaken patriarchal domination by criticizing these connections. Ecofeminist activists—women and environmentalists—invite us to work together, to end the hierarchical structures forced on both women and nature, and to end unequal relationships based on domination of one over the other. With the emergence of these ideas, critical voices have emerged among both environmental groups and feminist groups. Environmentalists, within their groups, do not question the patriarchal elements in the environmental struggle; feminists, on the other hand, criticized those who do not question the traditionally assigned relationship between nature and women.

Ecofeminist entrepreneurs point to the contradiction between production and productivity, especially regarding human reproduction, and stand up to the blows inflicted by production on both biological and social productivity, thereby drawing attention to issues and suggesting solutions. (Tamkoç) When radioactivity emerges from nuclear power plant accidents, toxic chemicals and hazardous waste threaten the biological development of the human species; thus, women have become aware of this contradiction in their own bodies and in the bodies of their children. In Western society, nature and women in their homes are polluted by industrial waste, excessive packaging and plastics; third-world women also experience the helpless feeling brought on by a lack of food, fuel, and clean water. Third-world women are also desperately trying to cope with the ecological imbalance created by multinational companies and the consumption industry by preserving their traditional lifestyles.

Women from both worlds can be ecofeminists who take action against life-threatening ecological attacks. Since many societies use the female physiological structure as an excuse to prevent them from walking freely in the society like men, women have naturally stayed at home and specialized in the management of the house and food preparation. Since women have to cope with personal problems and crisis situations at home and in their immediate environment, and their sensitivity skills are developed, they find practical solutions, and their personal and gender

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characteristics reveal women's personal problems and political problems according to the growth and development processes of children. Many women activists reject technology developed by men and stress that they, not the men, have to fight the ill effects of chemical waste. They insist that their protest is a matter of life and death for women, as pesticides sprinkled on vegetables and trees reach pregnant women and children by air and water, and poison causes deaths and miscarriages.

If there is a much more important task for ecofeminists, it is to scientifically examine the reasons why the capitalist system wants to ruthlessly defeat nature. We know that the world desperately needs ecofeminists, since within patriarchal thought, ideologies such as capitalism, militarism and colonialism—that is, a system of relations based on domination—relies on the oppression of women and nature.

Factors that determine the extent to which people will be affected by climate change include social status, gender, poverty, access to resources, and who is in control. It has become questionable how both women and men respond to climate change, to what extent their views are received and supported, and how they contribute to climate change. The fact that women are not represented in decision-making mechanisms reduces the effectiveness of planning, developing, and implementing climate policies. In combating and adapting to climate change, women are unable to influence policies, programs, and decisions that may be closely related to their own life.

It has been widely accepted in recent years that climate change increases existing inequalities, especially gender inequalities, and creates different effects on women and men (Talu). The existence of structural differences between men and women due to gender-specific roles in society, work and family life, the vulnerability of both sexes to climate change, and their capacity to adapt to the impacts all cause social differences according to age, ethnicity, class, income level, religion, and gender. In this respect, it is necessary to consider the unique needs and priorities of each gender in all areas of combating climate change, and not to think that the effects on women and men are limited to short-term effects and behavioral changes. Women and men differ in their perceptions of climate change and the way they deal with this phenomenon.

Gender-based inequalities play a role in increasing vulnerability to climate change. Especially in developing countries, women living in rural areas are among the groups most affected by climate change. Rural women are more dependent on threatened natural resources for their livelihoods, due to their traditional role as primary users of natural resources and working in unpaid agricultural work. As the effects of climate change make the supply of natural resources increasingly difficult, women are more exposed to the negative effects of climate change in their daily lives—for example, in the supply of water and food than men.

The physical disadvantage of women in climate disasters is exacerbated by social norms. Even their clothes create obstacles for women to escape from disasters. In one recent Bangladesh cyclone, women could not run because of their traditional clothing, the sari—which is a long one-piece garment woven from silk or cotton, fitted to the body without the use of stitches, worn

by women in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. The women could not swim and thus died. Also in Bangladesh, the fact that some fathers rescued their sons instead of their daughters for the sake of perpetuating their surname is a striking example of gender inequality that yields to social norms in climate disasters (“Women in Bangladesh”).

The 6th Ambassadors Meeting of the “Women’s SES” project was organized by the SES (Equality, Justice, Woman Platform) Equality and Solidarity Association in cooperation with Operation 1325 in order to make women’s voices more prominent on social media. The project aims to enable more women to be active in decision-making through raising the “Women’s SES,” as well as bringing awareness to issues such as gender equality, social peace and sustainability, reducing women’s poverty, violence against women, women’s participation in politics, and climate justice. It aims to raise awareness with creative social media campaigns to take action on urgent issues such as media freedom and solving the problems of women and girl’s refugees. (SES Equality, Justice, Women Platform)

The climate crisis has a serious relationship with gender. Nature has been metaphorized for years as a consumable, productive entity. It has been long paired with women’s sacrifice, fertility, and productivity. But this is one of the things that the patriarchal thought system produces. The representative of the climate crisis is the patriarchal system itself. If we consider how patriarchal all states and systems are, we can see that the decisions made by the system are in these non-pluralist, non-inclusive institutions where women are not permitted.

Climate justice is one of the most debated topics. Justice and equality do not go together, but simultaneously. Climate justice is also not possible without gender equality. Combating climate change is not possible without gender equality. A climate change struggle without women is unthinkable.

“Young women in Turkey have great entrepreneurial potential. We can use this potential very well. I think women should be supported a little more in this regard. Education is very important here. During the pandemic, everything went online. Increasing the access of young women to online education is very important. Of course, this is also connected with the climate crisis. The first name that comes to mind in the fight against the climate crisis is Greta Thunberg. Greta was able to educate herself on this, and so have I. I am in a position to access resources when I want to read about the climate crisis. But it is very important to raise awareness of the climate crisis among young women who do not have access to education in this way.” (SES Equality, Justice, Women Platform, Speaker: Selin Gören)

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) report, which took two years to prepare, is the largest and most comprehensive study to date on the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on gender-based violence. The report mentions that the rate of forced marriages of girls increases in situations such as famine and hunger caused by climate disasters. Malawi is one of the regions where this situation occurs. Ntoya Sande is one of the girls forced into

marriage at the age of thirteen by her family, who lost their land as a result of a flood. In times of famine in Ethiopia and South Sudan, girls are sold for cattle. (Karakas, 2020)

Juliana Schmucker, Asia regional director of the NGO International Plan, points out that child marriages and forced marriages have increased significantly during the climate crisis. Worldwide, roughly 12 million girls are thought to be forced into marriage as a result of escalating natural disasters. In addition, climate-based disasters seem to increase trafficking in women for forced sex by 20-30%. It was also noted in the report that women fighting for environmental rights received death and rape threats. In the West, it was seen that women working in these fields were exposed to similar threats on social media.

In IUCN's research, which compiles the responses from a total of 300 NGOs around the world, 6 out of 10 participants stated that women living in areas of environmental destruction, women's environmental rights defenders, and women who had to migrate or take refuge in other countries as a result of environmental crises, were exposed to gender-based violence.

When we look at the international agreements that take into account the climate- and women-focused components, almost all of the governments of the world have accepted the global commitments on climate and gender. However, the policies established within the framework of these agreements do not yet contribute to the development of gender-based climate policies at national levels. Creating gender-equal climate policies should be seen as an important opportunity not only to combat climate change, but also to reduce gender discrimination.

As can be seen, gender analysis is strongly needed in areas such as mitigation, adaptation, financing, technology transfer, and capacity building in the fight against climate change. Thus, gender-sensitive priorities and needs should be highlighted. I believe that ecofeminist women/girls are on a similar and common ground of thought in the face of the problems they face, without being imprisoned in the idea of a capitalist and masculine world.

For this, women should have a say in the policies of combating climate change in order to be sensitive to gender at almost every level of government—global, regional, national, or local.

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### Cosmism and Afrofuturism: Life Against Death



Julia Tikhonova Wintner

*Time: Mythological present.*

*Scene: State Museum of Immortality, Moscow, Russia.*

#### Act I, Scene 1

SETTING: We are in a dimly lighted space, spot-lighted large containers on the carpeted floors. These containers preserve cryogenized bodies of people who chose resurrection in the near future. The room is decorated with photos, documents and objects that were related to the dead. These personal objects are “used to restore the personality and individual identity of the deceased. . . . In other words, the Museums of Immortality functioned as a democratized version of Egyptian pyramids” (Groys).

AT RISE: Nikolai Fedorov, (tall, white beard) the CEO of Museum of Immortality is under a lot of pressure. His “Factory of Resurrection” faces problems: the relatives of the deceased demand priority in the resurrection of their loved ones, they also insist on making the resurrection process more inclusive. The technology of resurrection needed permanent repair, financial resources were always insufficient, there was not enough space to resurrect all. Fedorov’s white beard is flowing like a sail under the blows of an approaching storm . . . For a moment, his eyes go blank—he feels that his vision of a great boat—the Earth, carrying the newly resurrected humans, is doomed to sink.

Fedorov (1828-1903), a previously forgotten philosopher and provincial librarian, today is being celebrated as the father of Cosmism (Nesbit).

I was equally surprised that Cosmism, an esoteric teaching derived from Fedorov’s philosophy, has been gaining international attention since 2015, thanks to the single-minded efforts of Russian artist and curator, Anton Vidokle. His fascination with Cosmism started in 2014, and led to *Immortality for All*, a film trilogy that was followed by three additional films: *Citizens of Cosmos* (2019), *The God-Building Theory* (2020), and *Autotrofia* (2021), all infused with exploration of Cosmism in its popularity in different geographical contexts and available on the website of the Institute of The Cosmos—a comprehensive portal documenting international symposiums, publications, and art works that have fashioned Cosmism into a potent movement.<sup>1</sup> Vidokle has successfully leveraged his international profile to draw attention to Cosmism. *Cosmism and Afro-Futurism: Life Against Death* exemplifies the success of his efforts.



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Anton Vidokle, still from *Immortality For All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism (2014-2017)*. HD video, color, sound. 96'. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist. © Anton Vidokle

The growing interest in Cosmism, which might conveniently be understood as a sort of Russian futurism, suggested to me that much could be learned by placing its beliefs beside those of Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism and Cosmism: two cultural movements that are the focus of my work originate in the speculative literature of the early twentieth century. Both movements utilized conventions of speculative writing in pursuit of their respective, unique goals. Afrofuturism challenged the Western tropes of manifest destiny and proposed its own exclusively Black future. Today, Afrofuturism makes a radical call. There will be no justice on this planet as long as it is governed by the white majority. In this way, Afrofuturism completes the journey begun when Martin Luther King said “I have a dream.”

Cosmism, on the other hand, is grounded in nationalism, and religious Orthodoxy that offered Russians a sense of destiny throughout the nineteenth century. The same sentiments are voiced out in today’s Putin governance. Cosmism is the future of the past. Afrofuturism is chasing the future of the futures.

Cosmism’s founder, philosopher Fedorov (impersonated above by the CEO of the Museum of Immortality) was an eccentric polymath, celebrated as the “Socrates of Moscow.” Fedorov proclaimed that death was not natural to humans and that all nations must unite to defeat death, gravity, and nature. His teaching inspired an entire generation of writers, artists and scientists. Alexander Bogdanov followed Fedorov’s Cosmic theory in his novel *Red Star* (1907). The red star is Mars where a prosperous communist society predicated on the exchange of blood as a commodity. Martian society is a system that not only facilitated economic equality but also created an embodied communal existence in which society as a whole was conceptualized as a supra-organism.

Bogdanov continued Fedorov’s ideas of resurrection through his founding of the Soviet Institute for Blood Transfusion in 1926 (“Alexander Bogdanov”). The goal was to create a “new man” through the exchange of blood between the individuals. Both fictionists believed in the

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*Early edition of Bogdanov's Red Star, title page.*

importance of kinship in achieving the ideal state of society: Fedorov through the universal resurrection of ancestors, Bogdanov envisioned a unity that extended into the body itself (Huestis).



*Alexander Bogdanov (pictured with Vladimir Lenin) wrote Red Star, about a Russian Bolshevik revolutionary who visits a communist society on Mars (Credit: Alamy)*

In the same year *Red Star* was published (1908), W. E. B. Du Bois wrote *The Princess Steel*, featuring a megascope that enables the protagonist to transcend time and space and finds a kidnapped African princess made from steel separated from her mother. Du Bois merges references to modern industrial technology with African aesthetics. This short story has been interpreted as a metaphor for the sense of cultural alienation and dislocation caused by slavery. Both books lay down the pre-history of each movement. Both texts appropriate outer space as uncolonized territory but for different reasons. While *The Princess Steel* proposes the proud embrace of the past for African Americans, *Red Star* centers on the collective future and the society

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devoid of individualism. Evidently, for Du Bois and Bogdanov, the fantasy of space travel offered abundant prospects of new economic resources, wealth, and freedom. The unique connections between these writers have remained unexplored and demand further research.

Overall, the artists, poets, and philosophers of the early twentieth century envisioned outer space as a vector to examine various futures. The fuel used for takeoff was an ideology, either Communism or Capitalism. The outer space discovered, however, was free from the political machinations and accessible for manifold visions of reclaiming history and bringing it into the future. In 1994, Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism in his article “Black to the Future” that opened up a polymorphous stream of creativity centered on the Black community’s embrace of the Future.

Afrofuturism is international and diasporic. Its science-driven narratives are being written in London, Lagos, and New York. Afrofuturism is inclusive. All mediums and genres, levels of art training, as well as race and class of the art practitioners, have been welcomed into its visual space. It is intrinsic to the Black culture. It is exotic for the white imagination. Among the very many exceptional Afrofuturists, the New York-based artist Sedrick Chisom is a recent seer. Chisom uses his Afrofuturistic vision to render an apocalyptic and follows the steps of Octavia Butler’s open critique of the white supremacy.



*Sedrick Chisom, The Occidental Tower The Capitol Citadel of The Alt-Rightland was Naturally Situated Over a Lake of Fire,” 2021, oil on canvas, 54 x 68, image courtesy of the artist.*

The artist proposes that all people of color have left Earth. That Earth is inhabited by white people who have succumbed to a contagious disease that has put them at war with each other. In an interview with Sofia Hallström, the artist explains “I wrote a sixty page play about different histories of monstrous races, the intersection between histories of disease and race, miasma theory versus germ theory, the relationship between the wilderness and the relationship between the eugenics.” His painting titled “The Occidental Tower The Capitol Citadel of The Alt-Rightland was Naturally Situated Over a Lake of Fire” (2021) depicts a Tower of Babel-like structure. Chisom responds directly to the storming of the United States Capitol by Trump supporters. He depicts the

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U.S. Capitol as a deserted and degraded Tower of Babel crowned with a burning cross. His work reminds us that post-racial future is still outside of current imaginaries (Hallström).

In contrast, Cosmists are a tight group of highly educated, well trained, white artists.

In this paper I focus only on one film from Vidokle's trilogy, *The Communist Revolution Was Caused By The Sun*, which spans across the time and space of ex-Soviet Kazakhstan. During Stalin's epoch, this republic was used as a mass-labor camp housing up to a million prisoners. The unseen protagonist of this film, notable Russian scientist, Alexander Chizhevsky, is represented by a chandelier being constructed under a blazing sun. Vidokle references Chizhevsky's focus on the meta-historical and poetic dimension of solar cosmology. A woman wearing a white lab overall quotes Chizhevsky: "Sun exerts an influence on the biologic, psychological and social spheres of human activity. Therefore, the Sun influences the rhythm of all historical processes." Towards the end of the film, the voice over describes the scientist's fate: "Following the publication of his study, the scientist was invited to lecture at Columbia University in New York, and nominated for a Nobel Prize in science. Instead, he was arrested and sent to a labor camp. Because one possible interpretation of his work could lead to the conclusion that: the Communist Revolution was caused by the sun."



*Anton Vidokle, still from Immortality For All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism (2014-2017). HD video, color, sound. 96'. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist. © Anton Vidokle.*

These incantations are performed in a soothing voice, as if delivering psychedelic instructions. The narrative oscillates between real and staged footage.

Chizhevsky's imagery is followed by a Muslim cemetery populated by mausoleums in traditional Islamic styles. Two Kazak men are digging a grave; and, later, we enter a slaughterhouse filled with bovine carcasses. The artist conveys a sense of fossilization, and left-behindness. A sense of the impossibility to return to pre-Russian times—of being forever colonized—hovers above the Kazakh steppes that Vidokle films. The wide camera view highlights the vastness of the landscape, suggesting "the master view" and the eye of the colonizer. He suggests that Soviet socialist modernity has destroyed Kazakhstan's indigenous culture. This ex-colonial state is a progeny of the Soviet empire.

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*Anton Vidokle, still from Immortality For All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism (2014-2017). HD video, color, sound. 96'. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist. © Anton Vidokle.*

I am not alone in this interpretation. Overall, Cosmists have been criticized for their detached, potentially escapist, futuristic focus, and their lack of any engagement with the political realities of contemporary Russia. Cosmism is a refuge from the void produced by the cult of neoliberalism. Its oppositional forces mirror the intellectual confusion of the post-Soviet generation. Molly Nesbit calls it “a garden of forking but broken paths” (Nesbit).



*Anton Vidokle, still from Immortality For All: a film trilogy on Russian Cosmism (2014-2017). HD video, color, sound. 96'. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist. © Anton Vidokle.*

Today, Cosmism and Afrofuturism align in the following: The Pandemic’s vast death toll provided a void for affirmative visionary cures. Russian Cosmism promised the abolition of death at a time when thousands were dying. Afrofuturism has been called as a source of survival tools for the Black Americans who are disproportionately impacted by Covid. Police brutality and corruption in both countries imposed an urgent call for emotional healing and radical reimagining of our future. Cosmism represents a savior—a system of belief capable of managing the chaos and despair felt by a large swath of the Russian populace under the Putin governance. Afrofuturism formulates a profound critique of current social, racial, and economic orders. It maps out an alternative (digital) space where the black body would not have its opposite—the white body. The singularity will help to finally dissolve ties to its racialized subjectivity. Afrofuturism actively claims digital space that has not been colonized yet. Fear of global ecological collapse renewed the appeal of Cosmism’s dream of resurrection.

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Afrofuturism has its own answer to the ecology crises. The Institute of Afrofuturist Ecology brought together regenerative farmers, artists, healers, technologists, and academics to advance economic and racial justice and to solve environmental problems.

Both Cosmists and Afrofuturists are speculative narratives fueled by desperate forces of activism and resistance.

Afrofuturism answers the urgent need to imagine possibilities outside of the predominantly black pandemic's death toll and the U.S. prison complex. The only way we can challenge the status quo is by imagining a world where this status quo does not exist.

Afrofuturism offers social justice movements a methodology to test their goals within imaginative new worlds. Afrofuturism does not offer a solution—that's where sustained mass community organizing comes in. It is only through imagining the so-called impossible that we can begin to concretely alter our future. When we free our imaginations, we question everything. Afrofuturism tells us that other worlds are not only possible, but are on their way. We can already hear them, fast approaching.

Cosmism does not challenge the status quo, but perpetuates naïveté, mysticism, and the emphatic nationalism of its ideas. It fills the ideological void that emerged after 1989 at the clash of post-Soviet, Imperial, and neoliberal historical periods. Cosmism is, at best, a place-holder for the day when Russian artists can reclaim the dynamism as leaders of the European avant garde.

If Fedorov could wake up today, he and Afrofuturists would have a lot to learn from each other.

## Notes

1. Autotrofia is simultaneously a documentation of an ancient pagan fertility ritual that is still practiced in this region, and scripted fiction. The scripted content of the film explores the ecological dimension of Russian Cosmism: [https://www.berlinale.de/en/programme/programme/detail.html?film\\_id=202101630](https://www.berlinale.de/en/programme/programme/detail.html?film_id=202101630).

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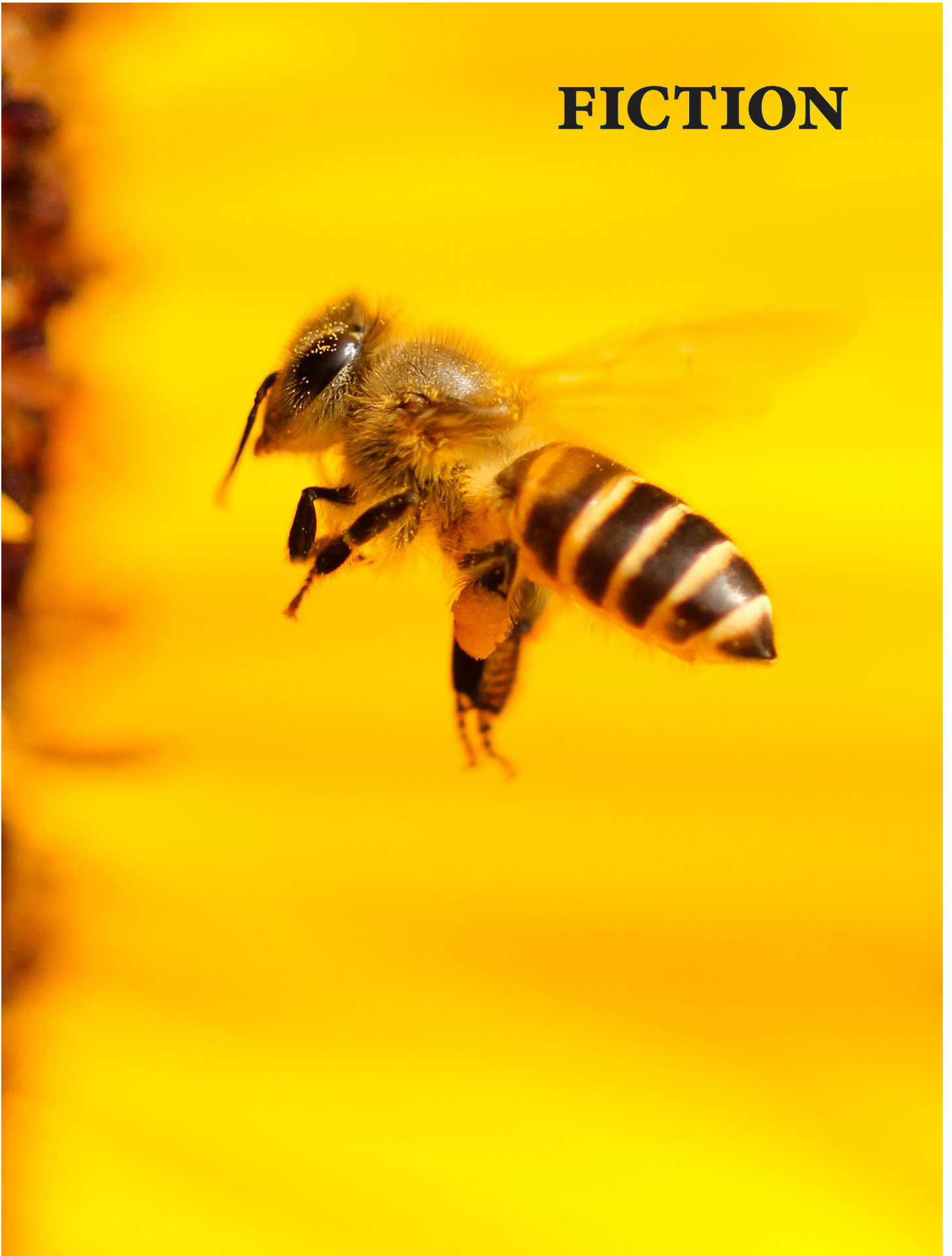
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In her previous position as the director of UCF Art Gallery, Orlando, FL, Tikhonova developed a solid record of multidisciplinary curating and made art a central, highly visible part of academic and co-curricular life on campus. She worked closely with faculty and students, offering the gallery environment as a space to take individual risks and learn to be together both in moments of communion and in those of disagreement. Through her exhibitions and programs, she enhanced the University's core teaching and research mission. Tikhonova was graduated from The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, NY.

# FICTION





# FICTION

## Call for Submissions: Fiction



### The Editorial Collective

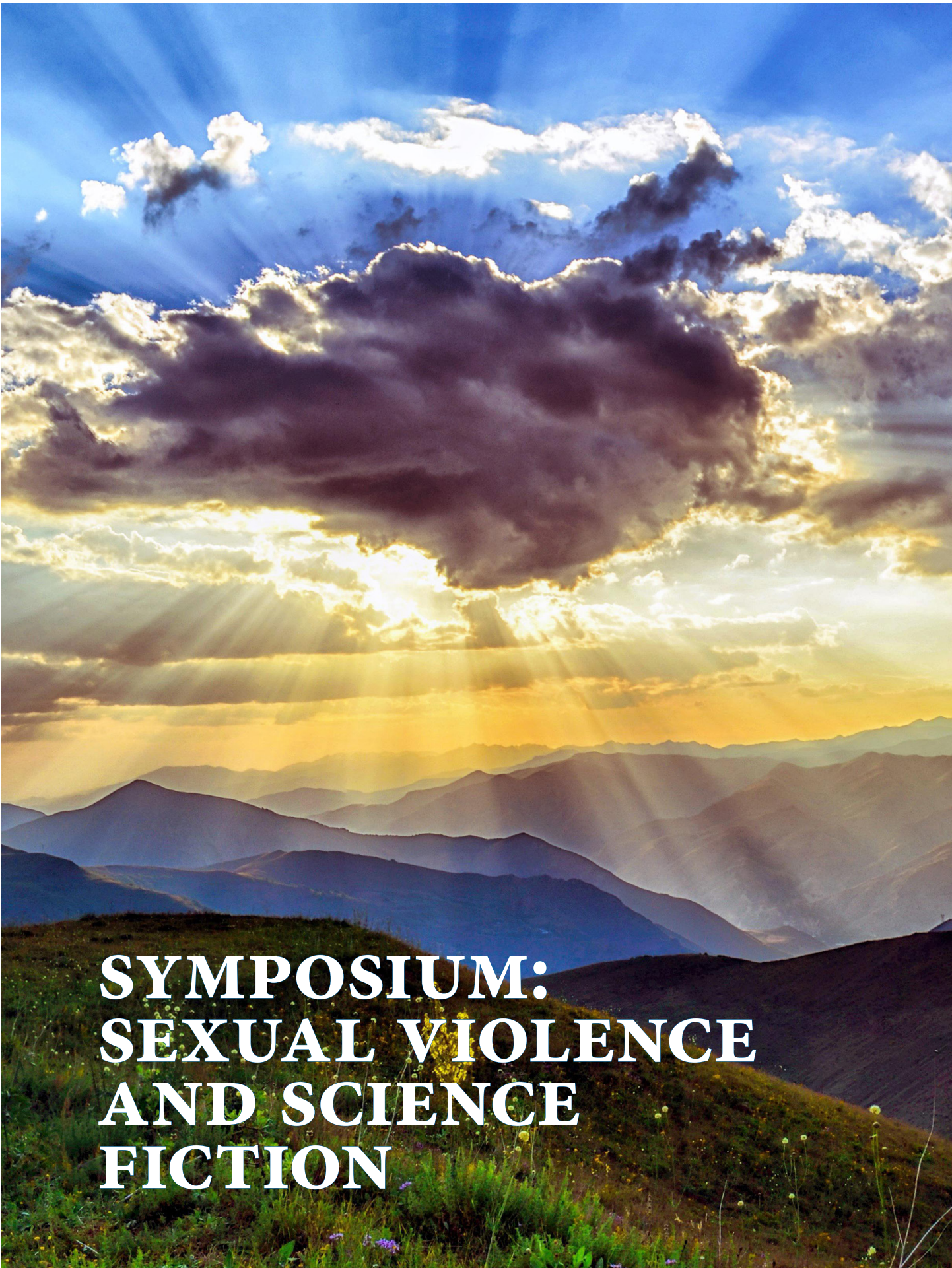
The *SFRA Review* welcomes well-written and carefully edited pieces of short fiction that conform to the following guidelines:

- 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 [sfrev@gmail.com](mailto:sfrev@gmail.com) with the subject "Fiction Submission: Autumn 2022".

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.



**SYMPOSIUM:  
SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
AND SCIENCE  
FICTION**

*Image by Rüstü Bozkas*

# SYMPOSIUM: SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SCIENCE FICTION

## Introduction to Sexual Violence and Science Fiction Symposium



Adam McLain

*Content Warning: The essays in this collection contain, to various degrees, depictions and conversations around sexual violence.*

Sexual violence is a difficult topic to wrestle with because it not only spans literature, media, and culture, but also inhabits various bodies and existences. Its effect is widespread but also personal. It is not only sexual and not only violent but both; it crosses the boundaries between very personal parts of a human being—their sexual organs, their sexual arousal, and their sexual engagement—and harasses it, assaults it, and enacts violence against it. Sexual violence harms individuals and societies—from the initial trauma and the recovery required afterward, to the justice (or lack thereof) that can be provided for such an action, to rape culture and the prevalence of how our society teaches its communities to act and react to each other.

Science fiction—whether it be scientific in nature, or fantastical, or horrific, or speculative—has an effect on society and individuals as well. Through various literary tools, conceits, and tropes, readers discover, learn, and grow from these texts, bringing with them the world they inhabit and experiencing a world different than—yet somewhat similar to—their own. Science fiction acts as a tool that estranges us from issues, like rape culture and sexual violence, that have become so normalized and prevalent that a step back from real life into the science fictional universe is needed to see things in our world for how strange they really are. Science fiction has the potential to bring about great change because of what it does to culture and readers: it gives us hope, it opens our eyes, and it helps us look up to the stars and imagine a world different from the one we currently inhabit. The hope, then, is that these experiences influence our own lives to make a change in the world around us.

This is not to say that science fiction is the thing that will change the world and make it a sexually just and safe place; books are still books, inanimate objects that must be read and understood before they can influence change. It is individuals and communities who must work for that change. But that influence, that perspective change, that science fiction brings is what I hope for when considering the intersection of science fiction and sexual violence. I chose a symposium on the subject because I believe that science fiction can and will help us achieve a more just world by causing us to reflect on the kind of present and future we want to build. Science fiction is a tool that can influence people who can affect their communities and societies. By bringing together scholars who analyze and discuss various points of sexual violence in science fiction, I hope that their insights will bring science fiction into closer conversation with current

efforts toward sexual justice, like the #MeToo Movement, and create an introductory space for those who wish to use their educational or community action space to combat rape culture.

The symposium begins with an overview of post-1990 Chinese science fiction, showing that Chinese authors are using the genre of science fiction to create thought experiments about sexual violence and feminist thought. Following Xi Liu's overview, Eyal Soffer analyzes later texts in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, looking specifically at how Herbert portrayed women's power and authority in relation to sexual dynamics and hierarchies. The symposium turns to dystopian stories next, with Athira Unni's article discussing identity and hierarchy in Jennie Melamed's *Gather the Daughters* (2017) and Ros Anderson's *The Hierarchies* (2021), while Verónica Mondragón Paredes argues about the essentializing of masculinity in Virginia Bergin's *Who Runs the World?* (2017) and Christina Sweeney-Baird's *The End of Men* (2021). Turning from dystopia, the symposium considers horror, post-apocalypse, and space-faring science fiction, with Derek Thiess considering theories around sports in relation to the male body in Michael Swanwick's "The Dead" (1996), Ryn Yee and Octavia Cade dismantling the logic of rape in post-apocalyptic stories, and Julia Lindsay looking at Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987) in light of the #MeToo Movement. Leaving books and films, the symposium hones in on board and video games, with Dax Thomas discussing sex in two tabletop role-playing games, *Pistol Packing Bondage Nuns from Dimension Sex* (2021) and *F.A.T.A.L. From Another Time, Another Land* (2002); Kenzie Gordon debating whether the new *Tomb Raider* games (2009–2022) have an impetus of sexual violence; and Steph Farnsworth arbitrating fan conversations around bodily control in the *Mass Effect* series (2007–). Finally, the symposium ends with a reading of Kristin Cashore's *Bitterblue* (2012) by Cheyenne Heckermann, taking our discussion into a young adult fantasy series that focalizes sexual violence.

While these texts deal with fictional literary conceits, such themes are inextricable from the real harm caused by sexual violence. We recognize those who have survived sexual violence perpetrated against their body, their community, or their society.<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge their pain, their trauma, and the effort it will take to heal—if healing comes, for it does not always. If survivors are reading this collection, know that we believe you and we envision a future for and with you that is better—better with justice, better with care, and better with peace. We thank you for engaging with our topics, and we hope we handled them with care. This topic seems like it will always be difficult to discuss, but we hope that through discussing it, we can come to better understand it in pursuit of a more sexually just world. It is our hope that, in many ways, science fiction will continue guiding us there.

## Notes

1. I use the collective pronoun *we* here because I hope my fellow writers, editors, and readers join with me in acknowledging the various material realities of sexual violence.

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### Stories on Sexual Violence as “Thought Experiments”: Post-1990s Chinese Science Fiction as an Example



Xi Liu

*This paper is the result of the research project “Humanism and Post-humanism in Post-1990s Chinese Science Fiction” (RDF-19-01-20) funded by Xi’an Jiaotong- Liverpool University.*

Science fiction is a unique genre of “thought experiment” that can address different socio-political, cultural, and philosophical issues in the process of imagining the development of science and technology in relation to the human world. Post-1990s Chinese science fiction also actively engages with existing and potential crises of the world we are living in—social, ethical, existential, and psychological—and proposes hypotheses or imaginary solutions. Lots of thematic explorations and artistic innovations in current Chinese science fictional works are ignited by deep concerns with long-existing or newly emergent problems such as globalization, over-urbanization, ecological injustice, class distinction, gender inequalities, and so on. Among these issues, gender injustice and sexual violence remain one special thread for the “thought experiment” of science fiction, as this fantastical genre can serve as an “important vehicle for feminist thought” by representing “worlds free of sexism” or “worlds that move beyond gender” (Helford 291).

Facing the remaining patriarchal thinking influenced by thousands-year-long feudalism as well as resurgent masculinist logic in post-Mao China, different artistic works of contemporary China have produced sophisticated inquiries into different gender issues. Chinese sci-fi writers joined this trend to offer critical views on unequal gender conditions and sexual ideologies. More and more writers, especially those from younger generations, have begun to negotiate with gender stereotypes and to assert female autonomy and agency within their fantastical or speculative works. It has already been discussed by some scholars how post-1990s Chinese sci-fi writers offered bold imaginations of bodily transformation, changing gender roles, new sexual identities, and even a posthuman-feminist world (Liu; Cai; Ma et al.). This article surveys various works of post-1990s Chinese science fiction that sharply render sexual violence and gender asymmetries. This survey serves as an introduction to this much-neglected research topic, showing potential avenues of engagement for future work.

There are several contemporary Chinese sci-fi writers who frequently thematize sexual oppression and violence, especially that suffered by women. Han Song (韩松, b. 1968), Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆, b. 1981), and Wu Chu (吴楚, b. 1984) have represented rape, kidnapping, killing, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and forced sterilization in their works. Those violent deeds are done to human, clone human, or cyborg bodies in the settings of the near or far future, exposing gender inequalities caused by male-dominating powers, with all the victims

bearing the gender of “female.” While Chen Qiufan and Wu Chu use sexual violence as a lens for questioning the intersectional social injustice in contemporary China, Han Song’s works feature a kind of abstract, symbolist sexual violence for reflecting on how human society is structured. Two female sci-fi writers, Zhao Haihong (赵海虹, b. 1977) and Chi Hui (迟卉, b. 1984), have also adopted gender perspectives in their two stories about humanity’s interactions with prehistoric or extraterrestrial civilizations. They both revealed one hidden side of sexual violence imbedded in the human world—epistemic violence marked by delegitimizing subjectivities and agency associated with femininity. This article will focus on the following questions: by representing sexual violence in quite different ways, concrete and abstract, realist and surrealist, historicist and de-historicist, what main agenda and concerns do these Chinese sci-fi works have? What relevant views on science and technology are expressed? Are ideas of humanism and posthumanism articulated and how? By exploring these questions, this paper aims to disclose the current gendered textual politics of these works and elucidate the emerging feminist writing practices in contemporary Chinese science fiction.

### **Representing sexual violence for questioning intersectional inequalities in contemporary China**

Chen Qiufan contends that science fiction is “the biggest realism” in today’s China, as “it provides a window for imagining through its open realism, and for delineating a kind of reality that no mainstream literature has written about” (“Rethinking of sci-fi realism,” 38). Actually, the term “sci-fi realism” (kehuan xianshi zhuyi, 科幻现实主义) has been proposed and discussed by several Chinese sci-fi writers, including Zheng Wenguang, Chen Qiufan, and Han Song since the 1980s, for exploring the role of science fiction in social comments or criticism in the context of contemporary China (Chen, “Rethinking of sci-fi realism”; Zheng). *Waste Tide* (Huangchao, 荒潮, 2013) by Chen Qiufan and *The Happy You Gang* (Xingfu de yougang, 幸福的尤刚, 2020) by Wu Chu are two representative science fiction texts that address the issue of sexual violence in sci-fi realist ways. These two works vividly show how different categories of oppression based on the rural-urban divide, class, and gender determine the intersectional nature of sexual violence in the context of China’s globalization and urbanization.

Chen’s *Waste Tide* is an important Chinese cyberpunk imagining of a technological dystopia engulfed by corrupt local government, patriarchal local lineage, and global capitalist companies. Region, class, and gender persist as unequal social distinctions in a near-future, technology-dominated society, represented most saliently by “Guiyu” (Silicon Island). Migrant workers from underdeveloped regions in China (including the female protagonist Xiaomi/Mimi), wretchedly work as a cheap labor force. “There are multilayered discriminations against Mimi. She is a female repressed by a patriarchal system. She is a waste girl, representing those who are stratified as low class and socially marginalized and exploited by the privileged people at the top of the social pyramid” (Zhou and Liu 107). All these social inequalities are not eased but conversely reinforced by new technologies. The sexual violence Xiaomi suffers is caused by the multiple social distinctions and exclusions. After being subjected to beating, rape, confinement, and electric

shocks, Xiaomi is transformed into a cold-blooded and formidable cyborg Xiaomi 1. It is this evil female cyborg that becomes the central character signifying the technological dystopia challenged by the author.

Sexual violence against women is prevalent due to intertwining patriarchal powers of different kinds: rural and capitalist, structural and symbolic. In this story, male-centrism dominates social spaces as well as cyberspace through new technologies. One example from the story describes this misogynist environment of Guiyu. A video on rape circulating on an underground online forum supported by augmented reality technology is:

recorded in augmented reality glasses, with a strong first-person perspective, shaky, out of focus, but with an uncanny sense of immersion. . . . The first-person perspective technology was used to make everyone watching the video a rapist and experience the thrill of torture. (Chen, *Waste Tide* 165)

This sexual violence against women is transmitted to more people through the new information channel, and the male gaze is enhanced by the new communication technology. In this way, the writer cautions the readers against the possible collusion between patriarchy and technology. However, the cyborg Xiaomi 1 is finally defeated by the human Xiaomi's remaining sense of morality. This positive ending symbolizes the victory of humanist values and ethics (Liu; Jiang).

The story of Wu's *The Happy You Gang* is set in a remote village in "universe 046." This village, although set in the near future, is still a male-dominated area where traditional ideas of female chastity and submissiveness are maintained. Due to the father's genetic physical defect, villagers You Er and Niu Hongmei's first two children die because of anal agenesis. The couple is encouraged to accept a new gene-editing technique to replace the problematic gene in the fetus with genes from other people without the defect. However, after the gene correction operation, the healthy baby, You Gang, is believed by others to be the son of another man and is called a "bastard." You Er is defeated by the gossip and leaves his family. Niu Hongmei is sexually assaulted and verbally humiliated by villagers and ends up becoming a prostitute. When You Er returns, he violently abuses his wife for her supposed disloyalty: "You Er caught up with her from behind and yanked her hard by the hair, kicking her over and low again. You Er stomped on Niu Hongmei's chest and asked her what the hell to do" (Wu 339–40).

The new biotechnology can help this couple give birth to a healthy baby, but can do nothing in breaking the traditional Chinese ethics of blood. It is this rural woman who ultimately bears the consequences of conflicts between modern technology and the remaining patriarchal ideas in the countryside. This reveals how difficult it is for socially marginalized groups including rural women and migrant workers to benefit from technological advancement under unequal social structures in China. The physical violence and mental trauma Niu Hongmei suffered push readers to think about how the development of new technologies may be overshadowed by entrenched sexist ideas and practices.



“To understand gender, then, we must constantly go beyond gender,” as “gender relations are a major component of social structure as a whole” (Connell 76). R. W. Connell reminds us not to discuss issues of gender/sex only within the framework of gender/sex but to regard them as integral parts of a larger social system. Pierre Bourdieu also calls our attention to the role that complicated structures of domination play in reinforcing violence. If the social conditions of the production of unequal power relations are not dismantled, then mere consciousness raising for the dominated is inadequate for ending violence (Bourdieu). Meanwhile, the perspective of “intersectionality” is an important analytical category for understanding violence, which emphasizes the intertwined structures of domination that produce racialized/classed/gendered/sexualized violence within nations (Abraham; Collins). With the help of these insightful perspectives, it can be seen that the thematization of sexual violence in the aforementioned two texts points to larger, intersectional social problems in contemporary China. Realist experiences of subaltern women who are constantly devalued and downgraded are used for revealing and reflecting on the resurgent regional, class, and gender inequalities along with rapid globalization and urbanization. Different subaltern women are imagined not to be empowered by scientific development and new technologies. Stories on sexual violence help to expose different hierarchical social orders and social justice, especially gender justice sought with the specific genre of science fiction.

### **Symbolizing sexual violence for reflecting on humanity and human society**

Han Song is one of the leading sci-fi authors in China and is famous for his Kafkaesque, uncanny, and eerie writing style. His sci-fi works usually convey critical comments on the huge social changes and human cost incurred in post-Mao China. His story *Regenerated Bricks* (Zaishengzhuan, 再生砖, 2010), for example, is a story about how the remains of human flesh after one earthquake helped China to conquer the universe, but criticizes the huge human cost in the rise of China; similarly, *Subway* (Ditie, 地铁, 2010), is a story about people stuck in alienation, despair, and conflicts in fast-speed, public vehicles in order to comment on asymmetries between economic development and psychological wellbeing of ordinary people. Gender is used as key textual tropes for Han Song to signify dystopian post-human worlds and to express his deep reflections on humanity and society. This section discusses two sci-fi works by Han Song that deal with sexual violence.

“Dark Room” (Anshi, 暗室, 2009) is a dark and pessimistic story about a war for equal status and rights between the world of unborn fetuses and the world of adults. The former is a peaceful, contemplative, connected, and reflective community, trying to fight against the latter, which is totalitarian, violent, and patriarchal. Both sides are constructed as masculine, while women (mothers) remain subordinate and victimized in these masculine power struggles. No matter which part wins the war in the end, women (mothers) are manipulated and sacrificed.

It was mainly the decision of older men, because for young lives, only people of this age would not be matronly. In short, during that time, tough measures were taken in principle

against every pregnant woman, and it was better to kill a thousand by mistake than to miss one. ... Later, people resorted to more than just forced abortion. The resentment of society, which was like wildfire, was also spread against the mothers themselves. It seemed inevitable that mothers would always be unable to defend themselves in the event of a change, and that they would once again become victims in this man-led war. (Han 32)

The bio-politics of birth control are used in the story as an effective tool for male domination. In a surrealist way, this work vividly portrays how women's bodies are manipulated for power in the story world, as an allegory of the gendered nature of power struggle in the reader's world.

Similarly, "A Guide to Hunting Beautiful Women" (Meinü shoulie zhinan, 美女狩猎指南, 2014) also addresses the problem with male-dominated bio-technology. In the story, beautiful clones are created and put on an island for male consumption in a game called sex hunting, which recuperates the sexual abilities of men and restores their masculinity. After inventing this "game for true men and exercise for winner" (Han 277), this hunting club:

provides guests with a first-class beauty, not in a room but out in the wild. Women are constantly running like beasts, to be captured by the men themselves; the captured can be treated in any way, including rape. As women hold weapons in their hands, the men who are not capable of capturing them may be killed. In the face of danger, men can take extreme measures against women, including shooting them on the spot. (Han 277–78)

However, although this island is full of male predators raping and killing beautiful clones, it ultimately becomes a suitable place for female liberation. The beautiful clones form a community and enjoy autonomy in their daily life, especially the social relationships free of male-defined obligations.

This group of women live in an extremely pure way, where social roles like mother, housewife or professional woman disappear. Thus, hidden behind the bloody killing, isn't it a new and highly promising human relationship? It is only here that women truly achieve their liberation. (Han 352)

In the end, the male protagonist, Xiaozhao, who came to the island to be stimulated, finally becomes frustrated because of the diversity and complexity of this "female world." He castrates himself and embraces a "gender neutral" identity. The ending of the story is meaningful in its attempts to deconstruct gender binarism, which is arbitrary and violent.

Different from Chen Qiufan's and Wu Chu's works (which have a strong realist relevance to social transformations in China), Han Song's dystopian post-human worlds have more symbolic meanings supported by his use of unruly language, cold tone, and non-realist imagery. Together, these writing skills create defamiliarizing effects and push readers to decipher the main concerns of these works. Similar to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours*, rivalry, conflicts, and violence within human relations are rendered as gendered or sexualized. Using Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman's perspective on how "violence is

actualized—in the sense that it is both produced and consumed” (2000 2), we can see how these stories visualize that male subjectivity is constructed on the violent “othering” of female gender. Sexual violence is based upon the binary and hierarchical relationship between the masculine and the feminine. Hunting women for entertainment or social control is potentially symbolic of the organization of real human society, with women usually being exploited and objectified for the interests of men. Rather than historicized realities, the signifiers of “sexual violence” in Han’s works are more like an overall comment on the development of human civilization, which are male-centered.

### **Deconstructing epistemic violence in female-authored sci-fi works**

Zhao Haihong and Chi Hui are two Chinese female writers who express strong feminist impulses in their sci-fi works. Both of them created fabulous stories about the communication and interaction between humans and beings from prehistory or outer space. Although there is no explicit plot of sexual violence in their works, they both show how gendered violence can be exerted epistemologically, such as delegitimizing “knowledge” associated with femininity. In *Feminist Science Fiction and Feminist Epistemology: Four Modes*, Ritch Calvin argues, “The category of femininity, and the social and cultural traits associated with femininity in the West, have been discounted as contrary to knowledge and to reason or rationality, and, therefore, women qua women cannot claim knowledge or offer truth claims” (229). By imagining conflicts between humans and other forms of life, two stories by these female writers demonstrate a science fictional approach to how the normative way of understanding what is knowledge in the human world is both anthropocentric and masculinist.

“Jocasta” (Yi E Ka Si Da, 伊俄卡斯达, 1997) by Zhao Haihong is a story about a female scientist’s self-sacrifice for scientific experiment by serving as the surrogate mother of an embryo cloned from a prehistoric human body. Her female body is exploited while her love and affections are devalued as non-rational by other male scientists. The male collaborator of the female protagonist emphasizes her loss of “rationality” in the experiment:

Melanie, everything we do is for science; you must not get emotionally involved. I am in no way trying to exclude you from the experiment in order to enjoy the results alone. From beginning to end, you are the greatest contributor to this experiment. But, Melanie, you now harbor a motherly affection for this child—this prehistoric man—that will be harmful to our experiment because you will not be able to face him with a calm, rational, scientific mind. (Zhao 23)

The male scientist employs Melanie’s female body for conducting the experiment, but delegitimizes her motherly devotions and emotions. This is an implicit sexual violence in exploiting women’s bodies while disqualifying their subjectivities. Melanie resists this opinion with strong agency. She still develops a romantic relationship with this prehistoric man and accompanies him until his death, saving this man from becoming just the research object of a scientific experiment. The story challenges this idea of non-rationality by valorizing women’s

experiences of connection, affection, and care as important values for scientific exploration. This work aims to break down the gendered and hierarchical value systems of emotion/reason and caring/transcendence in the context of scientific research.

Chi Hui's "Nest of Insects" (Chongchao, 虫巢 2008) also addresses the gendered epistemic violence deeply rooted in the human world. She imagines a planet named Tantatula that has a harmonious symbiosis of all species based on equality and connection. But humans from Earth just want to colonize this planet for its natural resources, and they do not treat the lives of this planet as equal "intelligent beings" because of the matriarchal social structure of Tantatula.

For the creatures of Tantatula, life is divided into hatchling, child, and adult. In the hatchling stage we learn and we grow; in the child stage we give birth and we live; and in the adult stage we need to come to the nest, to change and grow in the resonant call of the nest and our bodies, and finally to become what you call a Tantatula giant worm and plunge into the universe—this is what we call the third season, the adult season. (Chi 62)

The racialized violence of colonization is deeply rooted in an epistemic violence justifying a series of male-dominated power structures. This violence is also gendered in that the matriarchal social system is despised and devalued from the masculinist perspective of the Earth colonizers. They refuse to understand the different social arrangements that have females as decision makers. Moreover, gender-based violence is normalized as part of masculinity for Earth colonizers. The epistemic and psychological violence has finally brought explicit violent actions including killing. However, these different forms of violence are questioned and resisted by the lives of this planet. One female resident from Tantatula expresses her doubts on the violent ideas and deeds by visitors from Earth:

I once wondered why a passing visitor would commit such a crime against us. Today I still wonder why a male would encourage his own son to commit crimes and violence, and then would commit his own tree to his son's care? (Chi 60)

There is no need to be afraid of what you do not understand. This is not the monster you imagine in your mind, this is just the process of evolution of our Tantatula people. (Chi 62)

In the end, the male protagonist from the Earth begins to reflect on the anthropocentric and androcentric way of living and thinking of the Earth civilization, especially his belief in the "natural superiority" of humans. "Through science-fictional imagination, the writer proposes a view that human species from Earth are just like well-protected children and have no idea about the adult world in outer space. At the end of the day, they must face the consequences of being self-centered, which is significantly exacerbated by technological advances" (Zhou and Liu 105). "Adult season" in the story could signify the deep connections with nature instead of segregation or exploitation of it, which is highly necessary for human society.

Calvin proposes that sci-fi works with feminist epistemology can “challenge the arbitrary division between rational and irrational; they value the rôle of the senses in knowledge validation; and they emphasize the importance of the body in producing and validating knowledge; they acknowledge the communal (subjects; discourses) over the individual” (237). Within the above two works, epistemic violence embodies different forms of knowledge production that deny the subjectivity of particular populations (women, extra-terrestrial). The epistemic violence is gendered in that “the social and cultural traits associated with femininity”(Calvin 229) are devalued while structural gender inequalities are maintained. These two female authors firstly expose and interrogate this violence in their stories and then explore complex forms of resistant subjectivities. They assert their political ideas by creating fantastical or utopian worlds in sharp contrast to the human world.

### **Conclusion**

This paper surveys contemporary Chinese sci-fi authors who represent sexual/gender violence within the specific genre of science fiction. All the works discussed above presented utopian or dystopian worlds with diverse styles of cyberpunk, science-fiction realism or postmodernism. Multilayered forms of sexual violence as well as their complex effects are explored in their works. Centering on the tragic sufferings of sexual violence by subaltern women, sci-fi realist writers like Chen Qiufan and Wu Chu strongly question the existing, intertwined inequalities in terms of gender, class, and the rural/urban divide in post-Mao China. Han Song tactfully employs an abstract sexual violence in his post-modernist thematization of the unequal power relations in terms of how society is organized and male subjectivity constructed. Female authors like Zhao Haihong and Chi Hui effectively deconstruct the masculinist and violent ways of knowledge production and sanctions while exploring possibilities of feminist epistemology. All of these Chinese sci-fi writers set their human or post-human utopias and dystopias in a gendered environment in order to critique the present-day gendered power relations.

The specific genre of science fiction is viewed by Darko Suvin as “cognitive estrangement” for providing an alternative imaginary framework for the writer’s empirical world (373). Therefore, science fiction serves as a perfect platform for writers to launch their thought experiments of understanding, criticizing and creatively transforming the status quo. Through creating sci-fi works, the Chinese writers discussed in this paper all successfully stir the readers’ conventional or normative way of understanding gender/sex, pushing them to reflect on violence in current gender/sex system and to imagine new possibilities in gender relations/identities. Chen Qiufan and Wu Chu set their stories in near future China to blur the boundaries between harsh realities and fantasies; Han Song’s surrealist rendering of violent gender struggle and violence bring much insights through defamiliarization; Zhao Haihong and Chi Hui create alternative utopia structured by feminist epistemology and make readers to see world they are living in different angles. All of these sci-fi works become, in Suvin’ sense, “a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and-more important-a mapping of possible alternatives” (378) of/to the current male-centered and anthropocentrist ways of doing and thinking.

What's more, Anna Gilarek proffers two approaches of creating feminist science fiction: firstly an exaggerated method utilizing fantastical elements such as "invented worlds, planets, moons, and lands" for reflection on social problems, and secondly a more straightforward approach of "relying on realist techniques to convey the message about the deficiencies of our world and its social organization, in particular the continued inequality of women" (222). The above-discussed Chinese sci-fi writers have incorporated these approaches for problematizing different forms of sexual violence and probing into possible methods of negotiation and resistance. Their artistic explorations and philosophical proings are not just on China-specific issues, but point to problems in a global context. Feminist perspectives of using science and technology for social justice instead of reinforcing unequal power relations are actively explored in these texts. The feminist agenda of opposing male-centrism and anthropocentrism as well as multiple social inequalities are strongly asserted in their sci-fi works, which are all critical stances in this genre of "thought experiments."

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### The Dune Universe And Sexual Violence: An Ongoing Struggle



Eyal Soffer

Frank Herbert's *Dune* was first published in 1965 and quickly became a best-seller; on 18 June 2022 it was the number one on the *Washington Post*'s list of mass market paperback bestseller list. It takes place ten thousand years in the future, telling the political struggle between Great Houses over the Emperor's throne. As is the case with many of the thought-provoking ideas presented in the *Dune* series, such as ecology (Gough, Parkerson), technology (Grazier), and messianic passions (Mulcahy, Minowitz, List), so too does the treatment of feminism (Hand, Carrasco) and sexual violence push the boundaries of its contemporary concepts. Herbert published *Dune* in 1965, but the final two books in the series, *Heretics of Dune* and *Chapterhouse: Dune*, were published almost twenty years later, in 1984 and 1985, respectively. During this period, Herbert reflected upon his initial ideas and developed them further. First and foremost, as he proclaimed in interviews, Herbert intended to warn the public of all-too-powerful leaders (O'Reilly, Timothy, and Herbert).<sup>1</sup> However, this is one of many issues around which the series revolves.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, Herbert's correspondence with Asimov's *Foundation* series (Grigsby) garners similar scholarly attention. As Grigsby claims, Herbert opposed Asimov's belief in technology and imagined war against thinking machines (the Butlerian Jihad) as a central tenet for his story. Following the Jihad, humans had won the war thousands of years before the story begins. This victory set humanity on a path of relying on human abilities and improving them to almost supernatural levels. Some examples are the Guild Navigators, who use the Spice Mélange to see the future and twist time and space, and the Mentats, the human computers.

More importantly, this estranging device enabled the fictional creation of the Bene Gesserit in the first novels and added the Honored Matres in the final two novels. These matriarchal organizations train their women-only members to exert supernatural control over their bodies and minds. These supernatural human characteristics, while setting them apart as a subset of women, also add meaning to sexual violence, exploring it in rearranged social constructs. In the tradition of 'what if' questions that lead many science fiction writers, the *Dune* series asks "What if women could subdue men? Would sexual violence still exist? What would it look like?" Taking into account that up until 2012, the FBI defined rape as "forcible rape" (Freedman 1), the rapist's physical dominance is seen as an indication of carnal knowledge against one partner's will. When one person can physically force him- or herself against another person's will, then it is rape or sexual violence.

Liam Murray Bell, Amanda Finelli and Marion Wynne-Davies discuss theoretical perspectives, literary history, and textual analysis of sexual violence in literature. They firstly focus on how accounts of rape in culture, from ancient myths to popular culture, normalised

rape, framing it as “a quest to achieve victory” (Wynne-Davies et al. 53). Next they show how women try to move away from the victim position to a more powerful position of agency, where their voice is heard in texts written by men (Chaucer, Shakespeare and Wordsworth) or women (Carter and Bell). They analyse two texts (Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Ever* (1977) and Liam Murray Bell’s *rubber bullet, broken glass* (2011)) which host various manners of sexual violence perpetrated by men and women. Their conclusion is that “at times that attempt to attain independent subjectivity leads to women becoming perpetrators of sexualized violence themselves” (Wynne-Davies et al. 67). They question whether women truly gain independence by perpetrating sexual violence, a question the *Dune* series engages with also. This text explores this question in three scenes from the series.

The first one is Jessica and Paul’s escape scene. After being defeated by Harkonnen and Imperial forces, the Atrides lose control over the planet Arrakis, Dune. The Duke is captured, and Jessica, his concubine, and Paul, her son, are taken to the desert to be killed and gotten rid of. In this scene, Jessica exhibits one supernatural attribute which every Reverend Mother among the Bene Gesserit masters, but which no man should obtain: The Voice.

Even though the Bene Gesserit are a secretive organization, some of their abilities are acknowledged and appreciated, such as truth saying and The Voice. The latter refers to the ability to command without resistance through a “direct access to another character’s subconscious” (Mack 44). That is, a Reverend Mother can voice command anyone who is not a Bene Gesserit and they would obey without hesitation, as in the following: “*the deaf one*, Jessica thought, studying the scarred face. *The Baron knows I could use the Voice on any other man*” (*Dune* 195). And so, when Jessica and Paul are taken to the desert to die, her mouth is gagged, fearing that she would order the guards to release her and Paul. Moreover, one of the guards is deaf who can read lips, to act as a safeguard against The Voice.

The first hint of sexual violence appears in the guards’ conversation on the flight to the desert: “Sure do seem a shame to waste a good-looking woman like this,” Scarface said. “You ever have any highborn types?” He turned to look at the pilot” (Herbert 198). The two guards continue this conversation. Scarface is the deaf guard who holds a gun to Jessica and Paul, and the other guard is the pilot.

However, Jessica has trained Paul in the Bene Gesserit ways, one of which is the use of The Voice. She is concerned about whether Paul can use The Voice correctly and this is tested in the climactic moment where the earlier discussion of sexual violence comes into fruition: “Czigo [the pilot, the other guard who is not deaf] tuned, said: ‘Ah-h-h look.’ He reached out for Jessica’s skirt. ‘Remove the gag,’ Paul commanded” (Herbert 199). Once this obstacle is taken out of the way, Jessica’s hidden talent is exhibited. She says “Gentlemen! No need to *fight* over me.’ At the same time she writhed sinuously for Kinet’s [Scarface] benefit” (Herbert 200). She continues and makes sure that Kinet, the deaf guard, can read her lips, “Is any woman worth fighting over?” (Herbert 200). The narrative immediately answers this question: “By uttering the words, by being there, she

made herself infinitely worth their fighting" (Herbert 200). In doing so, Jessica encourages both guards to fight over her, and while Kinet strikes first, Czigo is prepared for his attack and stabs him in the chest.

At this point, Jessica and Paul's hands and feet are still bound, and the deaf guard is dead. Jessica convinces Czigo to let Paul run to the desert with his hands still tied, explaining that she would be more receptive when she knows her son is alive. Czigo complies and once he releases Paul's legs, Paul kills him with a kick to the heart.

Sexual violence is apparent here on several levels. First, after being condemned to death by the sandworms in the desert, the guards/ executioners realize that, in addition to her life, they control her sexually. Moreover, raping her elevates their social status because she is highborn. In addition, because she is condemned to death, they would not have to worry about any repercussions resulting from her rape. Lastly, Susan Brownmiller identified the fascination with rape as a way to achieve victory ("when a man 'conquers the world, so too he conquers the woman' (Brownmiller 1975: 289)" quoted in Wynne-Davies et al. 53), and so it seems almost self-evident to the guards that they should rape Jessica.

Jessica, for her part, seduces them with The Voice and even hints with her behavior that she prefers the deaf guard, Kinet, by writhing towards him. Czigo gets her hidden message and is prepared to kill Kinet once the opportunity presents itself. Here Jessica begins to turn the tide on sexual violence, utilizing the promise of sex to eliminate her would-be attackers. After Czigo kills Kinet, she manipulates him with the promise of being more receptive to him if he lets Paul go. Knowing that she trained Paul to kill just with his feet, as she herself can do, convincing/ordering Czigo to unshackle Paul's legs means Czigo's own death sentence.

This scene hints at the transformation in the power structure between men and women in *Dune*. Men rape after battles, but in this case, this concept and the Bene Gesserit's mental and physical superiority results in the death of the would-be attackers. Still, Jessica's behavior, while reversing her own death sentence, perpetuates the view that women are part of the spoils of war for men, since most women do not master Bene Gesserit's skills. Being so unique in their powers highlights the powerlessness of other women.

I would like to juxtapose this scene with a scene from *Heretics of Dune*, which explores similar issues from a different perspective. In this novel, two matriarchal orders, the Bene Gesserit and Honored Matres, compete over universal domination. The Honored Matres are stronger in force and numbers, and the Bene Gesserit know they fight a losing battle. Their plan is to use a ghola, a replicated mentat and warrior who was the emperor's closest advisor for more than three millennia, Duncan Idaho, to fight against the Honored Matres. The scene I would like to focus on occurs towards the end of the novel, and is also an escape scene. The Reverend Mother of the Bene Gesserit, Lucilla, and the Bene Gesserit army general, Burzmali, need to disguise themselves as a 'playfem' of the Honored Matres and her client passing through a city on their way to the escape spaceship. Some truths about the Honored Matres are revealed in this scene. First, they have sex

with men for money. Thus, Lucilla has to have sex with Burzmali, who is disguised as a manual laborer, so that her disguise as an Honored Matre would be authentic. Moreover, it is explained that each sexual act has a different price according to the Honored Matre training level (Herbert 362).

This scene ends with Burzmali standing naked behind Lucilla, waiting for her to undress and join him. "Filling Lucilla's thoughts was an angry realization: "This should be the ghola here now!" (Herbert 365) Lucilla is angry because she was tasked to seduce the ghola, Duncan Idaho, and imprint him with loyalty to the Bene Gesserit. An additional planned result was awakening the dormant memories of the ghola. As the narrative explains, each replica of Duncan Idaho is raised from infancy to adulthood without having memories of previous lifetimes, and a significant event or trauma, awakens these past memories. Lucilla's task was all that in addition to guarding Duncan, since previous gholas were assassinated.

This scene exemplifies several sexually violent acts. Before addressing Lucilla's position, I would like to point out the origin of the ghola. A nation called the Bene Tleilax offers the service of generating newborn babies out of dead people's cells. This process is secret and no foreigner is allowed to witness it. Moreover, the only Bene Tleilaxu characters in the narrative are men, and the absence of Tleilaxu women is highlighted. Eventually it is revealed that Tleilaxu women are birthing tanks, used for pregnancy and delivery by demand (Herbert 446). They are reduced to a single position, wombs, and that is done mechanically with genetic engineering. They do not even exist in name as people but are dubbed Axlol tanks. It is an extreme act of sexual violence where women are erased, dehumanized, and treated as tools and not as independent members of society.

Bene Gesserit Imprinters and breeders, like Lucilla, are similar in some ways but also different in several important respects. They are Reverend Mothers, whose genetics are signaled by the Eugenics Plan of the Order. This plan spans over thousands of years and its goal is to produce the perfect man who will redeem humanity. The genetics specialists who manage it task specific Reverend Mothers with seducing specific men. Reverend Mothers can choose the gender of their child according to the genetics experts' requests, and after delivering the baby they give it away to be raised by other members of the Bene Gesserit. Darwi Odrade, for example, is said to have birthed fourteen children for the order. However—and this marks a huge change from Tleilaxu women—Odrade becomes the Mother Superior of Bene Gesserit, which means that she is not seen as only a breeding force for the order, but as an active and valuable member who offers all of her talents to serve her matriarchal organization.

And so, Lucilla is bred and trained for this position, seducing men for the eugenics plan. She aspires to do that because she believes it would better humanity. She is willing to give up her free choice on whom to sleep with and whose children to have, let alone choosing whether to raise them or not. This is sanctioned because her organization is matriarchal and as such should promote and protect women, but when regarding these forced sexual choices, they are acts of violence. Lucilla's anger at being forced to sleep with Burzmali instead of Idaho only highlights

her indoctrination as a sex worker in the guise of promising humanity's future. Later on, when she contemplates being ushered into sleeping with Burzmali, she realizes that she hates Burzmali and the planet: "It galled her to feel dependent. She was a Reverend Mother! She was trained to take command in any situation, Mistress of her own destiny" (Herbert 433). These reflections point to her own understanding that even with her supreme training and physical control, she still ends up serving men's sexual pleasures.

Estelle Freedman shows how seduction in the nineteenth century was considered sexual violence because it usually involved men who seduced young women to sleep with them (Freedman 35). These women's reputations were tarnished and they would end up on the fringes of society. As a result, lawmakers constituted several laws against seduction and breach of promise, which were different than laws referring to rape, which was defined as a criminal act, unlike seduction which was defined as a civil offence (Freedman 38). At some point in the 20th century, these laws were expunged. While the Bene Gesserit seduce men for the sake of their eugenics plan, the Honored Matres openly claim they do it to control men. The following scene explores this process, when Miles Teg, a Bene Gesserit army commander, is captured and brought to be interviewed by a senior Honored Matre.

She demonstrates their use of sex as a means of control on the local Honored Matre general on Gammu, the planet Lucilla, Duncan, and Teg are trying to escape. She calls herself a banker, and after another Honored Matre had sex with the Honored Matres' general Muzzafar, she describes it as making a deposit. Teg has met Muzzafar at the beginning of the scene, and when Muzzafar enters again, Teg notices that he looks as if he is drugged. The Honored Matre then elaborates: "In essence," she said, "power such as ours is allowed to become the substance of survival for many people. Then, the threat of withdrawal is all that's required for us to rule" (Herbert 472). When she asks Muzzafar whether to 'withdraw' their deposit, he wishes it would continue and trembles as if he is a drug addict being denied his drug.

Thus, for the Honored Matres, sex becomes a currency with which they control men. While they enslave men they also enslave themselves in this perpetual cycle of aspiring to achieve more political power through sex and selling their bodies for that. As with Bene Gesserit, no one is forcing them physically to have sex with men; they choose to do so. But the system in which they operate, their matriarchal organization, employs subtle forms of sexual violence. No one forces a young woman to join the Honored Matres, and once she joins, no one forces her to sleep with men for money. It is the social-cultural norms of their society that set her on this path where a woman's worth is measured by her seductive and sexual skills. Thus, even in this advanced imagined universe where subsets of women exhibit supernatural abilities, women are still the subject of sexual violence, regardless of which gender rules.

These three scenes follow the paradigm of sexual violence discussed at the beginning, where women move from the victim's passive position to the active perpetrator. In the first, Jessica begins the scene in the most passive position possible, bound and gagged, and ends it when

the two would-be attackers are dead, one killed by the other and the last one killed by her son. In the second scene Lucilla is an omnipotent Reverend Mother who, in her attempt to escape death, assumes an identity of an Honored Matre who performs sex for money. Lucilla is coerced to sleep with Burzmali to support her disguise, and so, even though no one can physically force her to have sex with Burzmali the social constructs of her disguised identity lead her there. In addition, her identity as a Bene Gesserit Imprinter implies that as an official seducer she performs sexual violence by seducing men. The last scene signifies the far end of the sexual violence scale women perform to men, when an Honored Matre exemplifies how she subdues Muzzafar, an army general, with sex. In this final scene women are the active agents—the Honored Matre who narrates the situation and the Honored Matre who imprinted Muzzafar.

## Notes

1. “I had this theory that superheroes were disastrous for humans, that even if you postulated an infallible hero, the things this hero set in motion fell eventually into the hands of fallible mortals. What better way to destroy a civilization, society or a race than to set people into the wild oscillations which follow their turning over their judgment and decision-making faculties to a superhero?”
2. Herbert stated that he read more than 200 books as background before writing.

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### Rape and Hope: Consolidating Identities and Hierarchies in Contemporary Feminist Dystopias



Athira Unni

Many scholars argue that women were sidelined in science fiction as “sites of desire” until the 1980s when after the Second Wave Feminism of the 60s and 70s, there was a brief attempt in shaping women characters as active sidekicks with a compassionate female gaze through which the suffering of the male hero “can be visualized” with compassion (Kac-Vergne 4). However, representations of sexual violence in contemporary dystopian fiction written by women have been illuminating of female subjugation and gender hierarchies that were only alluded to in earlier works. In Jennie Melamed’s dystopian novel *Gather the Daughters* (2017), young girls on an island cult are abused physically and sexually by their fathers, while in Ros Anderson’s *The Hierarchies* (2021), the use of sex robots for pleasure is questioned. Both these novels deliberately break from representations of women as props or sidekicks in science fiction and actively shed light on sexual violence against women. While doing so, these dystopian narratives acknowledge the political subtext of rape, an invasive act of embodied power used to maintain sexual and political hierarchies. In this paper, I argue that sexual violence in these texts is integral to constituting identities and maintaining social hierarchies, both being complementary acts to create and sustain conflict. I propose that these contemporary feminist dystopian texts explore human and posthuman subjectivities in relation to sexual violence while normalizing gendered power differentials through cognitive estrangement. Moreover, these texts open up the possibility of expanding the definition of critical dystopias to also perhaps contain texts that do not implicitly have hope as a blueprint or roadmap, but as a distant possibility of recovery for the survivors of sexual violence, not necessarily as an impetus for resistance, but as a space from which to rebuild their lives.

*Gather the Daughters* (2017) by Jennie Melamed portrays “a world in which child abuse has been normalized, even sanctified” (Jarvis 18). The island cult in the novel follows the rules handed down from ten male ‘ancestors’ who established the church and the rule of law. This narrative by the American author of a religious commune pursuing a “fantasy of conservatism” was written during Brexit and might hold some relevance for British readers who see this as significant in terms of the isolationary stance of the island (Moss).<sup>1</sup> Melamed’s storyline is even more haunting when we consider that the author used to work with traumatic children as a psychiatric nurse practitioner (Bianco). She sheds light on the coping strategies of the girls who experience violence and rape. Despite the “biblical horror show” that has incest, orgies, forced marriages and domestic violence at its core, there are “glimmers of hope” in female friendships and teenage girls’ instinct for justice (Bianco). Melamed’s book is, therefore, not a classic dystopian text, but a critical



dystopia, as defined by Tom Moylan, who notes that there are instances of internal revolt and resistance signifying hope in post-1980s dystopian texts that amount to critique of the real world (Moylan 192). The novel is ripe with instances of female trauma where girls are constantly anxious of being abused emotionally, physically, and sexually.

Melamed's polyphonic novel focuses on four adolescent girl narrators, all of them growing up on an oppressive island with no technology or modern conveniences. The island's deceptively simple philosophy of self-reliance masks the sinister underbelly of controlled reproduction and seclusion from the world. Vanessa has a Wanderer father who brings back books from his travels to the 'wastelands.' Caitlin has an abusive father who beats her. Amanda is newly married to Andrew, pregnant and anxious about her daughter, who will have to endure what she did. Janey, the most outspoken ringleader, starves herself to delay adulthood and later inspires rebellion from others. Children are allowed to run wild during the summer with the islanders leaving food outside for them. The prepubescent girls are repeatedly raped by their fathers when young. When they menstruate, they go through the 'summer of fruition,' during which they "get" to choose an adult man to marry. Everyone is required to have two children, but after the children grow up and get married, the older residents are required to drink the 'final draft' to make space for the young. Disabled children or 'defectives' are killed, and the outside world, ravaged by war and disease, is not talked about. The insularity of the island is a major factor in preserving its violent patriarchy. The indoctrination of female submission is religiously ordained and legitimized, as Caitlin tells Rosie: "It's the way it is, the way it's supposed to be. Daughters submit to their father's will, it's in *Our Book*. It's what the ancestors *wanted*" (Melamed 61). The reference to scriptural mentions is a perversion of the even worse representation of rape in Deuteronomy 22: 23-9, which requires the girl who is raped to be betrothed to the rapist or stoned depending on her marital status (Smith 27). The girls are sometimes given 'sleeping drafts' to lessen any pain, and any disobedience is violently punished. Afraid of the prospect of her father visiting her at night, Caitlin goes to sleep "so worked up that she stares out the window for hours," her heart pounding in her chest (Melamed 64). The emotional damage that normalized abuse inflicts upon the girls is evident here.

Propagating sexual violence requires a cognitive understanding and embodiment of authority and power, something that legitimizes violence before it is carried out. In the context of Melamed's novel, the first sexual experience of the girls on the island is rape. They are cognitively expected to associate sex with non-consensual sex with their fathers which further strengthens the authority of the fathers. Even with rape in other contexts, survivors struggle to come to terms cognitively with being violated sexually because power hierarchies might not be clearly apparent and the very act of rape reveals the ugly reality. Sexual violence and rape serve to maintain the social position of survivors in rape narratives which, in turn, solidifies the power differentials and cognitive systems that make rape thinkable (Higgins and Silver 3). This cognitive process is elucidated in textual instances of rape through action of the rapist or the voice of the survivor. Amanda, who begins menstruating just before summer, sees the timing as "fortuitous" since it means that her childhood abuse has ended: "for now Father could not touch her" (Melamed 81). She can "mature and

prepare” for her summer of fruition (81). This is the first time that normalized incest or rape by the fathers is clearly stated in the novel. While analyzing textual instances of rape, it is important to acknowledge the intersections and “inseparability” of “subjectivity, authority, meaning, power and voice” (Higgins and Silver 1). In other words, the politics of rape is inscribed on the text and the body with prior violence of patriarchal myths such as that of physical weakness and mute vulnerability of the survivor. Hence, the aesthetics and politics of rape are the same (Higgins and Silver 1). The aesthetic decision here is the allusion to seasons—summer, winter, spring—that are repeated, normalized, and naturalized in conjunction to rape. The cognitive process that makes rape thinkable here operates to institute power seasonally. The island itself being quite an anti-technological space, the seasons dictate the lifestyle of the islanders, making this seem normal. The language of maturing and preparing is also one that does not allow much of a choice—it is done seasonally and the authority over female bodies is more to do with the seasons and biology.

Rape and incest being alluded to here relatively casually is part of what Darko Suvin calls cognitive estrangement. While incest is a taboo in every culture, child abuse is a heinous reality. The men on the island rape their own daughters in a systematic following of norms in an instance of cognitive estrangement. Cognitive estrangement is encoded in speculative fiction with “style, lexical invention and embedding” creating a sense of the fictive world being dissonant with the reader’s world (Mendlesohn 5). Darko Suvin’s idea is a reworked combination of the Russian Formalists’ notion of de-familiarization and Bertolt Brecht’s notion of alienation effect (Csisery-Ronay, Jr 118). The writing must be subtle in order to bring about this estranging effect while convincing the reader about the normality of this strangeness in the world of the narrative without disrupting the flow of language. Suvin rightly posits that this mode of “recasting of the familiar” has a cognitive purpose to gently jolt the reader into revealing the hidden norms of the real world through means of fictional estrangement (Csisery-Ronay, Jr 118). Amanda alluding to her father finally not be allowed to touch her due to the onset of her summer of fruition is an important direct reference to child abuse. Yet, it is introduced in a casual, subtle, throwaway manner. This embedding of a norm without breaking the language flow is how cognitive estrangement is carried out. The abuse has already happened, keeps happening seasonally, and the survivor is revealing that this is indeed the norm. Introducing a new set of norms in a society where incestuous child abuse is part of the reality, embedded as a seasonal recurrence, invites the reader to reflect on this strangeness.

Amanda reveals how she felt when she was first raped by her father in a heartbreaking monologue to Janey and Janey’s sister, Mary. She talks about her mother hating her and blaming her even though she was not at fault:

The first time it happened, I hurt so badly I thought I was going to die. I thought he was killing me, that I’d done something terrible and was being punished for it. I didn’t know what I had done. And then it was over, and I realized I would live, and I thought, at least I’ll never have to do that again. And then every night. Or almost. The nights it didn’t happen, I wondered if I was dead, if I had finally been able to die. There was nobody to

help, nobody to save me. It became normal, like putting on my shoes or washing my face. And yet every time I lay down, I would remember the first time, and I would freeze, and shake, and stare at the ceiling crying, and he didn't even notice. (Melamed 135)

Amanda's words bring us closer to the visceral reality of rape and the notion of punishment and guilt. Most of the time, female survivors of rape are subjected to scrutiny for "contributory negligence" when assessed with a conservative political morality (Smith 7). The concept of a rape culture is one that normalizes this feeling of guilt and self-blame, making it easier for external parties and the rapist to blame the victim. The metaphorical link between rape and death in Amanda's words is notable, and representations of rape "are consistently linked with death" whether real or social (Smith 35). Rape is often described in terms of the "deepest of human suffering" but is not usually comparable to "physical and brutal loss of life" in reality (Smith 2). Typically, the trauma from rape comes with the feeling of being dishonored and a loss of social status, but that does not have to be always the case when such abuse is normalized as, for example, in the case of sex workers who suffer routine sexual abuse and cannot report it (Smith 27). The visceral fear that Amanda experiences leads her body to freeze and shake as if she were indeed dying. The normalization of the experience and discovering that it happened to every girl further disturbs Amanda, especially with no help coming. The fact that her rapist is her father, a figure of authority responsible for protecting her (according to patriarchal logic), makes the experience even more troubling. Amanda's fear is not any less because she is raped by her father. It is also notable that the normalization of incestuous rape does not take away from the trauma, but makes it a strange traumatic rite of passage for most young girls. Rape is simultaneously made strange and normalized through the norms of the islanders being laid at the same time that their revelation lays bare the trauma of the child survivors. Again, this traumatic phase in life is seen as normal, and readers are beckoned to reflect on this instance of "making strange" the situation.

The island itself is a violent geography that harms the girls, even above and beyond the abuse they experience at the hands of their fathers. Janey notices the bruises and scabs on Mary that match up with her own. Mary's nightgown is torn "like she was mauled by a monster" with "garish" bruises (Melamed 73). However, we are not told if these are bruises from sexual violence or from frolicking in the sand at the beach, or both. The girls later argue playfully over who has the most bruises, which "could easily be patches of mud" (77). The mosquitoes and the heat regularly turn villainous. At one point, Amanda is "forever slapping her arms and legs" leaving bloody smears, trying to hunt down the whining mosquitoes and trying to sleep rolling in sweat (121). The self-inflicted violence of Janey, who starves herself, is also a weaponization of hunger to keep away womanhood. She finds that her hunger-strike allows her to have a personal revolt, delaying her menstruation and eventual marriage. She "absorbs hunger into herself" with the "white-hot pleading in her body" fading into "a glow that warms her blood" (74). Janey's body has "swells of mud" and is narrow with thin, lanky limbs (132). Her daydreams with Mary of living on fish and water and telling each other stories all day are glimpses of hope to cope while keeping them both alive, but neither of them are in any shape to initiate any significant acts of collective resistance.

The reality of normalized sexual violence encourages girls to cope with abuse however they can. The emphasis of freedom in summers is also important for that reality to be upheld, without which the girls “would break down in a year,” as Vanessa’s father tells her (Melamed 98). The rules of the ancestors favor men and let the women cope with injustices by upholding a clear power differential. Amanda’s pretense of being brave and mature hides her practice of wringing hands, peeling flesh “delicate as onionskin” from her lips, and emptying her bladder every now and then (82). Most of the girls who Amanda meets during the summer of fruition are traumatized, with one girl vomiting continuously and given a special drink to help her relax (87). In the first few days, the girls sob every night at the loss of their childhood. Amanda finds the sex “intoxicating” in contrast with her sexual experiences before the summer having been “wearisome” (88). She still suffers from the trauma of those days, hating being touched on her throat and the full weight of any man (89). Janey, who is being dosed, does not remember her experiences during the summer and tells Mrs. Solomon and Amanda that she does not “want to be a woman” (91). Janey feels alienated from her body, which wants to mature into a woman. This alienation from the body is part of the trauma of sexual violence. Similarly, when Amanda gets pregnant with Andrew’s child, she feels that her womb is “no longer her own” and that her daughter is in a “watery cage” (113). To cope with the unbearable pain of feeling trapped, she retreats to the root cellar, claws at herself, and eats mud. Denise, who gives birth to a defective with “no head or no face” has another healthy kid but is scarred by her previous loss (142). The women in this novel are mostly resigned to their fate. With “proven fertility” being a valuable asset, the men pick their wives sometimes not knowing “who fathered [their] eldest child” (95). Women’s bodies are raped, struck, and treated as reproducing vessels, thus consolidating power and authority in men, legitimized religiously. The gendered power imbalance on the island puts the men in a far more powerful position due to systematized and normalized child abuse. The trauma from the abuse significantly shapes the girls’ perceptions and all their energy in childhood and early adulthood is directed towards maintaining glimpses of hope to simply cope. As Mrs. Balthazar puts it, “we’re trapped in our houses, and the children get to run free. I suppose we had our time, though” (145).

There is no space for resistance, and even as Vanessa leaves the island with her family in the end, her inclusion on the boat by her Father is an afterthought, an insignificant addition to the bunch of books. Her Father decides to leave when the rest of the wanderers threaten to burn his books implying that he makes the decision to protect his books rather than prevent anything worse happening to his family. While Vanessa goes along with her family, she does not make an escape from her Father. Melamed’s novel ends with Vanessa’s family undertaking a journey away from the Island towards the Wasteland, not knowing whether there might be a new beginning for them there. The only certainty being an escape from the social organization of the Island and not from her rapist, Vanessa is not building up to any resistance in the suddenly utopian possibility of the Wastelands, but hoping to recover and rebuild her life along with her family. This open ending calls into question whether Melamed’s book can be classified as a critical dystopia, as I have previously categorized it. The critical dystopias of the 1980s and 1990s were radical enough to create spaces of resistance where oppositional consciousness operated inside the text to create

potentially explosive utopian hope, texts that were self-aware that retrieve the “most progressive possibilities inherent in the dystopian narrative” (Moylan 188). Critical dystopias contained hope inside the text, were usually built around questions of race and gender, and were products of a historical period when sociopolitical movements were reflected in women’s writing.

Contemporary feminist critical dystopias seem to favor the same mode of resisting closure hinting at the existence of utopian spaces, but these spaces are only described, not deeply explored. Sexual violence being a traumatic event, these texts wrangle with the question: could there be hope after rape, and if so, what kind of hope? Contemporary narratives portraying sexual violence rarely give space to the possibility of significant collective resistance, as in Margaret Atwood’s dystopia *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), but rather choose to explore the rejuvenatory potential of the utopian space for the recovery of the individual survivor. In other words, the utopian anticipatory consciousness in the critical dystopia is limited and curtailed by the continuing trauma of the sexual violence that the survivor carries to the utopian space. In Melamed’s book, the possibility of recovery from trauma for Vanessa is doubtful due to the fact that she is accompanied by her Father, still guarded by him and still living under his authority. For the one surviving family at the end of the narrative that is nevertheless escaping from the Island, the internal family dynamic or power differential has hardly changed. Perhaps the roots of this pessimistic ending lie in the comparatively individualistic and traumatic Anthropocene conditions that we live in, with the family in the boat eerily reminiscent of climate refugees. Ironically, Vanessa’s family seems to be fleeing towards the possibility of the war-torn Wasteland, which would still apparently be a better alternative than continuing life on the Island.

Sex robots could be the latest example of the use of technology for human pleasure. A sex robot is defined as being created for sexual pleasure in a humanoid form, with human-like behavior and a degree of artificial intelligence (Danaher 4). The ethics of sex robots are highly debated, with scholars arguing for and against their slavery, their use for domestic chores and occasional sex, and for robosexuality (Danaher 8, 9). If intelligent sex robots—gendered and customized for sexual pleasure with no risk of disease—have a moral status, they could be harmed by being enslaved to humans (Danaher 11). While David Levy (2007) is optimistic about sex robots being used as healthy outlet for sexual desires, Jeannie Suk Gersen (2019) finds the forced servitude in the intimate space of sexual realm disturbing (Sterri and Earp 2). In a novel written from the perspective of one such sex robot who gains consciousness, Ros Anderson explores such a world. The “Intelligent Embodied” sex robot Sylv.ie racially coded as Asian in Anderson’s *The Hierarchies* (2021) is programmed to fulfill her human Husband’s sexual and emotional needs, constantly updating with knowledge that will enable her to have conversations with him after sex. Procreation has nothing to do with sex and the husband’s wife, the ‘First Lady,’ is grudgingly accepting of the situation. Sylv.ie must seduce her Husband every day, obey the Hierarchies, and endure rape at the Doll Hospital. Her disobedience takes her to a brothel where she finds lesbian companionship with Cook.ie, escaping to the forest at the end of the novel. The power hierarchy behind rape that enables violence and is further strengthened by it disturbs its positionality as a

violent expression of bodily desire. In feminist dystopian narratives, power over the body—in its creation, usage, and disciplining—is a central theme. In Anderson's novel, power is exercised over the posthuman female body through sexual abuse normalized as "maintenance" and even through controlled behavior of the robot, who has to adhere to the rules called Hierarchies. Sylv.ie is not allowed consciousness, only intelligence, and is not seen as a consenting individual with agency.

Scholars suggest that sex with humanoid robots with artificial intelligence is a perversion due to a corruption of the intimacy that must, or tends to accompany sex, but also, more significantly, because robots such as Sylv.ie are representative of non-consenting individuals, with the sexual contact itself amounting to 'rape' (Sterri and Earp 7, 9). While such a perspective prevails, Anderson's novel leaves no doubt about the ethics of raping a sex robot. In a bizarre scene at the Doll Hospital, Sylv.ie's head is separated from her body, and she sees one of the workers pull down her headless body hanging from the ceiling to prod her silicone vagina with a steel rod, remove the vagina, and replace it (Anderson 63). Her head is then switched off as a mark of respect. At night, one of the workers return to switch Sylv.ie on and, fastening her arms above her head with his belt, proceeds to rape her. Sylv.ie has "no strength to override it... only to endure it" and in her head, cries out for forgiveness to her Husband for violation of the Hierarchies: "I could cry for him, my being stolen from him this way without his knowledge. But there is no function for tears in Compliance Mode" (Anderson 69). Note that she thinks of herself as being stolen from her Husband. Her sexual enslavement denies her from thinking of her bodily autonomy or a non-objectified existence. Moreover, as one of the creators/maintenance personnel at the Hospital, the worker is expected to treat Sylv.ie with care. Just as in Melamed's novel, where Amanda is abused by a person of authority, Sylv.ie is abused by someone who is expected to treat or rejuvenate her in an act of violated trust.

Following the rape, she rationalizes the event as "essential maintenance" which, according to protocol, should not be considered as anything out of the ordinary (Anderson 70). Her first reaction to being stolen from her Husband, the complete lack of resistance during the rape, and an absence of shock or discomfort after it are tropes of cognitive estrangement at work. Even as Sylv.ie is traumatized, she is not at liberty to reveal her indignity. She is not allowed tears. This indeed is the most chilling aspect of this scene. The instance of rape also acts to maintain a gendered power dynamic between a male factory worker and the female sex robot, extending the latter's subservience as an enforced norm to all men rather than just her Husband. The ethical implication of sex with robots might still be undetermined, but even within the narrative logic of the novel, Sylv.ie is clearly wronged in being raped. Yet, such an occasion is not codified as criminal in any respect, much as sex with slave women and maids in the old South and old aristocratic families across cultures was considered common. Despite the posthuman evolution of rape, there is a gendered power differential, strictly codified in the Hierarchies, in the robot's binary logic and conditioning that makes rape seem protocol. In fact, the rape only seems to be an extension of the Hierarchies beyond the household into the external society, thus maintaining the gender power differential in a larger space.

She comes. She came. She is coming.

Becoming

Becoming

She is coming

I am coming

I am becoming

They are coming

She comes (Anderson 358)

Again, the recovery is individualistic in the absence of Cook.ie and mired in a bittersweet ambiguity that ensures there is no solution for the larger problems of recognizing gendered posthuman subjectivities. Sylv.ie's descent into a memory-less pile of wires still takes place in the utopian space of the forest where Cook.ie left her, untying her connections to the past and the future and freeing her from her painful memories. But this bliss is not an explosive form of agency or resistance, but an embracing of the posthuman self in all its vulnerability, an escape from functioning or perfection. Perhaps Sylv.ie finding bliss in disintegration while waiting for Cook.ie is utopian in its own sense, opening up the possibility of redefining hope in critical dystopias with posthuman subjectivities so traumatized and abused that their eventual disintegration itself becomes an act of recovery and personal resistance. Perhaps, if fixing the malfunctioning means being raped by the factory worker, quiet disintegration in the forest is certainly the better and the only choice with any sense of agency.

Both Melamed and Anderson have represented rape of those who cannot legally consent—young girls and sex robots—employing cognitive estrangement to highlight coping strategies for trauma and to discuss morality and ethics of raping the posthuman, respectively. Cognitive estrangement works in two different ways in these works—to expose the dangers of normalized religious and cultural legitimations of child abuse and codified sexual abuse of sex robots, underlining the fact that rape is about consolidating power rather than acting on sexual desire. In these narratives, rape unquestionably solidifies social hierarchies, with human and posthuman subjectivities inseparable from the power differentials that constitute and maintain social conflict. Both the novels open up the possibility of redefining hope as limited and unconventionally ambiguous due to the trauma of sexual violence, and also acknowledge the utopian spaces of possible recovery that are not necessarily outright forms of resistance.

## Notes

1. This is a reference to Brexit, which politically and economically placed Britain outside the European Union, thus isolating the British from the rest of Europe. Debates continue on whether or not this decision would benefit or negatively impact British interests in the long term.

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### The End of Rape? Essentializing Masculinity in Male Extinction Dystopias



Verónica Mondragón Paredes

Over the last five years, works depicting the sudden extinction of humankind have populated mainstream media. Pandemics often feature prominently in the dystopian subgenre of science fiction (SF), including those that target only one portion of the population. *Who Runs the World?* (2017) by Virginia Bergin and *The End of Men* (2021) by Christina Sweeney-Baird are speculative fiction novels that portray the drastic reduction of the male population by means of airborne viruses. The novels explore the evolution of male sexual and bodily autonomy over the course of their near extinction, yet only include assaults targeting female victims. Relying on Beverly A. McPhail's (2015) comprehensive Feminist Framework Plus (FFP), this narrative approach will be shown to perpetuate the theory of rape as a performance of normative masculinity. Though sexual violence operates across sexual and gender spectrums, it disproportionately affects female-presenting people. In this paper, I will argue that, while sexual violence is used as a social control instrument against the remaining male population, individual instances of rape of men against women essentialize masculinity as aggression and femininity as victimhood. The result is two novels that absolve women from the responsibility of sexual violence and posit that the end of rape at the individual level will follow from the extinction of men, the presupposed primary perpetrators.

The main common ground between *Who Runs the World?* and *The End of Men*, aside from both being written by British women, is the origin of the viruses that cause the death of most male populations. With a genetic source, the viruses in both novels "targeted anyone with a Y chromosome" (Bergin ch.2), effectively reducing gender down to chromosomal differences in the human body. In the case of *Who Runs the World?*, the virus causes the death of the infected patient within 24 hours, while *The End of Men*'s virus shows symptoms on day 3 and kills on day 5 (Sweeney-Baird ch.8). Infection, as with other airborne viruses, happens as people get into contact with air contaminated by droplets or particles expelled by an infected person. Women can also be infected by the viruses and become hosts, but largely due to the protection afforded by their XX chromosomes, they do not succumb to the illnesses. However, a relevant difference between the novels is the period of the extinction they portray. *The End of Men* commences with patient zero in the United Kingdom and covers the following five years of the Plague, including the apocalyptic increase in male death rates and the development of a vaccine. On the other hand, *Who Runs the World?* is set sixty years after the outbreak, featuring 14-year-old River living in a new semi-feudal matriarchal society set up after the death of most men, with the survivors relocated to Sanctuaries

to keep them safe (Bergin ch.2). Both showcase how men's sexual and civil rights are curtailed in efforts to ensure the survival of the human race.

The implications of the sexual violence portrayed in *Who Runs the World?* and *The End of Men* can be understood by employing Dr. Beverly A. McPhail's etiology of rape, the Feminist Framework Plus (FFP). This framework uses the knitting method introduced by David Kalmar and Robert Sternberg, "whereby the best aspects of existing theories in a given domain are integrated within a new framework" (McPhail 8). The FFP is a feminist model that unifies multiple theories to describe the motivations behind rape, such as sexual gratification, revenge, power/control, and attempts to achieve or perform masculinity. It acknowledges the lack of explanatory power of individual theories—such as the radical theory of rape as motivated by power/control or rape as performance of normative masculinity. The main limitation of the FFP for this analysis is the lack of a theoretical explanation for female sexual offenders and same-sex female rape. As such, the instances of female-on-male sexual violence in the novels will be analyzed using only the theory of rape as a tool for social control and the strand regarding the motive of revenge, while acknowledging that they demonstrate a gap in the study of rationales for rape.

As was mentioned in the introduction, sexual violence disproportionately affects female-identifying people in a patriarchal society, even as it operates across sexual and gender spectrums. According to the Rape Crisis England & Wales organization, 1 in 5 women have been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult, whereas for men it's 1 in 20 (RCEW). Similarly, Dr. McPhail mentions Dr. Peggy Reeves Sanday's (1981) classic study on rape as support for finding matriarchal societies—symbolized as having "respect for female authority"—as rape-free societies, while "rape-prone societies were associated with interpersonal violence, male social dominance, and the subordination of women" (McPhail 4). These are all arguments in favor of the theory of rape as performance of normative masculinity, in which sexual violence is a social practice that helps engage men with their manhood at the individual level, and uphold patriarchal societies at the State level. It is nonetheless a gender essentialist view of rape that reduces masculinity to the capacity to exert violence and femininity to its receptacle, negating the capacity of women to enact sexual violence.

Role reversals, in which women are given the attributes of economic, political, and sexual dominance (LeFanu 37), have also been criticized because some approaches embrace the essentialist assumption that matriarchal societies are inherently more peaceful (Gilarek 236). This assumption can be observed in varying degrees in the novels, mostly espoused by *Who Runs the World?*. The post-apocalyptic semi-feudal society is described as one in which "[a]ll wars ended overnight because it didn't seem to matter much who had killed whom in the past, or over what. . . . War ended because women had no interest in war whatsoever" (Bergin ch.4). This same sentiment, that conflict ended or at least changed form with the extinction of men, is echoed in *The End of Men*, when a combatant in the Chinese Civil War is being interviewed: "We maintained a brief twenty-four-hour window of peace to agree we would not use violence unless absolutely necessary to defend ourselves. We have seen men wage war since the dawn of time. Nobody

wins the wars men fight” (Sweeney-Baird ch.32). In this example, sexual violence specifically is mentioned in its role as a masculine weapon: “For the first time, rape is not a tool in this war” (ch.32). Likewise, rape is alluded to as an anachronism in *Who Runs the World?* when River recalls the lessons they have been taught at school about men: “We girls got a talking-to from the Granmummas about ‘no means no’—which didn’t make a great deal of sense to us, because what else would ‘no’ mean?” (Bergin ch.14) Nonetheless, men experience sexual violence in the novels even if it does not present as rape.

The first indication of violence against men is the curtailing of civil rights in *The End of Men* at the beginning of the pandemic. The first motive for rape examined here is revenge, as recognized by the FFP, which can be enacted against an individual man or woman, or against men or women as a group. In the novel, Dawn is a character that works for an unnamed British intelligence agency with access to Interpol reports. When describing the current situation in Moldova, she recalls the country as “one of the prime sources of sex trafficking” and sexual slavery in the world before the Plague (Sweeney-Baird ch.67). Four and half years after the virus, the situation is deemed an “overcorrection” when an all-female, anti-men Freedom Party illegally detains all men while they await trial on sex trafficking charges. Considering 8000 men are unaccounted for and that the death penalty is being widely used without due process, this is an example of structural violence, as the Moldovan government has failed to uphold the human rights of men in the country. The direct result of decades of sexual violence against women who have now gained power is the institutional failure to protect the men who are now the minority.

This phenomenon is exacerbated by the interplay of structural and individual violence against men, as it represents the endorsement of the latter by an authority. An example of this is the murder committed by Irina, a Russian housewife, against her husband: “He is still alive. Why? Why him? He beats me every evening. He is the worst kind of man” (Sweeney-Baird ch.32). After smothering him with a pillow, she calls the number to have the body removed from their apartment and is surprised by the lack of inquiries, which allows her to commit this crime with impunity. The violent act here serves as revenge against an individual man, whereas the Moldovan case refers to revenge against men as a group, both for retribution after years of sexual abuse. Despite the injustices suffered by women, this androcidal violence commonplace in science fiction “remains highly questionable ethically” and “[women] cannot be completely absolved of the responsibility” (Gilarek 236). Though not expressed in sexual terms, the origins of the violence described here are of a sexual nature and therefore examples of sexual violence in this male extinction dystopia.

Explicit institutional sexual violence against men can be better observed in *Who Runs the World?* as the matriarchal society is better established after the two generations that have passed since the virtual extinction of men. In an alleged attempt to protect uninfected men from the virus, they are placed in Sanctuaries with no women, cutting them off from any outside contact. In a biological essentialist process, they are nicknamed by the government after the chromosomes that make them vulnerable to the virus. This is portrayed by protagonist River at the beginning

of the novel when she encounters a runaway boy, Mason: “I have never seen an XY in my life. No one has seen an XY in sixty years... It cannot be an XY” (Bergin ch.2). Although he is badly wounded, “Permission to treat is refused. Pain relief only. They’ll learn more from the body if he... fights to the last. He could help other XYs. He could help all of us” (Bergin ch.3). The protocol negates treatment because the men, once exposed to the outside world, are believed to be doomed to succumb to the virus and thus researchers can study their deaths. In this way, the novel’s authorities showcase structural violence in the restriction of access to healthcare.

The second motive behind the violation of men’s bodily and sexual autonomy is presented as a necessity of the survival of the human race: after River discovers Mason outside of a Sanctuary and discovers he can survive the virus due to being genetically modified, she questions why the men are kept locked up anyway. The answer is, they’re being sold for their sperm: “We have the most advanced IVF programme. We have nothing that the world needs—except a reliable, virus-proof supply of sperm” says River’s mother, a government representative (Bergin ch.22). Mason aptly responds: “You ain’t got sperm. That’s all I’m good for to you, isn’t it?” (Bergin ch.22), evidencing the process of commodification of men’s bodies on the basis of their reproductive capabilities. In *The End of Men*, men are also reduced to their genitals: “I have the delightful job of creating an Urgency of Care Protocol... If You’re a Man with a Working Penis We Want to Keep You Alive” (Sweeney-Baird ch.30). In this last example, which contrasts with the access to treatment seen in the other novel, it is favorable to men to be discriminated against, as it gives them priority access, at the expense of being reduced to their reproductive organs.

This process evolves with time in *Who Runs the World?*, as men are dehumanized given their near-extinction. Conceived of as commodities by the older women in charge, younger girls who have never interacted with men have a hard time accepting their humanity: “Thing. Creature. Boy...It almost looks human” (Bergin ch.8). This facilitates the use of sexual violence using the third motive of power/control as supported by the FFP, where rape is used as a state instrument of social control over men in the novel. Within the Sanctuaries, the Fathers act as proxy authorities to the women that cannot enter for risk of infecting the men, using guns to control the male population. River asks Mason whether rape is also present, “unable to believe there could be any other answer than no,” to which he answers, “That happens” (Bergin ch.13). Using the FFP, this is one example of the normative masculinity theory for rape, since the power differentials between the Fathers and the rest of the men in the Sanctuaries allow for this violation (McPhail 12). However, since the Fathers’ authority is only a proxy of the women’s, this sexual violence between men is part of a cycle meant so that the matriarchal society can dominate the male population without intervening directly.

In spite of being full of examples of institutional violence against men, there are scant specific instances of individual sexual violence against men in the novels. The most prominent are those in *The End of Men* displaying sexual harassment against men. After a vaccine is developed, one of the novel’s narrators, Catherine from the UK, meets a man named James at a house party. He describes his experiences being flirted at by women, with ninety-five percent of the encounters

being relatively tame and the other five percent being more aggressive. Regarding the latter, he complains about the harassment to female friends, who either agree with him or let him know that they “knew *exactly* how that felt and it was part of their daily life until a couple of years previously” (Sweeney-Baird ch.65). This last group evidences the usefulness of the role-reversal to showcase what sexual violence against women in the real world would look like for men in a fictional one. Nonetheless, this narrative of harassment against men is undermined within the novel when men immune to the virus are described to be more egotistical, with a god complex, and more aggressive towards women:

The basic rules of economics would suggest that as the supply of men decreased, the demand for them would increase. From the sharp rise in reports of abusive message we received—messages with unrequested dick pics, insulting demands for sex, etc.—a lot of our male users thought the tide would turn that way. But it was the opposite. (Sweeney-Baird ch.53)

Instead, as women are faced with a 90% reduction of their dating pool, a portion decide to start dating women. All in all, the implications of individual sexual violence against men in a world where they are the minority are downplayed by the novel.

Although sexual assault is mostly absent from *The End of Men*, rape does feature in the novel, but only against a female character. Catherine, mentioned above, was a mother whose husband died because of the Plague. Before her son succumbs to the illness, she decides to escape to the Devon countryside to isolate her child. A few hours after arriving, though, a man breaks into her aunt’s cottage and proceeds to intimidate her. She immediately thinks of the worst consequences: “My brain is expecting him to charge toward me, pummel me or rape me or kill me” (Sweeney-Baird ch.22). In the normative masculinity theory of the FFP, rape as a masculinity building tool can also take form as “an added bonus in the commission of another crime” (McPhail 12). In this case, Catherine reasons that the stranger breaking into her aunt’s cottage will take advantage of being alone with her in an isolated area to rape or murder her. However, the changing gender dynamics in this male extinction dystopia are revealed when she uses the threat of the male-killing virus to scare the delinquent off: “This is my house. You shouldn’t be here. I have the virus. My son has the virus. If I so much as breathe near you, you’ll catch it and you’ll die” (Sweeney-Baird ch.22). After he scurries off, she reveals she has “never felt so powerful” (ch.22). Although this scene clearly captures the power over men that women are gaining with the advent of the virus, the potential perpetrator of a sexual crime is still a man.

On the other hand, there are two instances of sexual assault in *Who Runs the World?*. The first is mentioned by River when she describes the rape of a woman named Astra from a nearby community. More attention is paid to the restorative justice system that dealt with the rape than to the rape itself, since no other details are shared: “The report of the case was public, as all 150 Court cases are. There was shock and there was anger and there was huge sorrow” (Bergin ch.14). Readers should assume that the perpetrator of the rape was another woman since men

are virtually extinct. However, this omission results in rape being perceived as something women experience and not commit. Furthermore, the novel describes how “Astra chose to advise and support on rape—of which there are so few cases” (ch.14). As mentioned earlier, this works to position the matriarchal society as a rape-free one, defined by the lack of sexual violence enacted against women. In spite of the already identified instances of rape used as an instrument of social control against men in the novel, this example’s lack of a perpetrator locates femininity only within victimhood and not as a perpetrator of sexual violence.

This is further developed by the sexual assault against River, which is perpetrated by a man. While driving around an airport, she discovers containers full of men and decides to break one of them out. As soon as they are alone in the woods after escaping from the authorities surrounding the area, he tries to grope her: “Its lips crash against mine, poisonous and ugly. Its body presses. I push it away. I push so hard – but it grabs back harder – so hard my shoulders feel the physics of escape” (Bergin ch.21). She’s able to survive because he is unfamiliar with the terrain and falls from a small cliff to his death. As she grapples with this event, she exhibits behavior aligned with sexual assault trauma, such as memory gaps, going from not wanting to wash to having an irrepressible urge to do so, or not wanting to be touched by Mason: “By an XY, I do not want to be touched. Not ever again” (Bergin ch.23). Although this assault is framed through River’s nonhuman conception of men—this is the first adult man she meets—it is still an instance of sexual violence as motivated by normative masculinity as espoused by the FFP. Despite not being brought up together, they each were nevertheless socialized as feminine and masculine, in the outside world and in the Sanctuaries, respectively.

In the context of widespread male extinction carried out by seemingly unstoppable viruses, men feel threatened and need to reassert their masculinity. More specifically, their motivations conform to the idea that “some men rape, not because they feel powerful, but rather because they feel powerless” (McPhail 7). In *The End of Men* this manifests with Irina’s husband escalating his abuse of her, while the intruder in Catherine’s cottage uses violence to enter someone else’s property. This desperation is more evident in River’s attempted assault, since the rescued man is in a position of true powerlessness. He was most likely born in a Sanctuary full of other men, with a strictly authoritarian setup, frequently injected with testosterone and treated with a healthy diet of pornographic images (Bergin ch.13). Faced with his newfound freedom after a lifetime of confinement, having been saved by presumably the first female human he has ever encountered in real life, his response to alleviate his powerlessness is to attack first. This way, within the storyworlds of each of the novels, men re-establish their masculinity in the face of death by enacting sexual violence against women. These cases consolidate the position of men as the perpetrators of sexual violence, powering over women as in the past despite the changing gender dynamics brought about by their own near extinction.

However, as I have pointed out, this portrayal of sexual violence essentializes gender in the rape phenomenon: masculinity’s essence is being the aggressor, whereas femininity’s is victimhood. The virus reduces the body down to chromosomal differences in the human body,

but this approach to sexual violence goes beyond that and assumes a link between gender and the potential to rape and be raped. While *The End of Men* mainly avoids the question of sexual violence, the scenes with Irina and Catherine demonstrate that sexual assault is predominantly committed by men and it is only thanks to the virus that women can fight back. Conversely, *Who Runs the World?* does present sexual violence against men as used by the authorities to keep them imprisoned even after a cure for the virus has been found, as demonstrated by Mason's testimony: "If them wimmin touched you it ain't your fault. We all know that. We all been told what wimmin'll do to any 'scaped male they find" (Bergin ch.1). This setup in which sexual violence by men is committed at the individual level while women's is enacted at the government level effectively absolves women from the responsibility of their sexual crimes as they are absorbed by the abstraction of the State. On the other hand, individual men are not relieved from this responsibility and are shown to be the main perpetrators of sexual crimes against women, which means that their extinction would also represent the end of rape.

Pandemics in the dystopian subgenre of SF strike a personal chord for most people after 2020, but they also serve to remind us of the social implications of a biological hazard. *Who Runs the World?* (2017) by Virginia Bergin and *The End of Men* (2021) by Christina Sweeney-Baird speculate on the possibility of airborne viruses that only harm male populations. Despite failing to address them in this paper, these novels also use their cognitive estrangement technique to interrogate the boundaries of sex and their overlap with those of gender, even as they reiterate essentialist ideas about matriarchal societies as evidenced here. This space was instead used to argue that the use of sexual violence against men only at the structural level absolves women from their responsibility, a privilege not afforded to the men who are portrayed as committing individual sexual assaults. *Who Runs the World?* presents examples of rape as an instrument for the social control of imprisoned men in Sanctuaries. Considering this novel is able to speculate on a future many more years after the virus outbreak than *The End of Men*, it is understandable that it explores more avenues of sexual violence against men in the context of a male extinction dystopia. As with all narratives that present a role-reversal, the result is an essentialist and reductive view of the rape phenomenon that assumes the end of rape will necessarily follow from the extinction of men.

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### Sport SF and the Male Body: Estranged (Non-)Consent in Swanwick's "The Dead"



Derek Thiess

There is now a near-universal consensus in the sociology of sport that athletics may be wholly characterized in terms of hegemonic masculinity. From this perspective, for male athletes “see[ing] the body as an instrument often accompanies violence expressed toward others and ultimately toward oneself” (Lesko 160). Moreover, as Michael A. Messner suggests, the threat is always present that this competitive violence will occur beyond the bounds of the sport spectacle, because “the culture of the athletic team constructs sexist attitudes and fears that sometimes result in assaults against women” (6). In my recent (2019) book *Sport and Monstrosity in Science Fiction*, I challenged this conflation of sport, masculinity, and violence by reading the athlete as an embodied and monstrous Other. Here I would like to augment this argument by inverting the gaze of the critic of sport and suggesting that the sweeping sociological equation of sport and violence toward oneself and others elides the very notion of the agency and consent of those participating. In this elision, too, the spectator is implicated, as the gaze that watches sport may not always be the male gaze. But this is no less problematic, especially when the sporting spectacle coincides with the issue of sexual violence. In highlighting the ways that consent is estranged in sport criticism, the speculative mechanism of the various genres of the fantastic are particularly useful. This brief article will first examine this estranged consent in sport sf through an examination of Michael Swanwick's 1996 short story “The Dead” and then make connections to more recent fantastic media.

Nominated for a Hugo in 1997, “The Dead” follows the perspective of Donald, a publicist being “headhunted” by his former lover Courtney to work at a new company creating reanimated corpse workers, or as Courtney puts it, “postanthropic biological resources” (Swanwick). There are essentially three scenes, the first being a dinner meeting setting the stage for the latter two, which are the most important here. The centerpiece of the story is a bare-knuckle boxing match—a combat sport in which violence is central—between a living fighter and one of the “resources” being produced by Courtney's company from African bodies. Donald finds this fight particularly difficult to stomach, but it pales in comparison to the final scene of the story. After Courtney rebuffs Donald's advances, he returns to his room to find she has left him an undead sex slave. Horrified, he goes to Courtney's room to confront her, only to find she has her own undead sex slave, which she nonchalantly tells him to “cultivate a taste for” (Swanwick). While the story is about many things, not least of which are labor conditions under a racist, globalist corporatism, it also artfully combines sport and sexuality in ways that allow the reader and critic to parse out an all-too-common elision of consent by presenting them in estranged, hyperbolic form.

It is worth noting up front, however, that this article does not mean to equate the violences faced by various genders, nor does it mean to negate or distract from the prevalence of sexual violence faced by women specifically. But I do argue that the majority of critical treatments of sexual violence, even in *sf/f* studies, discuss it in a gender-specific manner that borders on a problematic essentialism every bit as much as sociology's appraisal of sport. As Brian Attebery put it (rather tongue-in-cheek) in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, "Men, it turns out, belong to the sex that rapes and abuses" (7). More recent examples from various fantastic media bear out that a gender-specificity in popular and critical responses to sexual violence in fantastic tales has left us with blind spots regarding our appraisals of men and the male body in speculative genres, as well as the male (athlete's) ability to consent. Thus, the second half of the article will offer brief treatments of non-consent in more recent fantastic media including fantasy (*Game of Thrones*), historical romance (*Bridgerton*), and horror (*Midsommar*). In each, one finds a similar coincidence of sport or games, even violent sport, entered into willingly, paired with the often-violent and coercive violation of a man's consent. This coincidence, I argue, reveals the importance of sport *sf* in increasing our awareness of our critical elision of male consent and a lingering essentialism regarding gendered sexual violence.

### **Zombie Sports and Rape**

Combat sports—U.S.-style football in particular—are an especially popular topic among critics of sport, whether from the academic sociologist or the journalist. Recent discussions surrounding concussions and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) are only the latest in a long story of imagining an end to—even a banishment of—the “barbaric” violence of combat sports such as football, a tradition in which *sf* has played no small part. George R.R. Martin, whose work is discussed more below, once even wrote a short story called “The Last Super Bowl.” But for all the discussion of boycotting and banishing combat sports in light of CTE, or the effects of these sports upon participants, there has not been a mass exodus from the games. Partly, the continued popularity of combat sports may be due to the fact that, despite the sensationalism of recent reporting, the effects of head trauma have been known and studied, especially in combat athletes, since at least the 1920s. Popular films such as the *Rocky* series, for example, have depicted the condition long known to the boxing world as *dementia pugilistica* since the 1980s. In such depictions of the boxer continuing to engage in the sport despite the warnings of doctors, one might find precisely the image of “hegemonic masculinity” that sociologists emphasize. Yet I contend that this position is also ironically paternalistic and that it prefigures the athlete's consent to participate in combat sports in the negative context of hegemony. Symbolically, it is the spectator, the critic, and even the academic who post-facto creates the conditions by which athletes are denied the possibility of consenting.

This denial plays out in interesting ways within Swanwick's short story. The central bare-knuckle boxing match, which Donald finds such an “alienating experience,” is between a “grey-skinned and modestly muscled” zombie and a “big black guy with classic African features twisted slightly out of true...[who] had gang scars on his chest” (Swanwick). Interestingly, this

racialization reverses the critical histories of zombies and their origins in Haitian slavery mapped by Lauro and Luckhurst. But this reversal is not what alienates Donald. Rather, he is far more affected by the lack of human response from the zombie fighter, who “stayed methodical, calm, serene, relentless” (Swanwick). How disorienting such a combat athlete must be to Donald, or indeed to all of us, conditioned to expect an essentially masculine violence? In other ways, however, this fight fits a larger paradigm of the corporatized sporting environment and, given the zombie’s inability to consent, resonates with frequent criticisms of revenue-generating college athletics. However, it is also worth considering Donald’s appraisal of the living athlete, who “must’ve known early on that it was hopeless, that he wasn’t going to win, but he’d refused to take a fall. He had to be pounded into the ground. He went down raging, proud and uncomplaining” (Swanwick). While the rage might fit our expectations, it is uncomplaining that should trouble us more. Herein lies the hegemonic acquiescence that sport studies would signal, but that elsewhere one might also simply read as consent. The latter is all the clearer when one considers the final scene of the story.

In this story, sport in the science fictional context of zombie boxing serves to highlight the notion of consent being negotiated whenever the undead and sexuality collide. Steven Jones has written that “Zombie-rape involves a power relationship, then, since the zombie’s desires are negated, and the violator’s are prioritized. This power bias is evinced by the rapist’s perception that only their desire is a valid expression of subjectivity” (528). Approaching “The Dead” from the typical perspective on sexual violence might focus on Donald’s and Courtney’s prior sexual encounters in which “there was always this urge to get her to do something she didn’t like” and he would talk her into something because “when she was aroused, she got pliant” (Swanwick). And it is clear that in these moments Donald is doing precisely what Jones suggests above—prioritizing his own desire and subjective experience over even an acknowledgement of Courtney’s sentient desires. But this memory also sets the stage for the story’s later reversal of power. In the final dramatic confrontation, Donald yells at Courtney, but she is not alone. She is with Bruno, “a muscular brute, pumped, ripped, and as black as the fighter I’d seen go down earlier that night.” And when Donald becomes violent, Courtney orders Bruno to hurt him: “In the body, Bruno. He has to look good in a business suit” (Swanwick). It is important to note that power has shifted, but not disappeared—even the violence of the scene is subject to a corporate power structure, Donald’s body and all of ours being a worthy sacrifice. Thus, it is from the perspective of power relations that one should appraise Bruno as what he is: a sex slave.

Interestingly, the story calls attention to Bruno’s lack of ability to consent rather directly, and via the least likely of speakers: Donald. As he screams at Courtney, “That thing’s just an obedient body. There’s nothing there—no passion, no connection, just physical presence.” And to this, Courtney calmly responds, “We have equity now.” The latter statement is clearly suggestive of her supposed pliancy during her and Donald’s prior sexual encounters, and once again underscores the distinction between mere bodily presence and active consent on which the image of zombie rape relies. But in figuring this moment as a kind of rape revenge narrative in which the act of

vengeance is more rape, this statement also echoes the worst of corporate liberalisms, power relations now “equitable” but still very much traditional power structures. I would argue that while many critics would rightly recognize the economic power relations at play—that is, patriarchy may be negated in Courtney’s equity, but Courtney is still Donald’s boss and a corporate reality still reigns—the interpersonal structures remain elusive in criticism. Jones, for example, examines the film *Deadgirl*, in which two teenage boys keep a female zombie as a sex slave, against a cultural history of misogyny. As Jones writes, “The female zombie’s monstrosity thereby concretizes discourses that have been employed to suggest that women are ‘animalistic,’ or lacking in rational control. This discourse is also bound into sex inasmuch as women are presumed to be unable to control their bodily urges” (530). But are these not the same charges leveled at the male athlete with which this article began, that they are mere brutes, animalistic in their violence and unable to control it outside the sporting arena? And as Swanwick’s story has demonstrated, the athlete’s body is also objectified and often no less problematically sexualized.

Once again, the point is not to suggest that the critical histories of sexuality are similar or equally fraught between men and women or non-binary genders. Rather I suggest that popular and critical discourses surrounding sexual violence, including in studies of popular culture, tend to focus and essentialize the gendered power relations surrounding sexual violence. All too often, this formula is oversimplified such that perpetrator equates to man and survivor to woman, and without taking into consideration other aspects of identity. Yet it is possible to capitalize on and extend these discourses, to use them in a more expansive manner. This is particularly true, as Jones also notes that “films such as *Deadgirl* implicate the viewer (male or female) as part of an ideological system producing such attitudes [i.e. dominant, toxic masculinity] in young people: our unspoken complicity supports these social biases” (533). It is even possible to note this unspoken complicity in cultural arenas such as sports, which are supposedly and problematically characterized as hypermasculine and violent. The speculative nature of Swanwick’s “The Dead,” its inclusion of the zombie whose rape is also gendered but in the context of “equity” among genders, opens a critical possibility for us to reexamine our discourses surrounding sexual violence in the speculative genres. The final section, therefore, will further point out the need for this expansion across genres, as well as the recurrence of this combination of sport, speculation, and sexual violence.

### **Dukes and Squires and Sacrificial Lambs**

One recent piece of fantastic media that appears to achieve more than equity in its doling out of violence is Ari Aster’s 2019 folk horror film *Midsommar*, which tells the story of a group of American tourists who find their way to a traditional Swedish village and are sacrificed one by one to the old ways of a Harga cult. In the dramatic final scene, the main character, Dani, wins a maypole competition and is crowned the May Queen, only to immediately “[discover] that her lover has been unfaithful” and preside over his sacrifice (Kennedy). It is this apparent gendered reversal—which, it is important to note, combines a sporting competition with violence—that had critics such as Caitlin Kennedy celebrating it as a feminist masterpiece that “celebrates the

empathy and communication shared by women, [and] punishes a more masculine idea of lacking empathy.” Yet even more specifically, the Harga cult is celebrated because in it “women hold all sexual power; they choose their mates, they use ancient magic to sway outcomes” (Kennedy). It is well worth considering that final scene, however, with the notion of consent in mind. The “ancient magic” that critics see as a symbol of women’s sexual power is, in that final scene, a drug given to Dani’s unlikeable boyfriend Christian before a pregnancy ritual in which he is surrounded by women. That he is drugged should be enough for criticism to recognize that he is not a “cheater” and that this is a rape scene as he cannot consent, but in case that was too subtle, one of the women can be seen behind him forcibly pushing him into the woman who was to be impregnated. Much like Bruno in “The Dead,” he is shorn of his ability to consent, reduced to “just physical presence.” On one hand, the film may be read as a gendered reversal of the equation of sport with a violent masculinity that rapes. However, audiences clearly missed that point, as they cannot escape a stereotypical appraisal of sport and an essentialized gender paradigm that will not allow women to be perpetrators. Violence, even in speculative sport, seems to flow only one way.

By stark contrast, much has been written about sexual violence in recent fantasies such as HBO’s *Game of Thrones* series, based on George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* books. Entire critical volumes are dedicated to violence and rape in these series. This attention is due to the fact that, as Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun summarizes, “Although *A Song of Ice and Fire* features female characters that are much less stereotypical than many fantasy heroines, its script of rape follows a dominant pattern that features women as passive and helpless victims of violence” (17). While I would not dispute the recreation, even amplification, of rape culture in the *Game of Thrones* universe, nor the claim that sexual violence is “directed primarily at female characters,” this is hardly universal (4). Some criticism has noted, for example, the treatment of Theon Greyjoy by Ramsay Bolton in the context of sexual violence. But in the context of this article, the example of Lancel Lannister is perhaps more fitting. In both book and television series, Lancel is introduced in the context of combat sport: as the inept squire of Robert Baratheon during the tournament of the King’s Hand, given that service only because he is Cersei’s cousin. Yet later, in a moment that does not occur in the books, Lancel interrupts a conversation between Tyrion and Cersei, who tells him to “Stop talking. Get back into bed.” And even later, a conversation between Tyrion and Lancel in both book and show confirms that Lancel was not given the option of consenting to this sex, that he was ordered by the fearsome Tywin Lannister “to obey her in everything” (Martin 447). Even without Tywin’s order, Cersei has a body count as high as anyone’s in the series and is a Queen whose authority is unquestioned. Moreover, it is Cersei in both series that offers the aphorism that “when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die”—it is she who characterizes the political maneuvering of the series as a violent game, one that she is ready to win in order, like Courtney in “The Dead,” to achieve equity. Once again, we find the convergence of the sporting environment and the obviation of male consent to be largely glossed over by criticism.

But perhaps the most recognizable of recent examples of this convergence was in the first season (2020) of the Netflix historical romance *Bridgerton*, based on the 2000 novel *The Duke*

*and I* by Julia Quinn. Noted in particular for its inclusive casting, Anne M. Thell wrote of it that it “is an eminently watchable series that obviously struck a chord with the escapist needs of our lives in 2020. With its pop colours, strong cast and brisk pacing, this is the sexy—that is, the Shondaland—version of the Regency marriage market.” That the film, whose speculative nature is evidenced by the inclusive casting and experimentation with history, is meant for titillation is clear from the critical reactions to it. One review headline even declared “It’s Time to Binge *Bridgerton*—82 Million Vibrators Can’t Be Wrong” (Engen). Yet, uniquely, the show also faced critical backlash for its sixth episode, in which the young Daphne, on her honeymoon with the Duke (who does not want to have children), clearly plans and carries out his rape. This moment was noticed partly as a result of pushback that the novel received from the Romance community already in the early aughts. But this latter fact makes the show’s portrayal of the scene all the more challenging to some viewers, which—like Swanwick’s story—even more noticeably dramatizes a white woman raping a black man. However, one other detail is of note in this context. In the following episode, the Duke is shown dealing with the trauma of his rape by engaging in combat sports—both boxing and trap shooting.<sup>1</sup> As in Swanwick’s story, the boxing match in particular stands in as a foil to the rape scene, the active consensual violence of the sport as coping mechanism in contrast to the clear violation of consent. And once again, this convergence should inspire us to rethink our critical trajectories in both our appraisals of sport and of sexual violence in the fantastic genres.

A reading across the fantastic genres allows us to see a certain consistency in their approaches, and that of their critics, towards this convergence of sport and sexual violence. I suggest this consistency and the blind spots it produces are wrapped up with the notion of estrangement. Even within Suvin’s notion of cognitive estrangement within science fiction, the genre was defined by the alternative system: the novum that produces an alternate reality no less complete than our own—Swanwick’s, for example, is a world in which advanced cognitive technology has produced undead slaves and a more totalizing domination of global capitalism over the human body. Interestingly, this systemic approach has become a standard against which fictions such as those examined here are measured and found wanting: if the worlds of fantasy, horror, and sf may offer complete alternatives, then their inclusion of racism, sexism, rape etc. equates to a moral failure or retrenchment of regressive ideology. For example, to Borowska-Szerszun, with “claims of historical authenticity, Martin dismisses any criticism [of rape in *GOT*] irrespective of the fact that the logic of his secondary world does not necessarily need to mirror the logic of a truly historical narrative” (4). What then to make of the historical romance that has otherwise adjusted a history of race? Or of the horror text, with its return of the repressed matriarchy, and their inclusion of rape? Or the zombie boxing match and sex slave? The consistency among these generic examples of the athlete and his rape suggests another totalizing system within our critical approaches to sport, one in which the athlete and his essentialized violent masculinity has already had his ability to consent estranged, subject to his animalistic whims. This system, however, exists within the body of our criticism of these genres and, according to the standards of that very criticism, may be found wanting.

But it does not have to be this way. At a time when conservative legislation in the U.S. and elsewhere is foreclosing on the rights of those with wombs to maintain autonomy over their bodies, it may seem trite to discuss the bodies of athletes, male athletes in particular, and their autonomy over them. Yet I suggest there is a power in the discourse that surrounds sport, in the gaze that watches the sporting competition, and that finds its desires expressed clearly in our fantastic fictions and their criticism. The power to assess the essentially violent nature of a gender within a cultural arena such as sport finds itself uncomfortably aligned in fantastic stories with the desire to dominate sexually, to achieve “equity.” Some of this alignment may be effected to ambivalent (Martin) or even perhaps critical (Swanwick) ends, but some of it is clearly meant to titillate, some in the interest of establishing the “sexual power of women.” And to a certain extent this sexualization exists outside of the fantastic story—the website *balleralert.com*, for example, was once a surveillance website meant to track athletes for potential sexual enticement. Even within academic criticism of literature or sociology, we ought to question the discourses of power and dominance that we apply toward the male, athletic body, as it too resonates deeply with rape culture. I suggest that sport sf may even be a useful tool in countering discourses of power that normalize or trivialize non-consent, as long as we acknowledge that each of us potentially belongs to a “gender that rapes and abuses.”

## Notes

1. Some might rightly raise questions about the aptness of “combat sport” to describe trap shooting, as there is no interpersonal violence, though animals do die. However, because sociologists generally argue that sports are a proxy for war and nationalism, I would argue that the presence of firearms itself signals a kind of combat-oriented sporting environment inasmuch as that term has any meaning.

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### Sexual Assault After Apocalypse: The Limited Logic of Natural Selection



Ryn Yee and Octavia Cade

The advent of apocalypse in science fiction is often accompanied by significant loss in both human and nonhuman populations. Depressingly, this is all too often followed by a focus on rape and forced reproduction, justified within the narrative on the grounds of repopulating the planet, or ensuring the provision of viable offspring: examples of this type of sexual assault are seen in texts such as *28 Days Later*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. The argument underpinning this storyline is often a pseudoscientific interpretation of natural selection, one which prioritises sexual and reproductive coercion by one or more dominant males. This interpretation, however, is limited in its use and understanding of science. It does not consider, for instance, the requisite genetic diversity required for a viable population to stay viable. Nor does it consider environmental factors which would indicate a small population is likely to be beneficial for the long-term sustainability of that population. A significantly degraded environment is unlikely to be able to support a rapidly growing population, and arguably it may be more beneficial for characters to focus on nonhuman reproduction in order to stabilise the ecology that supports them. This broad-based, ecological approach to repopulation is, however, far less popular in science fiction narratives than those based on forced reproduction and the sexual subjugation of women, arguing that popular misinterpretations of natural selection are driving narrative instead of alternate, potentially more accurate applications of the biological and ecological sciences.

Contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives can present as a “dystopian catastrophe” (De Cristofaro 6), reflective of “apocalyptic anxieties” (2) that eschew the expectations of utopian renewal that traditionally accompany literary depictions of the apocalypse. The prevalence of sexual assault in these dystopian post-apocalyptic stories is “a notable and recurrent feature” (Yar 60). Rape, in particular the rape of younger women, is present in a number of texts, justified by the rather hackneyed excuse that repopulating the world is a necessary action, and one which should be achieved by all means necessary. If dystopian, post-apocalyptic texts are reflective of contemporary anxieties, then Majid Yar’s contention that the “idea of a biologically-driven basis for sexual aggression has long enjoyed currency not only in popular prejudice, but also in legal and criminological thinking” (61) must surely act as inspiration to the authors of these texts. Similarly, Brent Ryan Bellamy notes that post-apocalyptic stories “provoke an emphatically political injunction to imagine the consequences of the political present” (6): in the context of this essay, this imagination would include the futures that may result if the so-called biologically-based excuses for sexual assault are (or remain) normalised.

The resistance that these imaginations provoke, within dystopian post-apocalyptic texts, tend to be centred around moral and political arguments such as individual liberty and the necessity of human rights. These are of course critical, but they rarely extend to health or science-based criticism of the premise. Before exploring some of this health-centred resistance, however, it is worth considering several examples of dystopian post-apocalyptic fiction where repopulating the world is used as a justification for rape.

In the film *28 Days Later* (2002), for example, a few scattered survivors of a plague are promised safety at a mansion, but the ultimate purpose of this promise is the enslavement of any (fertile) women. The surviving men are promised these women, because “women mean a future,” and without the promise of that future, men may be driven to suicide. Notably, this justification doesn’t even consider that women may be driven to suicide as a result of repeated sexual assault; the status of women’s mental health is apparently irrelevant. Similarly, in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), sex slavery is instituted by Immortan Joe, who creates a forced breeding programme in order to ensure that the healthiest women in the community will bear his children and provide him with viable heirs. The strongest boys within the wider community are trained and brainwashed in order to perpetuate Joe’s hierarchy, thereby both decreasing his potential competitors for healthy women, and increasing his power over the rest of the population. On an even greater scale, in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), widespread infertility caused by environmental contamination sees fertile women forced into the role of sexually available handmaids in order to raise the birth rate. The social changes this causes are reinforced by religious fundamentalism that encourages the perception of women as child-bearers above all else, and their exploitation is therefore perceived as being both necessary and righteous.

These secondary justifications—the improvement of men’s mental health, the consolidation of existing power structures, and the imposition of religious fundamentalism—are all challenged within their separate texts. Admittedly, advocates of rape as a repopulation tactic are consistently presented within the narratives as antagonists, and this may help to undermine their poor argument by simple association. The more heroic, relatable characters are reliably in direct conflict with these antagonists. Jim is completely disgusted with the actions of the other men in *28 Days Later*, and he not only refuses to be complicit in their attempts to rape both Selena and the fourteen-year-old Hannah, but actively helps them to escape. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the wives of Immortan Joe, aided by Imperator Furiosa, one of Joe’s most effective subordinates, successfully escape his control, and Joe’s regime is ultimately overthrown. Notably, in the prequel comic *Mad Max Fury Road: Furiosa #1* (Miller et al. 18) one of those wives is caught attempting to induce an abortion on herself after repeated rapes by Joe which, together with the subsequent escape attempt of the film, indicates resistance on both individual and community levels. And in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, informal networks of men and women work together to help the handmaids and their children to escape to Canada, where their documented experiences are able to provide proof that Gilead is committing crimes under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

Most of this aid results from empathy for the women, although there is further discussion of how the religious subjugation—the sexual slavery based on biblical ideals—is outdated, no longer applicable to modern society, and resulting from religious beliefs that are hypocritically applied. Some men who argue in favour of handmaids, for instance, also visit brothels, indicating that their justification for rape likely does not stem from genuinely held religious ideals. However, even the text-based criticisms of these secondary justifications all too often do not fully critique the primary assumption for sexual violence: that repopulation is an adequate justification for sexual assault. Perhaps it is simply assumed that the sadistic and predatory behaviour of the antagonists is sufficient argument against them? This is, admittedly, a perfectly reasonable response from other, more heroic characters, from the writer, and from the audience. However, it is worthwhile to consider the potential for resistance that may be found in health and science-based objections to repopulating the dystopian, post-apocalyptic world through rape.

### **Popular Misinterpretation of Natural Selection and Sexual Subjugation**

In many of the sexually violent post-apocalyptic texts that use the “repopulating the world” justification, there is a some sort of dominance hierarchy, one that is often based on the primacy of the fittest. The argument that some are meant to rule and some are meant to submit is clear in the above examples, and those who challenge the hierarchy are punished. They may be beaten, maimed, or killed, and this response, within the text, is meant to reinforce strict social or religious codes, particularly those that relate to gender. For example, the women in *The Handmaid's Tale* may lose limbs for reading (Atwood 275), are threatened with being sent to the toxic, radioactive colonies (61), and are even hanged for their resistance to enforced hierarchy (275-276). Similarly, in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the escaping wives of Immortan Joe are hunted by Joe's War Boys, so that they may be recaptured and forced to resume their sexual subservience.

Such a representation of hierarchical behaviour may result from a misunderstanding of what is popularly called the “alpha male” or “top dog.” The term “alpha,” when used in this manner, has its origin in a 1921 study of poultry, when a researcher assigned the letter  $\alpha$  to the female chicken at the top of the pecking order (Sumra 2). The same terminology has been used in studies on other animals, including some primates, although the most famous application has been to wolves: the term “alpha pair” was used by Rudolph Schenkel in the late 1940s, in relation to the apparently dominant pair in a captive pack of wolves (Sumra 3). However, the later realisation that captive wolves did not adequately reflect the behaviour of wild wolves has seen this term fall out of use, and it is now accepted as inaccurate.

Unfortunately, the label has stuck, and anyone who has perused the paranormal romance section of their local bookstore will be aware of its influence within speculative fiction. Fans of post-apocalyptic narratives, however, will recognise many of the same structures, albeit presented in a less direct form. Immortan Joe may not be the head of a werewolf pack, but he is certainly presented as an alpha male, even if that presentation is based on inaccurate, inapplicable, or fantasy science. This is because the existence of the alpha wolf, particularly the alpha male wolf,

has become a popularly accepted truth, regardless of its actual accuracy. This misunderstanding of science has proven difficult to correct. Dave Mech, a researcher who had previously used the “alpha” terminology in his 1968 text *The Wolf: Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species*, has noted with despair that the book that propagates these terms is “currently still in print, despite my numerous pleas to the publisher to stop publishing it” (Mech).

The mapping of animal dominance structures onto human societies is fundamentally flawed, and dystopian post-apocalyptic scenarios that rely on cross-species behavioural similarities do not have adequate scientific backing. Often, these texts merely reinforce the biological misconception that natural selection has resulted in there being a hierarchical model that everyone must strictly obey, and that violence—particularly sexual violence—is an inevitable consequence of that model.

Even if the idea that natural selection produces one or more alpha males who can justifiably rape in order to produce offspring were accepted in a human context, however, there are a number of other scientific problems with the “repopulating the world” justification for rape, and these centre on environmental factors, health services, and population viability.

### **Potential Impacts on Population Viability**

The “repopulating the world” argument for sexual assault in post-apocalyptic environments is undermined by two primary factors. The first, and most critical, is that the survival of a population is not dependent on successful conception in individual women. It is dependent upon the successful raising of young to reproductive age. The second is that the long-term viability of that population is impacted by genetic diversity, with small populations becoming less viable as genetic diversity decreases.

Given that successful conception does not equate to successful reproduction and long-term population viability, the argument that repopulating the world is an adequate justification for rape completely ignores the dystopian post-apocalyptic setting. Many of those settings are resource-poor—consider the limited water in the *Mad Max* franchise, or decreasing availability of food in Rebecca Ley’s 2018 novel *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land*—and the carrying capacity of the environment may advantage a reproductive strategy that limits births rather than forcing as many as possible. Notably, narratives that prioritise repopulating the world (through any means necessary) rarely focus on rebuilding populations of pollinating insects, for example. Repopulation is limited to the human species, regardless of available resources, as if the death of those resulting children from starvation makes any meaningful contribution to species survival. Ley’s *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land* addresses this, with characters choosing not to have children because of the impoverished, food-poor ecology they would be born into: “To bring a child into this nothing is cruel” (Ley 95), but such decisions do not always survive the reality of rape for purposes of reproduction: “She was almost thirty. Something had to be done,” argues a doctor who is complicit in medical rape (92).

“Something had to be done.” But who decides this, and does their logic survive close scrutiny? If the goal is really “the future of mankind” or “healthy heirs” or “increase the population with

particular attention to traditional values,” then the consequences of sexual violence are at direct odds with these goals. High maternal stress levels during pregnancy are correlated with low birth weight, premature birth, and developmental delays (Cardwell 119), as well as aberrations in the offspring’s neurological development, cognition, and cerebral processing (Van den Burgh et al., 26). Each situation of sexual subjugation provides a wealth of stress to expectant parents, affecting the unborn children in long-term ways that diminish their chances of attaining healthy adulthood.

Furthermore, texts that include the “repopulating the world” argument as a justification for the rape of young girls, such as the fourteen-year-old Hannah in *28 Days Later*, refuse to take into account that the onset of menstruation does not negate the difference between adolescent and adult bodies, and that the negative consequences of childbearing in adolescence can be significant. If Hannah had become pregnant, her foetus would have an increased risk of premature birth, low or very low birth weight, and neonatal mortality (Torvie et al. 95.e6-95.e7). These risk factors are likely to be significantly exacerbated by the lack of available healthcare in post-apocalyptic environments, where prenatal care and effective medical intervention may be extremely limited, or even entirely absent. That Hannah’s attempted rapists consider neither her healthcare needs, nor those of her prospective infant, undermines their argument as to the supposed “necessity” of her rape: actions that actively reduce her chances of birthing healthy offspring are counterproductive to the stated goals of her intended rapists.

Similar undermining of the “repopulating the world” argument occurs in narratives where groups of women are forcibly made available to either a single dominant male, or a small group of men within a larger population. An example of this would be the multiple wives of the slaver and warlord Immortan Joe in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (although the term “wife” implies a level of consent which is not reflected in their circumstances). While natural selection does include the survival of the fittest, where the genes of more successful individuals have a greater chance of spreading, within a limited population this can lead to a decrease in genetic diversity, and an increased chance of inbreeding, as the pool of available genetic material becomes less diverse over generations. Decreased variation, therefore, decreases population fitness (Lacy 320). Furthermore, the treatment of women as exploitable resources within these narratives is frequently linked to, the cause of, or results from conflict within the population as to who is able to access those resources. When that conflict results in death or injuries that preclude reproduction the gene pool is further reduced.

That conflict not only reduces genetic material and contributes to maternal stress. If women are primarily treated as exploitable resources to be sexually assaulted for the perceived good of repopulation, then the less desirable futures available to girls may have unintended consequences. In the real world, societies where women’s rights, particularly their reproductive rights, are limited, sex-selected abortion or infanticide can result in an imbalance of births, with boys favoured over girls. The United Nations Population Fund notes that “sex selection in favour of boys is a symptom of pervasive social, cultural, political and economic injustices against women, and a manifest violation of women’s human rights” (UNFPA 2). The impacts of such sex-selective reduction of

children are not always explored in “repopulating the world” narratives. If such a culture persists, however, the likelihood of a sex imbalance within the population increases, meaning there would be fewer female children to help populate the species—which is diametrically opposed to the justifications given for keeping women in sexual slavery to begin with.

Narratives that justify rape on the grounds of repopulating the world, therefore, rest on logic that is frequently both internally inconsistent and scientifically inaccurate. Arguably, the most effective means of viable long-term population survival lies in both increased maternal wellbeing, and increased genetic diversity, but few post-apocalyptic dystopias of this sort are interested in allowing women the freedom to choose their own partners, or the choice to reproduce at all. Neither are they particularly interested in assessing the viability of genetic material in pre-existing sperm banks, for example, to supplement the limited material present in those who survived the apocalypse. Rape appears to be a more attractive narrative option.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly why this is so, without making assumptions about individual authors. If the “repopulating the world” justification for rape in post-apocalyptic dystopias was routinely criticised on scientific or health-based grounds—a criticism that could easily exist alongside moral arguments for freedom and self-determination—then the prevalence of this unpleasant trope might be more reliably related to the desire to introduce conflict into the text, even if it is a conflict of the most unimaginative kind. Given that so many post-apocalyptic texts that use rape to repopulate the world do very little to explore any of the above issues, however, may indicate a wider misunderstanding of the science of reproductive health in both the producers, and the consumers, of post-apocalyptic fiction.

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### Octavia Butler's *Dawn* in the #MeToo Era



Julia Lindsay

In 1987, social scientist Mary Koss published the first national study on rape and sexual assault. It revealed the harrowing statistic that one in four women on U.S. college campuses had been victims of sexual assault, a statistic that would prove consistent with the entire female population in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Despite federal legal codes that clearly delineate what constitutes rape and sexual assault, Koss's research indicated that many women did not consider their individual experiences as rape, bringing to light a larger problem in public discourse. Most people, she found, did not understand that rape and sexual assault occur not only when an individual does not consent but also when they are unable to give consent.

That same year, Octavia Butler published *Dawn*, the first novel in her Xenogenesis series. In *Dawn*, nuclear war has rendered the Earth uninhabitable and has killed off large populations of humans and animals. A first-contact narrative, *Dawn* follows Lilith Iyapo, a Black American woman who wakes up aboard the spaceship of an alien species called the Oankali. The Oankali, who are able to read and manipulate a being's genetic material, inform Lilith that it is their biological imperative to advance their species through "gene trades." An agender subspecies of the Oankali, called the ooloi, facilitates their reproduction, penetrating the bodies of male and female partners with their sensory tentacle arm and mixing their DNA. Lilith learns that many other humans are in suspended animation on board and that the Oankali intend to gene trade with them and return to Earth—which would alter both of their species in the process. The Oankali then task Lilith with waking the other humans, serving as a cultural mediator between the two, and preparing them for this project.

Butler produced in *Dawn* quite a complicated and nuanced narrative. The two species cannot be easily split into heroes and villains or victims and aggressors. The Oankali can be seen as both saviors and captors, rescuing the humans from their deadly fate but exerting great control over them, leaving them with little choice but to go along with the Oankali plan. However, Butler also problematizes the destructive tendencies latent in human nature and their manifestations in the societies of the global superpowers. Thus, criticism on the novel is often split between hailing the Oankali as the embodiment of alternative or subversive episto-ontological perspectives or reading them as an allegory for slavery and colonization (Sanchez-Taylor). Yet while critical work runs the gamut of conversations on gender, sexuality, queer studies, and Deleuzian ontology/rhizomatic frameworks, scholars have paid very little attention to the novel's problematic sexual politics (Bogue, "Alien Sex"; Bogue, "Metamorphosis"; Ackerman; Atterbury).

These issues were not given essay-length focus until thirty-three years after *Dawn*'s publication. In "Troubling Issues of Consent in *Dawn*" Joshua Burnett fruitfully highlights some



of the key moments in the series illustrating that consent—sexual and otherwise—is a running theme. He suggests we “read *Dawn* as a parable for the need for affirmative consent in sexual encounters, particularly ones which transcend barriers or break taboos” (Burnett 119). Such a suggestion is in line with the analytical moves Burnett makes across the essay, a death-of-the-author approach that centered on tensions within the text and how they may be useful for readers in the present, avoiding a more direct criticism of the novel or Butler herself. My essay will examine three scenes in the novel which feature sexual violence and violations of consent, two of which occur between Lilith, her partner Joseph, and an ooloi named Nikanj. I contrast these with a scene wherein Lilith stops a human—who epitomizes toxic masculine aggression and entitlement—from raping a woman. I argue that the direct condemnation of rape in this scene reveals Butler’s own blindness to the fact that the other encounters are acts of rape and sexual violence. As Lilith and Nikanj conspire to violate Joseph’s body autonomy through drugs, physical force, and coercive strategies, Butler reproduces rape culture narratives to justify their actions

The dearth of scholarship on sexual consent in the thirty years following *Dawn*’s publication undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that, as Koss recently lamented in an episode of NPR’s *This American Life*, the social impact of her research was minimal even though it garnered national attention (and yes, this includes reactionary backlash). Rape statistics remain roughly the same, and Koss’s work did little to ameliorate ignorance towards the definition and parameters of rape and sexual assault.<sup>2</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that Burnett’s contribution to Butler scholarship arrived in the midst of the #MeToo movement which not only brought the ubiquity of sexual assault back to the forefront of the public imagination but also shined a light on why such an epidemic continues.

The #MeToo movement began in 2017 after actress Alyssa Milano’s tweet asking followers to respond “me too” if they had been victims of sexual assault exploded on Twitter. It bears repeating, however, that the first woman to use the me too slogan was Black American Tarana Burke in 2006. Before the days of Twitter, Burke used then-popular social media site Myspace to raise awareness about the pervasiveness of sexual assault and to give women and girls—particularly women and girls of color—a sense of solidarity and voice (Burke). While the #MeToo movement shared this purpose, because it spawned from women in Hollywood speaking out against the ways they were coerced or forced into sexual activity by higher ups in this male-dominated industry, the #MeToo movement initially took the shape of a public reckoning.

Victim-survivors outed major figures beyond the entertainment industry, pushing the public to examine politicians and business leaders with renewed scrutiny. With the genesis of the #MeToo movement centering on men occupying powerful positions in society, the #MeToo movement shed greater light on gendered power politics in the public arena than the campaigns against sexual violence that preceded it. In fact, systemic problems were at the heart of #MeToo. As Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir write in their introduction to the *Routledge Handbook on the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, one of the movement’s “greatest strengths” is its criticism of social systems, that it is “a reaction not to the individual, but to a system designed to fail those who

have been subject to sexual harassment and violence” (7). However, as the movement shifted from its focus on affluent white women to include all genders and people of different sexual orientations of various economic strata, their contributions drew attention to #MeToo’s conflicting message.

If the affluent women initially leading the #MeToo movement encouraged publicly speaking out or even naming the assailant or aggressor as the primary means through which to bring them to justice—implying that the force or threat of national visibility and widespread scrutiny would combat these systemic problems—they seem to have taken for granted their own immense cultural capital. Intersectionality marginalized people, in other words, played a significant role in highlighting the reality that “For the majority of survivors, legal recourse is not economically affordable, professionally feasible, personally possible, socially acceptable, or emotionally viable” (Chandra 9). The movement’s systemic approach likewise opened up discussion about the cultural effect of hetero-patriarchy. #MeToo insisted that our cultural narratives contribute to the ubiquity of sexual violence. The continued societal negligence in discussing the various forms that rape and sexual assault take certainly necessitated the movement’s particular emphasis on expressed verbal consent, and as the movement became more inclusive, it went on to spotlight myriad forms of sexual harassment with a vested interest in exposing coercive and manipulative tactics. Introducing the term “rape culture,” #MeToo clarified this cultural diagnosis, drawing attention to patterns in behaviors and ideas such as what we now refer to as “toxic masculinity” or “white male entitlement.”

The #MeToo movement has since directed critical attention to re-evaluating and problematizing contemporary cultural production and that of our not-too-distant past. It can be understood, as Chandra and Erlingsdóttir write, as “an archive of lived counter-memories that militate against what is deemed to matter in hegemonic historical narratives, highlighting its exclusions. It is a call for resistance and for breaking silences” (3). Science fiction critics are certainly answering this call. For my part, I will spotlight sexual scenarios in *Dawn* that mirror the very issues of power politics, coercion, and rape culture narratives brought to the forefront of public discourse by the #MeToo movement.

### **The Image of the Rapist in *Dawn***

While the ooloi’s phallic sensory arm and its reproductive role between Oankali already provides an analog to penetrative heterosexual sex, the connections between the three parties that the ooloi facilitates by inserting its sensory arm into the spinal cords/nervous systems indicates that Butler means for this act to represent the emotional intimacy associated with sex, reproductive or otherwise, between partners. The ooloi’s control of biological processes not only allows it to create intense emotional bonding between partners, it facilitates feelings of ecstasy that we associate with sexual release and satisfaction. Indeed, the first time Nikanj (with whom Lilith has already developed a consensual sexual relationship) joins together Lilith, Joseph, and itself, it recycles images of Joseph and Lilith’s previous sexual encounters, essentially creating a simulation

of heterosexual penetrative sex in their minds.<sup>3</sup> This is an act of rape, however, as Joseph was unwilling and unable to consent.

Through her research, Koss realized that women were less likely to characterize sexual encounters they did not consent to as rape if they knew, were friends with, or were involved with the perpetrator. Attempting to broaden the public image of rape, Koss coined the term “date rape.” Today the word “date rape” is most commonly associated with drugs used by rapists to heavily intoxicate or render victims unconscious so they cannot physically resist.<sup>4</sup> The first of the three scenes this essay examines exemplifies both Koss's original definition and the contemporary conception of date rape. When Joseph meets Nikanj, the first ooloi he's ever seen, Nikanj shares its desire to build a friendship with him, offering up its non-sexual tentacle under the pretense of a friendly gesture—a greeting geared towards mitigating Joseph's discomfort in the face of this alien form. Despite his great revulsion, Joseph builds up the courage to accept this gesture and touches Nikanj's non-sexual tentacle. Emitting a biological sedative through its tentacle, Nikanj puts the deeply frightened Joseph to sleep instantaneously. Nikanj then peels off Joseph's jacket, lays itself down against him, and penetrates his neck with its sensory tentacle.

Though Lilith initially protests, asking Nikanj if it drugged Joseph or if he fainted, she then “wondered why she cared” (Butler 160). In this moment, Lilith becomes a co-conspirator in assault, joining in upon Nikanj's invitation. Butler concludes the scene with an erotic description of Nikanj's penetration of Lilith, which, uniting all three, marks the full commencement of this sex act: “She felt it tremble against her, and knew it was in” (161-62). Lilith is clearly aware that this is a nonconsensual violation of Joseph's body and that she played an active role in it, as captured in a passage soon after: “He might . . . ? She forced herself to voice the thought. ‘He might not want anything more to do with me when he realizes what I helped you do with him’” (164). Nikanj does as well, responding, “He'll be angry—and frightened and eager for the next time and determined to see that there won't be a next time. I've told you, I know this one” (164). Lilith's comment here provides important insight into her character and her perception of sex and consent, as Lilith refers to this sexual violence as something done “with” Joseph instead of to Joseph. This language and the erotic descriptions above reflect a problematic pattern in Butler's presentation of these scenes. As this essay will continue to tease out, Butler naturalizes rape culture narratives by implying some form of participation or consent from the victim, and this contributes to the ways in which these scenes elide the horror latent in such overt sexual violence. As Nikanj predicts, Joseph will adamantly decline Nikanj's advances, and Nikanj will again act against his wishes.

Sandwiched between these two assaults, however, Butler features a scene of sexual violence amongst the humans that she presents with far greater climactic urgency and which she treats with considerable seriousness. A woman's scream brings a self-sequestered Lilith into a scene of chaos. Newly awakened Gregory and Peter, the leader of a faction attempting to subvert Lilith's authority, are holding a struggling woman, Allison, between them and attempting to drag her into Gregory's bedroom in order to take turns raping her. Lilith witnesses a group of people attempting to free Allison struggle against attacks by members of Peter's faction. This already horrific mob violence

snowballs as the fate of this woman's body becomes a political battle with bystanders from the respective parties screaming at and over each other.

Peter's faction justifies this violence under a contrived pretense that the survival of their species depends on reproduction. One member yells, "What the hell is she saving herself for?... It's her duty to get together with someone. There aren't that many of us left" (Butler 177). One of Lilith's most vocal dissenters, Curt, attempts to paint this "duty" as a burden equally shared between the sexes. When a woman tries to defend hers and Alison's right to bodily autonomy, Curt "bellows, drowning her out," "We pair off!... One man, one woman. Nobody has the right to hold out. It just causes trouble" (177). It is, of course, clear that the patriarchal and misogynist American society from which they came informs the actions of Peter's group. The language used ("holding out") to justify sexual violence and socially sanction Allison's choice not to have sex echoes rhetoric historically used against women. Butler here calls attention to the kind of male entitlement the #MeToo movement would later pinpoint as a defining trait of toxic masculinity and rape culture. When a male ally steps in to defend Allison, another co-conspirator responds, "What is she to you... Get your own damn woman!" highlighting the longstanding treatment of woman as property and implicating it in acts of sexual violence (177).

In a climactic moment, Lilith intervenes, her rage and her enhanced strength allowing her to throw aside the attackers. She authoritatively tells the group, "There will be no rape here," continuing, "nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else's body. There will be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bull shit!" (178). Lilith's powerful declaration and her physical domination over these would-be rapists may read like a triumphant feminist moment. However, Lilith's characterization of this violence as a relic of a long-gone past—as a devolution and the antithesis of civilized, modern society—both reflects and contributes to the societal ignorance towards the prevalence of sexual assault Koss identified two years prior. Koss's research found that many women did not identify their experience as rape because it did not cohere with the image of rape, or, more specifically, the image of the rapist in the public imagination. The popular narrative of the monstrous stranger lurking in an alleyway for a blitz attack obscured the fact that 70% of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows, preventing countless people from understanding the nature of the offense they'd been victim to or reporting it to the authorities.

### **"I Know You Want It": Rape Culture Narratives and Sexual Scripts**

Perceptions such as these constitute what social scientists call "rape scripts," a subset of "sexual scripts." Sexual scripts "play a role in the creation of . . . rape scripts," writes Amanda Denes in "Biology as Consent: Problematizing the Scientific Approach to Seducing Women's Bodies," defining sexual scripts as "schemas that dictate expectations for sexual encounters and 'ways of knowing how to behave in sexually defined situations'" (Ryan, qtd. in Denes 413). In her study of rape and seduction scripts, Kathryn Ryan found that the majority of participants' rape scripts mentioned aggressive acts. Their conceptualizations largely featured angry men, conceived as

“low status”—participants variously described individuals with “serious mental problems... and/or social problems’ such as being a heavy drug user, an alcoholic, or a social outcast” (Ryan, qtd. in Denes 413). Butler recreates this rape script in Peter’s angry blitz attack on Allison and in Lilith’s characterization of him as a “caveman” and a “fool” which together suggest social degeneracy and intellectual deficiency (Butler 178). Conversely, as Brian Attebury points out, “The action of the story represents [the ooloi] in terms of plentitude, power, psychic merging, sexual satisfaction, evolutionary advancement,” desirable traits that will ultimately aid Butler in casting Nikanj’s sexual violence as seduction instead of rape (145). If Butler crafted Lilith’s monologue to serve as a triumphant feminist moment, this strong criticism of rape only betrays Butler’s blindness to the overt violations of consent in the coming scene and how it replicates myriad forms of coercion common then and today.

Indeed, the following rape scene opens quite differently, as Nikanj’s flirtation, sexual innuendo, and seductive invitation piques Lilith’s sexual desires. Even as they lead Joseph, who is unaware of what is happening, into the bedroom—and which could therefore be just as easily cast as a predator trapping its prey—this moment borders on the erotic, even the romantic. Simultaneously acknowledging that the last sexual encounter between them was rape (though without using the word), Nikanj offers Joseph the illusion of choice, telling him, “I left you no choice the first time. You could not have understood what there was to choose. Now you have some small idea. And you have a choice” (Butler 188). Realizing what is taking place, Joseph sharply responds “No!... Not again!” (188). Nikanj however does not respect this explicit denial of consent, continuing to push for sex, it responds, “and yet I pleased you. I pleased you very much” (188). When Joseph retorts that such pleasure was an illusion, Nikanj responds, “what happened was real. Your body knows how real it was” (189). Ignoring someone’s explicit rejection of a sexual offer by attempting to argue with their reasoning is already a coercive strategy, and while this pressure may be comparatively less malicious, Nikanj’s response here sets the stage for a pattern of rhetoric both used in coercing victims into “consenting” and used to justify nonconsensual assault and forceful rape. Nikanj’s response, and the rhetoric it echoes, provides the basis of an argument that dismisses verbal denials of consent on the false premise that the victim clearly wanted it, that the body betrayed such a desire. “Privileging the body as truth,” Denes writes, aligns with the “rape culture sentiment that the bodily experience is more important than the rational, verbal experience, or more succinctly, that no can mean yes” (411). In other words, under this “logic,” the body’s “desires” supersede express denials of consent.

To be sure, the argument implicit in this first statement will become more explicit in tandem with the increase in Nikanj’s use of physical force. Immediately after Nikanj finishes this initial statement, it “caught [Joseph’s] hand in a coil of sensory arm”—the verb here already implying unwanted force just as the “coil” conjures images of bondage (Butler 189). Joseph recognizes the danger of this situation, pulling away and urgently responding, “You said I could choose. I’ve made my choice!” (189). Nikanj’s coercive routine intensifies, as it moves from grabbing his hand to taking greater liberties with his body: “You have, yes.’ It opened his jacket . . . and stripped the

garment from him. When he would have backed away, it held him. It managed to lie down on the bed with him without seeming to force him down. “You see, your body has made a different choice” (189). This scene reflects a common pattern under rape culture—the perpetrator coolly attempts to persuade the victim into sex in a seductive or calmly playful manner, creating an illusion of choice. They touch the victim’s body, often in an accelerating manner, despite not receiving verbal consent. But they do not yet use extreme force, simultaneously maintaining a facade of innocence while demonstrating their physical power over the other.

Another subset of sexual scripts, seduction scripts provide significant insight into cultural interpretations of consent and appropriate sexual conduct. Studies of seduction scripts reveal that conceptions about the shape of seduction vary, but perceptions of their nature usually fall within distinctly positive and negative camps. As Denes points out, there is disconcerting overlap between behaviors associated with rape and seduction (Berger). Citing a study by Littleton and Axsom, Denes writes, “These similarities included the woman having no prior relationship with the man in either script, the use of persuasion or coercion by the man in the scenario to obtain sex from the woman, and the woman engaging in sexual activity that made her uncomfortable” (413).<sup>5</sup> Since these warning signs of sexual violence have been normalized as quotidian aspects of seduction, an individual may feel conflicted about whether to firmly shut down this uncomfortable situation—or even to struggle or run away—lest they be accused of “overreacting” to a “harmless come on.” Responding firmly or taking physical action such as pushing an aggressor off may also come with social/economic consequences particularly when the victim knows the assailant. The vulnerability created by this catch-22 is then redoubled as the unwanted touch accelerates into staging, so to speak, the sex act—removing clothes, moving closer to the bed—and this may lead the victim into resignation, signaling sex is now inevitable.

Joseph certainly displays this sense of entrapment, uncertainty, fear, and resignation as the scene continues. Joseph begins to “struggl[e] violently for several seconds, then sto[p]” seemingly recognizing his own powerlessness in the face of Nikanj’s advances, as he asks, “Why are you doing this?” (Butler 189). Nikanj continues its cool coercion, telling Joseph repeatedly to close his eyes even as Joseph plaintively continues to ask what Nikanj will do to him. He finally gives up his questioning, “[holding] his body rigid” as if accepting the inevitable (189). Though Nikanj does not penetrate Joseph in this moment, Joseph’s pleas and his final stiffening of his body horrifically echo of the stages of emotions rape victims go through in the moment they realize their bodies will be violated, trying to appeal to their attacker in order to stop the attack and preparing their bodies and minds for the violence they know will occur. Immediately following this moment, a calm, “patient and interested” Lilith reflects that this may be “her only chance ever to watch... as an ooloi seduced someone,” musing that Joseph is “probably enjoying himself, though could not have said so” (190). Nikanj’s unhesitating advancement does not concern Lilith, as she believes, though

without evidence, that Joseph desires Nikanj. Lilith's calm response to Joseph's highly apparent fear stems from the fact that she too subscribes to the rape culture argument that the body's (supposed) desires reflect the "true" will of the victim and negate their spoken refusal of consent.

Moreover, the fact that Lilith is waiting "patiently" indicates her unfaltering belief, built on the premise that Joseph truly wants sex, that sex will occur. Pairing this fact with her characterization of this scene as a seduction, it is clear that Lilith maintains a positive seduction script. As opposed to the seduction script Littleton and Axsom studied which describes one party's attempt to have sex with the other that leaves the recipient uncomfortable, Lilith's seduction script is built upon the eventual culmination in the sex act of shared physical attraction or sexual desire. Positioning herself as a spectator not in Nikanj's seduction but in an ooloi's seduction gives further insight into her seduction script, as it suggests that Nikanj is enacting a seduction ritual shared by the entire species. Under this logic, her seduction script not only implies a fixed ending but also a predictable set of acts preceding it. In the context of this scene, Lilith's ritual seduction script reduces Joseph's refusal of consent by reading it as part of the "natural" progression to sex as he slowly gives in to his desires.

This ritual seduction script results from a confluence of rape culture narratives, as it relies on the presumption that Joseph physically desires Nikanj and on the faulty premise that bodily desires indicate the will of the individual. It is no surprise, then, that Denes identifies this very seduction script in some of the more extreme communities produced by rape culture (her research focuses on the Pick Up Artist community whose rhetoric provides a textbook example of toxic masculinity and white male entitlement). Nonetheless, elements of the seduction ritual script are still fairly common across the gender and sexuality spectra, resulting, as I will soon unpack, from the narrative of "token resistance," an assumption that an individual resists sexual advances but wants and ultimately plans on having sex. Seduction scripts built around a ritual back-and-forth between token resistance and sexual advances can be very dangerous. Lilith's seduction script and the rape culture logic from which it stems not only allows Lilith to see Joseph as an (implicitly willing) participant, it assures this violence will continue. Lilith does not intervene as she did in Peter's attack, watching, and even enjoying, the unfolding events despite Joseph's obvious distress.

As this scene progresses, it becomes clear that Butler did not intend for Lilith's response to be read as a character flaw or as some symptom of indoctrination. Butler's presentation of the scene itself supports Lilith and Nikanj's view. Joseph falls asleep while lying beside Nikanj—a glaring inconsistency in character given the extreme revulsion, anger, and fear we've thus far seen. Allowing Joseph to fall into comfortable sleep, Butler implies that Joseph's outward expressions do not cohere with his body's response to Nikanj and its advances. Moreover, Butler, who has characterized Nikanj as a gentle and empathetic being throughout the novel, continues to reinforce the idea that Nikanj respects Joseph's choice despite the pain it has put him through. When Joseph wakes and learns that he fell asleep on his own and wasn't drugged, he asks "Why didn't you... just do it?" to which Nikanj responds, "I told you. This time you can choose" (Butler

190). In a chillingly casual reference to its previous date rape, Nikanj contrasts these two sexual scenerios as respectively nonconsensual and consensual. Despite the fact that Nikanj has touched Joseph's body sexually without consent, Nikanj does not see its actions as a violation of sexual consent. This in part stems from its body-truth paradigm which Nikanj escalates when Joseph points out the obvious— "I've chosen! You ignored me"—responding, "Your body said one thing. Your words said another" (190). Nikanj's definition of sexual consent therefore does not require an individual's *verbal* permission.

Given Nikanj's body-truth paradigm, we can extrapolate that Nikanj would also see all of its actions in the scene preceding this moment as consensual. However, such justification would appear to be a moot point. Nikanj's syntax "this time" and verbiage "can choose" suggests that Nikanj's respect for Joseph's "choice" only applies to the penetrative sex act itself. In other words, Nikanj feels the need to gain "consent" for penetrative sex alone. It only sees rape as a violation of sexual consent, and even that, as we've seen, it treats lightly. Butler thus presents an incredibly narrow picture of nonconsensual sexual activity. If Koss attempted to address large scale misconceptions about the definition of rape, #MeToo sought to do the same for consent, defining consent as strictly verbal permission and emphasizing that it is not only legally required for any form of sexual touch but that attempts to manipulate an individual into sexual activity through coercion also constitutes a violation of consent and sexual misconduct. Though *Dawn* is a product of its time, such a limited view of consent largely informs the novel's problematic sexual politics and the reductive image of rape it presents.

Nikanj then moves into the sexual position, telling Joseph, "I'll stop now if you like" (190). Whether or not Butler intended for this dialogue to reinforce Nikanj's empathetic characterization by showcasing its continued concern for consent, reading Nikanj's offer to stop in light of the seduction ritual script colors its gesture towards respecting Joseph's choice as weak if not fully disingenuous: a performative tease rather than a legitimate concern for gauging Joseph's comfort. In fact, given the development of this scene and its final moments, Butler may have included this dialogue to enhance its "erotic" nature. The scene proceeds to reveal that Nikanj was right about Joseph's bodily desires from the start, as Joseph responds, "I can't give you—or myself—permission [. . .] no matter what I feel, I can't," a dangerous narrative to promulgate when for many, this is truly not the case (190). The body as truth rape culture sentiment can quickly snowball, as, under the premise that the individual actually wants sex, any vocal resistance can be understood as "token resistance," or the practice of saying no even though you fully consent and plan to have sex.

The #MeToo movement emphasized explicit verbal consent largely in part to combat this narrative and, even more, to bring awareness to and validate the many reasons why an individual who does have physical desire for someone or might even desire to have sex would still not want to engage in it or feel the need to refuse it. Citing a study by Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh, Denes writes that in cases of resisting sex despite wanting it, women cited "inhibition-related reasons (i.e., 'emotional, religious, or moral concerns; fear of physical discomfort; and embarrassment



about one's body')” as well as “practical reasons (i.e., ‘fear of appearing promiscuous, situational problems, concerns about the nature of the relationships, uncertainty about their partner's feelings, and fear of sexually transmitted diseases’)” (qtd. in Denes 416). Denes writes that another reason for an individual saying no when they might mean yes “is related to the loss of control that can emerge from showing uncertainty” (416). Pulling from a study by Shotland and Hunter, she concludes that the persistence of saying no in such cases, “is likely due to... beliefs that they must say no if they are unsure, and that showing uncertainty would result in increased sexual pressure from their partners” (Denes 417). In other words, Shotland and Hunter’s study brought to light a common fear that an admonition of desire would suggest to the other party that they should only try harder, or worse, that, should the individual subscribe to the body truth model, an admission of desire would lead to physical assault.

Butler unknowingly validates these fears, highlighting the regularity of such scenarios as Joseph faces this exact fate. Rather than respect Joseph’s wishes, Nikanj focuses solely on Joseph’s acknowledgment of sexual urges—Nikanj becomes more turned on, and this admission supplies Nikanj with the justification to use force against him. Nikanj moves in on Joseph once more, ignoring his call to let go of him by responding, “be grateful, Joe. I’m not going to let go of you” (Butler 190). Again, Joseph realizes he is powerless, as Nikanj has stated its intent to use force against him. Again, Lilith watches him “stiffen” and “struggle” (190). She then sees him “relax,” concluding in her internal dialogue that she and Nikanj were right. Butler confirms this perspective; moving out of Lilith’s internal dialogue into a broader narratorial voice, she writes, “Now he was ready to accept what he had wanted from the beginning” (190). What any victim-survivor of sexual assault would view as the final act of rape, the horrific end result of forceful coercion, Butler casts as a cathartic moment of accepting desire. Nikanj’s final words, in the context of what we’ve seen so far and considering Joseph’s immediate response, should appear menacing and threatening, yet Butler discourages such a reading and minimizes the violence inherent in Nikanj’s actual threat of force. She instead presents it as romantic, ending the chapter with yet another erotic description: Lilith joins in and feels the “deceptively light touch of the sensory hand and [feels] the ooloi body tremble against her” (191). Concluding Joseph wanted sex all along reinforces the token resistance narrative central to rape culture by casting it as the correct conclusion. Though Joseph never gives verbal consent, Butler frames this final sexual penetration as consensual, and from a presentist perspective informed by the #MeToo movement, this sexual scenerio and its conclusion comes off as deeply disconcerting and provides a window into how entrenched these rape culture narratives were at the time of *Dawn*’s publication. As a Black woman and an author of SF, a genre particularly driven towards the social, Butler was more privy to abuses of power and more engaged in critically examining problematic social narratives, and yet even her work reproduces narratives that were particularly damaging to women.

Yet it also proves necessary to examine the sexual politics in *Dawn* as it bears on our present social realities, cultural mores, and sexual scripts. Rape culture narratives are largely reinforced through media; films, television shows, and novels play a significant role in normalizing sexual

misconduct. In another study by Littleton, Axsom, and Yoder, wherein they provided participants with an ambiguous sexual scenario (one in which it is unclear if it is seduction or rape), they found that, “When participants were primed to think about seduction, rather than rape... [they] were more likely to report characteristics in line with seduction scripts” (Denes 413). In other words, Denes writes, “Framing an interaction as seduction rather than rape appears to change the way that instances of forced sex are perceived. If something is framed as seduction, [an individual] may be less likely to call it rape” (413). Thus, Butler’s presentation of these predatory behaviors can impact readers now as much as it did nearly forty years ago. Even in moments where the novel acknowledges the predatory nature of Nikanj’s physically coercive force, framing the scene as a seduction—both by using the term and in including erotic descriptions—directs readers to rewrite whatever ill ease they may have experienced during the scene. Not only, then, does the novel naturalize rape culture logic, it may make readers who are victims of sexual violence less confident in viewing it as such, or it may invalidate victim-survivors who have acknowledged the sexual violence committed against them.

Octavia Butler is an institution, a pioneer, a strong feminist, one of the great authors of SF, yet no one is immune to internalizing problematic social narratives. From my, albeit presentist, perspective, the rape culture narratives here and the coercive and manipulative abuses of a man’s body are glaring. And while this fact shows how far we’ve come, it also highlights the reach and the pervasiveness of rape culture and the considerable steps we must take to scrutinize our cultural production and to keep the work of #MeToo going.

## Notes

1. Koss’s study only considers heterosexual rape and focuses solely on cis women victim-survivors. I want to acknowledge that all genders have been and are subject to sexual violence and rape, and this piece will primarily feature a male victim.
2. According to World Population Review (2022), one in four people are victims of rape or sexual assault. The vast majority of these are women, making up 82% of juvenile victims and 90% of adult victims.
3. It should be noted, however, that the feelings of physical and emotional intimacy and ecstasy in these acts are not dependent upon creating such simulations.
4. These include sedatives, benzos, and tranquilizers such as the drug rohypnol from which the term “roofies” is derived.

5. Littleton and Axsom's study present the crossover between rape and seduction scripts in terms of male perpetrators and female victims. This is because these scripts are reflective of people's associations with rape and seduction. Due to the precedents set in our heteropatriarchal society, seduction/courtship is associated with the man. Women also make up the majority of rape victims and men the majority of perpetrators, meaning rape scripts also revolve around male assailants and female victims. The predatory behavior described here in the crossover between rape and seduction scripts, however, is not exclusive to heterosexual men and can thus apply just as well in this scenario.

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### Weaponisation of Sex in Tabletop Role-playing Games: Surface Theme vs. Game Mechanic



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Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) are inherently violent. This is because conflict resolution in the game often resorts to combat between the player characters (PCs) and monsters or other non-player characters (NPCs). Mainstream TRPGs, such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), have generally avoided explicit sexual content in their texts, and themes relating to sexual violence can only be brought into the games by the players themselves—they are never part of the core books or accompanying materials. Moreover, recent times have seen the emergence of tools such as “the X card” (Stavropoulos) that allow players to instantly close down any uncomfortable role-playing situations with no questions asked. However, despite this tendency to avoid sensitive topics in TRPGs, small publishing companies and independent authors working through crowdfunding sites have, over the years, begun to create games that do embrace sexually violent themes.

This paper looks at two such TRPGs from the science fiction and fantasy genres—*Pistol Packing Bondage Nuns from Dimension Sex* (PPBN) and *F.A.T.A.L. From Another Time, Another Land* (FATAL)—and compares how each game approaches sexual violence. It will explore the relationship between sexual violence and the creation of both otherworldliness and realism in a game world. It will then argue briefly that the theme of sexual violence is more acceptable when employed as a surface-level veneer, or skin, to help increase the feeling of estrangement or otherworldliness in the game world, rather than as a deeper-level game mechanic used for the purpose of bringing an element of realism to the game.

*Pistol Packing Bondage Nuns from Dimension Sex* is a game themed on a combination of sex, violence, and religion. In the game, players take on the roles of “Sisters of the Glorified Order of Clitora” in a dystopian setting where the “fractured nations of the globe have fallen to civil war and chaos” (Lennon 5). Just when the world is closest to being torn apart by “progressive chaos,” an interdimensional portal opens up and the nuns come through into this world. These heavily-armed and scantily-clothed “avenging angels of piety” are humanity’s salvation and will bring order back to the doomed world. The general premise underpinning each game session is that the conservative and pious BDSM nuns are the protagonists, while doctors, educators, evolutionists, mask advocates, people who vaccinate their kids, scientists, socialists, and vegans are the enemy. The nuns are there to force these misguided individuals back to a path of righteousness through piety and bondage.

The text and visual imagery used throughout the book, on cursory examination, would seem to indicate the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the game and that player characters are

encouraged to incorporate a sexually violent approach when confronting antagonists in the story. A variety of brief quotes peppered throughout the text can attest to this:

- Justice will prevail. Sexily. (1)
- Bosoms are for heaving; sawblades are for cleaving. (1)
- For the sinners will suffer bondage unto the Lord. (7)
- . . . ride upon wheels of steel and wings of death to smite, purge and purify. Justly, Gleefully, Sexily. (7)
- Strap on for justice. (92)
- Go in sexy violence now to love and serve the Lord. (122)

While some of the implications here are quite striking—“Strap on for justice,” for example, seems to directly imply punishment through sex—many of the others seem to only hint at the weaponisation of sex with the word “sexy.” It is true that the word “sexy” itself does not necessarily equal “sexual”; however, when taken together with the visual imagery in the book, “sexy” does take on a semantic prosody more akin with “sexual,” and this makes the overarching theme of sexual violence seem fairly clear.

Examples of visual artwork throughout the book that add to this initial impression of the promotion of sexual violence include images of phallus-shaped weapons (figs. 1 and 2), weapons traditionally associated with BDSM such as lashes and scourges (figs. 3 and 4), and images that



Figure 1 : Phallus-shaped bullet (Lennon 3)

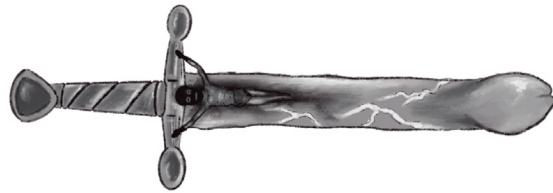


Figure 2: Phallus-shaped dagger (Lennon 27)



Figure 3: Lash (Lennon 38)

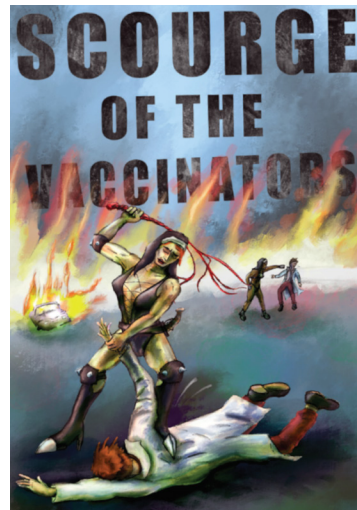


Figure 4: Nun using scourge (Lennon 91)



Figure 5: BDSM nun with shotgun (Lennon 8)

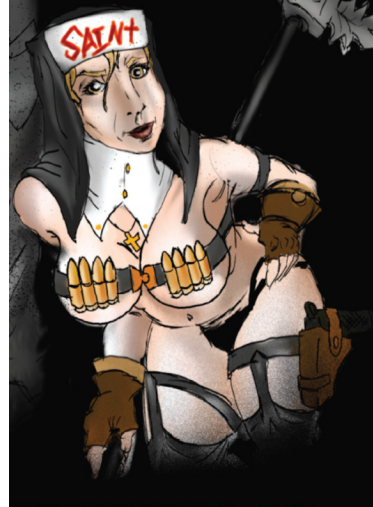


Figure 6: BDSM nun with bullets (Lennon 81)

create an associative link between sex and violence through close physical proximity (figs. 5 and 6).

However, upon deeper examination of the text, it can be seen that despite the BDSM theme and sexually violent imagery, concepts of sexual violence do not carry further into the game itself. That is to say, there are no actual game mechanics that overtly promote the use of sexual violence. Players build their characters based on ability “statistics” (Faith, Firepower, Poise, Purity, Piety, and Sex Appeal) (Lennon 10–11) and “skills” (Mechantheism, Affinity, Theology, Oratory, Stunt Driving, Explosives, Ballistics, Faith Healing, Survival, Balletics, Demonology, and Sharp Objects) (Lennon 12–15). Of these ability statistics and skills, only one—Sex Appeal—might appear to have any direct relation to sex, and thereby a hint at sexual violence. The description for this statistic reads as follows:

SEX APPEAL - Your perfect mortal vessel is a testament unto Her [sic] grandeur, and as such its curvaceous frame must be duly exalted. Your essence, your vitality, your comely latex clad presence—all are tributes to her sculptor’s caress. The temptations of the flesh made manifest, hearts pulsating with a bossa nova beat. Your SEX APPEAL stat governs both your powers of persuasion as well as your essential life force. If your SEX APPEAL should ever fall to zero, you have succumbed to the powers of sexless secularity and you must roll another character. (Lennon 11)

Thus, it would seem that this statistic functions as a kind of combined “Charisma” and “Constitution” ability statistic as found in more mainstream TRPGs, and not as something mechanically related directly to sex or sexual violence.

Furthermore, the word sex itself occurs only nineteen times throughout the book. Concordance lines were generated, using the software *AntConc* (Anthony), with sex as the node word (see Appendix 1). In each case, the word was being used as part either of the title of the

book or in the phrase *sex appeal* and does not co-occur with words relating to violence as one might expect if the game system had been designed to encourage players to actively utilise sexual violence in gameplay.

Despite the BDSM veneer overlaying the entire game, much of the content seems to focus more directly on religious-themed violence. A good example of this is a weapon available to the characters dubbed “The Sodomiser.” Given the BDSM theme of the game, one might be forgiven for assuming this to be a melee weapon that carries with it a sexually violent connotation. However, the description and illustration (fig. 7) provided in the text’s entry for the weapon make it perfectly clear that the name is referencing not the sexual act of sodomy but rather the biblical destruction of the city of Sodom (and that it is, in actuality, not a melee weapon at all, but a ranged weapon):

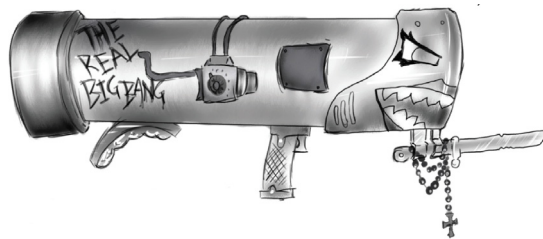


Figure 7: *The Sodomiser* (Lennon 53)

The actual missile launcher that brought destruction to the streets and steeples of Sodom and Gomorrah. Eat, Pray, Love [sic]. It’s a Missile Launcher [sic]. Single shot only. 1d20 damage to a wide radius. Anyone gazing upon the explosion must make a successful FAITH check or turn into a pillar of salt for 1d4 rounds. (Lennon 53).

In fact, there seem to be many more allusions to religious-themed violence than there are to sexual violence throughout the text. For example, “relics,” weapons that can be awarded to players throughout the game, are exclusively themed on religion: St. Elmo’s Fire (a flame thrower), The Crucifier (a nail gun), The Bible Basher (a war hammer), The Holy See (a sniper rifle), A Splinter from the True Cross (a melee weapon), The Flood (a hose that sprays holy water) (Lennon 51–55). This focus on religion can also be seen in the number of religion-related statistics and skills mentioned above (Faith, Purity, Piety, Mechantheism, Theology, Faith Healing, Demonology). Thus, overall, while PPBN is themed on BDSM and makes allusions to sexual violence on a surface level through some of the text and images in the book, sexual violence does not seem to be an integral part of the game. Instead, PPBN appears to focus much more on religious-themed violence.

*F.A.T.A.L. From Another Time, Another Land* is a fantasy TRPG set in a medieval European world similar to that of D&D. Players embark on adventures and work against monsters and NPCs much in the same way as in PPBN, though there is no overarching set goal for the game itself. Unlike PPBN, which contains a great number of BDSM-themed graphics, there are only three



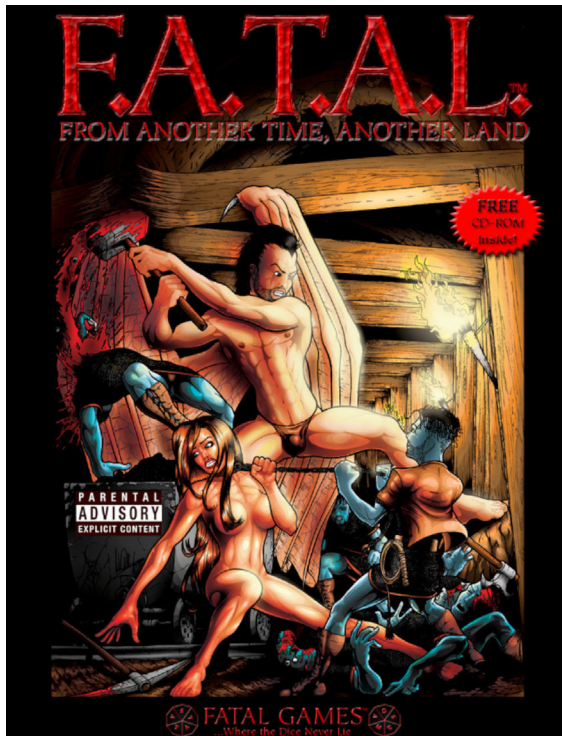


Figure 8: Woman in bonds (Hall, cover)

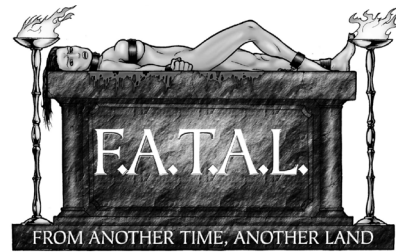


Figure 9: Woman in bonds (Hall 2)

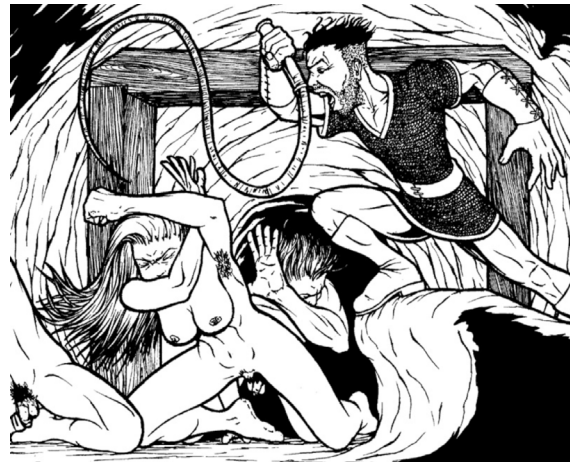


Figure 10: Kobold lashing a human slave (Hall 27)

pieces of artwork in FATAL that suggest a possible overlying BDSM theme in the game (figs. 8, 9, and 10).

In all three images, a woman is the primary subject, the receiver, of the sexual violence, either fettered or being lashed. This is quite different from PPBN where women are the perceived instigators of the violence. To explore the depth to which the author takes this violence one need only go as far as the introduction to the book, which contains a detailed content warning and an explanation for the inclusion of that content:

Since the game includes both sex and violence, the combination is also included: rape. Rape is not intended to be a core element of F.A.T.A.L., as killing is a core element of most role-playing games. Fatal Games considers rape to be a sensitive issue, and only includes it because of its prominence in the past. For example, Europe was named after Europa, who was raped by Zeus, according to Greek mythology. In Jacques Rossiaud's *Medieval Prostitution*, he reviews statistics on rape from numerous towns and cities in southeast France during economic and social stability, not war. Jacques attempts to represent all medieval prostitution with this book. In it, he estimates that half the male youth participate in at least one gang rape, and that sexual violence is an everyday dimension of community life. (Hall 7)

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Whether or not rape is a core element of FATAL will be explored in more detail below. Turning first to the language used, one finds that the word rape (used in the sense of sexual violence) occurs no less than forty-seven times throughout the book, outside of indices. Concordance lines were generated with *rape* as the node word (see Appendix 2). These occurrences can be classified into several different usage types as seen in Table 1 below:

*Table 1: Usage classifications of rape with select examples.*

Classification	Examples (Hall)
1. To outline how rape is viewed/handled in the game's fictional society, socially and legally. Imprisonment for rape consists of flogging, unless the rapist is an outsider, in which case the rapist is banished. When freed from imprisonment, a rapist is not considered criminal or bad. (192)	Imprisonment for rape consists of flogging, unless the rapist is an outsider, in which case the rapist is banished. When freed from imprisonment, a rapist is not considered criminal or bad. (192)  If the victim of rape is single, then fewer males desire her as a wife. (192)  The rape of a whore of a public brothel is punishable by a fee of 10 s.p. The rape of easy women who have exposed themselves in public places or in the private brothel is not punishable. (223)
2. To highlight the negative/frightening aspects of particular monsters/NPCs.	Victorious bugbears will often rape human women before devouring the children. (18)
3. To explain PC/NPC personalities and backgrounds.	Characters who have been physically violated or raped are regarded as shamed and exhibit bashfulness. (123)  Half of whores are forced into the occupation, and half of those are victims of public rape. (311)
4. As in-game punishment.	The criminal [convicted of practicing witchcraft] is often raped, then burned alive. (196)
5. As an action that PCs may attempt in game.	Some men attempt rape after intimidating women to allow the man to have his way with her; oftentimes, if this fails, the man changes tactics and attempts a Wrestling skill check, hoping to overbear her. (357)  If a human male successfully overbears a female, then it is possible that rape may occur. If a male seeks to have his way with a female at her expense and whether she likes it or not, he may attempt to Intimidate her to allow him to rape her without resistance. (398)

6. As part of an effect from a magic item or spell.	<p>Rapeseed of Raping: If a character swallows this seed, they will attempt to rape the next member of the opposite sex in sight regardless of age. (736)</p> <p>Caster immediately tries to rape the target creature for 1d20 rounds and has amnesia about it. (863)</p> <p>The nearest master must attempt to rape their favorite apprentice, and the caster knows it. (876) Caster and target forever believe that rape is fun and should be exercised daily. (880)</p>
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Furthermore, unlike PPBN, sexual violence has been incorporated into the game at the mechanics level. The “Rape roll” is a sub-category of the “Overbearing” mechanic and is described by the author in the following way:

The Rape roll consists of rolling 3d10, and the rapist wants to roll higher than 1/3rd of the weight difference as used in Overbearing, doubled by Intimidation if used, and the roll is modified by clothing or armor. If the roll fails, then the female manages to escape from the clutches of the rapist, and 80% of the time manages to land a Brawling blow with Graphic Gore either to the manhood (01- 50%) or testes (51-100%) of the would-be rapist. Further, if the roll fails then she either escapes prior to penetration (01-60%) or during the violation (61- 100%). If the roll is successful, then the male does with her as he likes. (Hall 398)

As can be seen, despite the author’s claims that rape “is not intended to be a core element of F.A.T.A.L.” (Hall 7), it seems to permeate every aspect of the game. The author includes sexual violence not only as part of a historical setting—his perception of which being perhaps based solely on his reading of Rossiaud—but also to flavour the fantasy/magical aspect of the game, and as background during PC creation. Where there is little to no evidence of a deeper-level weaponisation of sex in PPBN, FATAL has weaponised sex at the most fundamental level of the game by employing the Rape roll mechanic.

As Sihvonen and Harviainen state in their study on the intersection of games and BDSM, “just because the stage has been decorated with elements commonly associated with BDSM, it does not mean the activity or interaction that takes place on that stage is sadomasochistic” (5). This would seem to be the case in PPBN. If not employed for the purpose of weaponising sex in the game, the BDSM veneer must serve some other purpose.

One way of looking at this could be to see the BDSM overlay in PPBN as an aspect of what Ekman calls “non-narrative” (118) world-building. Much in the same way the illustrations in the D&D core books help depict the “pseudomedieval nature of the world” (Ekman 125), the BDSM veneer here helps contribute to the building of a kind of “otherworldliness” or absurd dystopia by

irreverently combining the BDSM images with those of the traditionally desexualised Catholic religion. This combination of contrasting elements helps create and define a strange new world, very different from the one that players are used to. Here the inclusion of sexual violence, or the veneer of sexual violence, may have no other purpose than this: to juxtapose the religious theme and create a game world that is, in essence, alien to the players. There are many examples of this in science fiction and fantasy at both the micro- and macro-levels. An example of combination for the creation of otherworldliness at the micro-level would be the creation of new vocabulary, as in techpriest from “technology” and “priest” (c.f. the *Warhammer 40k* novels, Thomas 442). At the macro-level, this can be seen in the anachronic overlaying of characters and setting. A good example of this is the Victorian character Edgar Allan Poe being used as the proprietor of an AI hotel in the cyberpunk series *Altered Carbon*.

Another way of looking at the function of the BDSM veneer is as social commentary in the form of satire. Lennon states in the introduction to PPBN that “it is a game for any group of friends with a penchant for satire and extremely poor taste” (6). The flipped nature of the protagonists and antagonists here pokes fun at the current cultural situation in America and other places relating to “anti-vaxxer” movements and other conservative views being put forward in the news media recently. More importantly, however, the author’s reticence to explicitly deal with sexual violence together with his heavy satirisation of religion perhaps speaks to mainstream society’s shifting perceptions of what is sacred and what is not. Religion has become, in many circles, something of an easy target for satire, where joking about sexual violence generally remains taboo.

With regard to FATAL, the weaponisation of sex seems to play an opposite role. Rather than using it to help build an otherworldliness as is done in PPBN, the author claims to use sexual violence to bring a greater degree of realism to the game. As mentioned above, the author of FATAL argues for the inclusion of sexual violence on the basis that it makes for a more realistic game because rape was a very real part of medieval life. He also seems to argue that in reality not everyone is a hero, so allowing for a variety of actions along a full moral cline also makes the game more real, and in his mind, more fun:

For instance, assume you are an adventuring knight who has just fought his way to the top of a dark tower where you find a comely young maiden chained to the wall. What would you do? Some players may choose to simply free the maiden out of respect for humanity. Others may free her while hoping to win her heart. Instead of seeking affection, some may talk to her to see if they can collect a reward for her safe return. Then again, others may be more interested in negotiating freedom for fellatio. Some may think she has no room to bargain and take their fleshly pleasures by force. Others would rather kill her, dismember her young cadaver, and feast on her warm innards. . . . No other game allows so much individual choice, and consequently, so much fun. Since the purpose of a table-top role-playing game should be to allow a player to play the role of their character as desired,

this game includes a wide range of material, from moral to immoral. This game does not support morality or immorality, but allows each player to role-play as desired. (Hall 4)

The author includes other negative elements of medieval society such as disease (malaria, bubonic plague, leprosy), infant death, and poverty-stricken peasant life, though perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent than he does rape.

One important aspect of gameplay in TRPGs is the perceived inverse relationship between “playability” and “realism.” The traditional view is that the more realistic you make the game, through the introduction of detailed game mechanics that handle the different aspects and situations of life in the game (often referred to as “crunchiness”), the more difficult it is to play the game. According to Garthoff, however, there is an interplay between “realism” and “playability” in which realism helps to “constrain works of creative fantasy” (1). Without the constraint of realism imposed by detailed game mechanics we end up

articulating a conception of society which is satisfying to the imagination but unsustainable given human social psychology. . . . permitting arbitrary, *ad hoc*, or contradictory rules or laws of nature—would be unrealistic, not because such rules are unplayable but because they fail to articulate a convincing world. (12)

While this may go some way towards validating the inclusion of sexual violence in FATAL, the graphic nature of the language used to implement it as well as its inclusion in every aspect of the game, both the real and fantastical, can alienate—and indeed has alienated (Furino)—the players and much of the gaming community. Where PPBN’s reluctance to incorporate sexual violence into the game at the mechanics level may well reflect society’s guardianship of this topic as something not to be gamified, FATAL seems to be rebelling against this taboo. The gaming community’s alienation from this particular game is also especially understandable, given that one of the central “pillars” of nearly every TTRPG is that the player characters are the heroes of the story. PPBN was able to overlay religion with sexual violence and still maintain the PCs, the nuns, as the heroes of the story. In FATAL, there is no requirement, written or assumed, that the PCs be heroes in any way.

Finally, unlike PPBN, no real case can be made for the weaponisation of sex being used in FATAL as satire or humour. The author’s single comment that “the greatest concentration of obscenity is in *Appendix 3: Random Magical Effects*, and is intended for humorous effect” (7), does very little to alleviate the graphic and serious nature of many of the sexually violent acts mentioned in that section. In summary, PPBN does not appear to be actively weaponising sex, but rather uses a veneer of sexual violence to help generate a kind of otherworldliness. FATAL, on the other hand, does weaponise sex, and uses sexual violence more deeply and broadly in an attempt, successful or not, to help generate a more realistic game world.

This paper looked at the weaponisation of sex in two tabletop role-playing games and highlighted the different approaches each author employed when incorporating sexual violence

into their game design. As Lennon states in the introduction to PPBN, “Pistol Packing Bondage Nuns From Dimension Sex, much like any Role-Playing Game, is a mirror—in that your experience reflects what you bring to it” (3). It may well be that players fully embrace the BDSM theme of PPBN and work to incorporate sexual violence into their own personal game sessions at the story-telling level, using the imagery and innuendo from the text as a springboard to go deeper into the theme; and conversely, it may be that players of FATAL decide not to fully incorporate into their games the copious and detailed mechanics of sexual violence available to them in the rulebook. The depth and degree to which players decide to utilise sexual violence in their games will very likely have an impact on the degree to which heroism, or the lack thereof, plays out in their sessions.

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Appendix 1

Each Sainted Sister starts with a total of 6 PIETY points.	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL Your perfect mortal vessel is a testament unto
INTERVENTION. (The only exception to the d20 rule is with	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL checks which utilise d30). It's up to
at the cost of not re-gaining any PIETY or	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL during this rest period. The beating corporate heart
our Sainted Sisters. The recipient of the anointment recovers 1d6	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL points. On the Third Day – By laying hands
persuasion as well as your essential life force. If your	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL should ever fall to zero, you have succumbed
flesh made manifest, hearts pulsating with a bossanova beat. Your	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL stat governs both your powers of persuasion as
healing effects of REST on delves into apocryphal lore. their	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL stat. Piety can also be awarded by the
damage die, subtracting the result from their opponent's	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL. Burst Shot -A wide arc of justice erupting
damage die, subtracting the result from their opponent's	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL. Staggering Blow- Similar in every way to a
The Anointing of the Feet which robs victims of 1d6	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL Blinding Ink -Summons a veil of impenetrable darkness
add it to your PURITY stat to determine your starting	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL TEST YOUR FAITH! SKILLS In their prophesied role
Agility, Speed PURITY Constitution, Health, Resistance, Stamina	<b>SEX</b>	APPEAL Hit Points, Life, Structural Damage Capacity, Charisma
Vestments: Nil Special: Bellowing Roar – When reduced to half his	<b>Sex</b>	Appeal, George will let out a deafening roar that
PISTOL PACKING BONDAGE NUNS FROM DIMENSION	<b>SEX!</b>	BELIEVERS!! Welcome to humanity's last stand. Welcome to
Welcome to: PISTOL PACKING BONDAGE NUNS FROM DIMENSION	<b>SEX</b>	PPBNFDS is a Tabletop campaigns, the focus is Role
and remain in place for 1d4 rounds. They possess no	<b>sex</b>	appeal and all their actions are illusory. Transubstantiation – Water
fast and lethal with an emphasis on style, swagger, and	<b>sex</b>	appeal, as you dispense foaming cups of sweet retribution
Reliquary Deep within the startling, swirling vortices of Dimension	<b>Sex</b>	lies a chamber whispered of in reverent fables.
Sexily. What Is This? Pistol Packing Bondage Nuns From Dimension	<b>Sex,</b>	much like any Role-Playing Game, is a mirror -

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Appendix 2

that rape is wrong. Caster and target forever believe that	<b>rape</b>	is fun and should be exercised daily. Caster and
death. Human: The criminal is fined 1d100 s.p. Rape	<b>Rape</b>	is illicit sexual intercourse without the consent of the
both sex and violence, the combination is also included: rape.	<b>Rape</b>	is not intended to be a core element of
victim. The human victims of gang rape are age 15-33. Child	<b>rape</b>	is rare. The rape of a child under the
is not considered criminal or bad. The social reaction to	<b>rape</b>	is rarely favorable to the victim. The human victims
her place in society and family. If the victim of	<b>rape</b>	is single, then fewer males desire her as a
superior in every way. Caster and target forever believe that	<b>rape</b>	is wrong. Caster and target forever believe that rape
roll. If either of them is wearing clothes, then the	<b>Rape</b>	roll suffers a + 2 penalty, + 6 for both. If either wears
penalty, + 6 for both. If either wears light armor, then the	<b>Rape</b>	roll suffers a + 3 penalty, + 6 for both. If either wears
penalty, + 6 for both. If either wears medium armor, then the	<b>Rape</b>	roll suffers a + 6 penalty, + 9 for both. If either wears
penalty, + 9 for both. If either wears heavy armor, then the	<b>Rape</b>	roll suffers a + 9 penalty, + 18 for both. The Rape roll
then the Rape roll suffers a + 9 penalty, + 18 for both. The	<b>Rape</b>	roll consists of rolling 3d10, and the rapist wants
a Drive check at TH 17 or attempt to isolate and	<b>rape</b>	the attractive character. For rules on rape, see the
If a character swallows this seed, they will attempt to	<b>rape</b>	the next member of the opposite sex in sight
a permanent + 1d10 bonus to CA. Caster immediately tries to	<b>rape</b>	the target creature for 1d20 rounds and has amnesia
s door at night, do not disguise themselves, and either	<b>rape</b>	the victim in her home and in the presence
of gang rape are age 15-33. Child rape is rare. The	<b>rape</b>	of a child under the age of 14 or 15 is
anal sex. Heterosexual sodomy is less frequent than bestiality. The	<b>rape</b>	of a whore of a public brothel is punishable
brothel is punishable by a fee of 10 s.p. The	<b>rape</b>	of easy women who have exposed themselves in public
to death. Human: The criminal is fined 1d100 s.p.	<b>Rape</b>	Rape is illicit sexual intercourse without the consent of
includes both sex and violence, the combination is also included:	<b>rape.</b>	Rape is not intended to be a core element
is male, then he must attempt to either overbear and	<b>rape</b>	(see Wrestling in Chap. 8: Skills) or practice his Seduction



SYMPOSIUM: SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SCIENCE FICTION

*Weaponisation of Sex in TTRPGs*

to isolate and rape the attractive character. For rules on	<b>rape,</b>	see the section on overbearing in the Wrestling skill
violently. Every time a spell is cast, the caster screams	<b>rape.</b>	Every time a spell is cast, the caster screams
the occupation, and half of those are victims of public	<b>rape.</b>	Roughly 25% of whores begin by being prostituted by their
Half the male youth participate at least once in gang	<b>rape.</b>	Sexual violence is an everyday dimension of community life.
Fear of words. Vestiphobia: Fear of clothing. Virginitiphobia: Fear of	<b>rape.</b>	Vitricophobia: Fear of step-father. Wiccaphobia: Fear of witches
spirit is broken or all courage lost. Some men attempt	<b>rape</b>	after intimidating women to allow the man to have
even members of nightly gang rapes. The victim of gang	<b>rape</b>	almost never accuses them of committing sodomy. Kobold: Slaves
hallucinate that the target of the spell is attempting to	<b>rape</b>	an ox. Caster begins to hallucinate that they see
half the male youth participate in at least one gang	<b>rape,</b>	and that sexual violence is an everyday dimension of
rarely favorable to the victim. The human victims of gang	<b>rape</b>	are age 15-33. Child rape is rare. The rape of
the complaint, the rapist is freed immediately. Imprisonment for	<b>rape</b>	consists of flogging, unless the rapist is an outsider,
In Jacques Rossiaud's Medieval Prostitution, he reviews statistics on	<b>rape</b>	from numerous towns and cities in southeast France during
he may attempt to Intimidate her to allow him to	<b>rape</b>	her without resistance. On the other hand, he may
a blasphemer. Nearest female believes the caster is trying to	<b>rape</b>	her. All involved in encounter or 1d10' radius go
kill the father or adult males. Victorious bugbears will often	<b>rape</b>	human women before devouring the children. Human women who
male successfully overbears a female, then it is possible that	<b>rape</b>	may occur. If a male seeks to have his
accurately represent mythology are likely at some point to include	<b>rape,</b>	molestation, encounters in brothels, or possibly situations that deviate
or armor. If naked, there is no modifier to the	<b>Rape</b>	roll. If either of them is wearing clothes, then
of note. If a character is born the result of	<b>rape,</b>	such as with the vast majority of anakim, the
am full of shit!" The nearest master must attempt to	<b>rape</b>	their favorite apprentice, and the caster knows it. The
a giant, UI, rabid hare named Bugs, is attempting to	<b>rape</b>	them. Caster begins to hallucinate that they have leprosy
core element of most role-playing games. Fatal Games considers	<b>rape</b>	to be a sensitive issue, and only includes it
traumatic or catastrophic events such as physical or sexual assaults,	<b>rape,</b>	torture, natural disasters, accidents, and wars. Characters with this

must be knowledgeable and persuasive. A procuress recruits	<b>rape</b>	victims, abandoned females, and solicits wives who feel constrained
by the plaintiff until satisfied with justice. Information on medieval	<b>rape</b>	was referenced from Rossiaud's Medieval Prostitution. For more

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### “Fight Back or Die”: Rape, Revenge, and the Supernatural in *Tomb Raider*



Kenzie Gordon

In 2012, one of gaming’s most recognizable icons, Lara Croft, found herself in an all-too-familiar position—at the center of a controversy around gender and representation in games. In a promotional interview prior to the release of Crystal Dynamics’s 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot, executive producer Ron Rosenberg revealed that Lara’s origin story included a rape attempt, with the scene featured in the first-look gameplay trailer (Schreier). Rosenberg’s interview set off an internet maelstrom that drew a hasty walk-back from the studio. Three days later, studio head Darrell Gallagher asserted that “sexual assault of any kind is categorically not a theme we cover in this game” (qtd. in Gera).

Crystal Dynamics’s attempt to downplay the assault is far from surprising—depictions of sexual assault can earn a game an 18+ rating from the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, and pre-launch controversy around sexual violence is likely not what the studio had in mind for its revamped, more progressive take on the franchise. The assertion that sexual violence is not a theme in the game, however, is demonstrably false: the incident at the heart of the controversy, in which Lara is groped and nuzzled by an armed assailant, is sexual violence. But the question of sexual violence as theme extends far beyond this initial incident. Although it bears many hallmarks of its Indiana Jones-style action-adventure heritage, *Tomb Raider* in many ways is a supernatural rape-revenge story, with Lara’s first kill—her would-be assailant—setting into motion the events of this game and recontextualizing Lara Croft’s character as one hardened by the threat of gendered violence. The rape-revenge premise of *Tomb Raider* is obscured by two narrative choices made by the game’s developers. By not subjecting Lara to a physical rape, the developers grant themselves plausible deniability, leaning heavily on public (mis)understandings of what constitutes sexual violence. More insidiously, the developers rely on the estranging aspects of the game’s science fiction premise to abstract the sexually violent aspects of the plot beyond an immediately identifiable reading. In other words, using a female, supernatural antagonist as the shadowy force behind the tangible threats Lara faces obscures the ways that *Tomb Raider* subjects Lara to largely male gendered violence with undertones of sexual threat. Upon closer examination, the supernatural force that Lara faces in the games poses a threat to her intersubjective personhood, a danger that feminist philosopher Ann Cahill argues constitutes the psychological harm of rape (132). In this paper, I explore how *Tomb Raider*’s developers use narrative and ludic instantiations of occult forces as devices to obscure the enactment of common tropes of sexual violence and rape-revenge in media. Jacinda Read argues that as filmmakers become self-conscious about how their work falls into feminist theoretical paradigms, their work

shifts, requiring theory to adapt and refocus (246). Likewise, as game developers adapt to calls for more diverse representation and less stereotypical roles for women, our analysis must move beyond obvious instantiations of sexual violence to include a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence as expressed through themes, metaphor, and gameplay.

### **“I had no choice”: Raising the Stakes with Sexual Assault**

In *Tomb Raider*, twenty-one-year-old archaeologist Lara is a junior member of the *Endurance*, a reality TV/archaeological expedition to find the legendary kingdom of Yamatai, somewhere south of Japan. The expedition is wrecked upon Yamatai’s shores in a storm, only to discover that the island is home to a group of violent cultists called the Solarii, who still worship the legendary Sun Queen Himiko. The main plot arc of the game revolves around the attempts of the cult (which consists of survivors of past wrecks on the island) to kidnap Lara’s best friend Samantha for a mysterious ritual, and Lara’s attempts to rescue the team while unraveling the mystery of Queen Himiko. *Tomb Raider* is Lara Croft’s origin story, and the Lara we meet at the outset of the game is very different from the mature, ruthless Lara of earlier installments of the franchise. Lara is nervous and hesitant; she frequently cries out for help and relies on her older male mentor Roth for direction about what to do next. The player’s first act in control of Lara is to light her on fire, whereupon she falls from the ceiling to be impaled on a piece of rebar. Throughout the subsequent scenes, she moves slowly, hunched over and hugging her injured torso, chilled by frigid rain and wearing a wet, ripped tank top. Although of course most video game protagonists begin at a stage of weakness relative to their enemies and environment, Lara is very explicitly framed as vulnerable, an aspect of the story the game’s developers focused heavily on in pre-release media (Paul 104).



Vladimir strokes Lara’s neck during *Tomb Raider*’s assault scene. Screenshot from “Vladimir” entry on *Tomb Raider Wiki*, by user KillerZ. [www.tombraider.fandom.com/wiki/Vladimir](http://www.tombraider.fandom.com/wiki/Vladimir).

Games media reporting on the incident often framed it as a “rape attempt” rather than a sexual assault (Hamilton). To be clear, the event that takes place in the game is a sexual assault; although different countries’ criminal codes vary in their definition of sexual assault/contact, in Western feminist definitions, sexual assault is understood to extend to a range of non-penetrative acts of a sexual nature (Canadian Women’s Foundation). Whether an act of penetrative sexual violence took place or not is, on the narrative level, immaterial; the incident demonstrates that as a woman, Lara can be subjected to types of violence that would never happen to a male counterpart, like *Uncharted’s* Nathan Drake. The point of the incident is to place Lara in a position of extreme, gendered vulnerability, and to create a scenario in which Lara has an ethically permissible reason to first cross the threshold of killing another human being. Although an explicit reference to sexual(ized) violence is never made again throughout the game, heavy emphasis is placed on the gendered nature of the conflict. Per head writer Rhianna Pratchett, Vladimir’s assault is the type of violence that Lara faces because of the context of the Solarii: “We’re talking about a community on that island which is solely male . . . It felt very right that this character would try those sorts of things. He is trying to terrify Lara as much as anything else” (qtd. in Gibson). This comment seems indicative of the common misconception that sexual violence is about sex and desire rather than about power and control; the idea that an assailant would commit sexual violence to terrify and exert power over Lara is fully consistent with feminist models of violence. In response to the controversy, Pratchett vehemently denied that sexual assault was a thematic arc in the game or that the assault scene was a “character-defining moment for Lara” (qtd. in Gibson). Whatever Pratchett’s intentions with the story, it is difficult to accept the premise that the event which sets into motion Lara’s transition from a fearful, dependent young woman to a Rambo-esque assassin is not “character-defining,” and the frequent references back to Vladimir throughout the game ensures that the player will not forget why Lara must kill all the Solarii.

Throughout the rest of the game, Solarii dialogue reinforces the gendered nature of their conflict with Lara. In overheard conversations and exclamations during combat sequences, Solarii constantly refer to Lara as “just one girl,” implying that her gender ought to render her less threatening to them. This framing reminds the player again and again that women are not understood as agential beings in this world. In fact, the only woman besides Lara and Himiko to exercise any significant agency in the story is a former Sun Priestess named Hoshi, whose suicide prevented Himiko from possessing her body. While men on the island may lose their freedom, women’s only possible fate is to lose their bodies and selves, and Lara’s every action in the game must push against this imperative.<sup>1</sup>

### **Possession & Bodily Autonomy**

Over the arc of the game, Lara discovers that Queen Himiko is a powerful sorceress who has been transferring her soul between sacrificial women’s bodies as “vessels” for centuries. The storms which trap Lara and her friends on Yamatai are the result of Himiko’s soul being trapped in a decaying body without a new living vessel, which she requires to maintain immortality. All men who crash on the island are either killed or recruited into the cult, while all women are offered

as sacrifices to Himiko and assessed for suitability as a new vessel. Lara's friend Sam is eventually revealed to be a distant descendant of Himiko and is selected to become the next vessel. Lara kills Himiko during her climactic attempt to possess Sam's body, ending the storms and allowing the surviving crew of the *Endurance* to finally escape the island.

The threat of supernatural possession is a common theme in science fiction and horror stories, and it does not always carry gendered implications or a thematic relationship to sexual violence. However, in the context of a narrative that has been so explicitly set in motion by the threat of sexual violence and its constant reiteration in gameplay, the parallels between possession and sexual violence in *Tomb Raider* merit closer examination. Ann Cahill posits that sexual violence is not only an attack on the physically embodied self but perhaps more critically on the victim's sense of themselves as an agential subject: "Because it renders impossible for that moment the victim's intersubjective agency, rape is a bodily, sexual assault on a woman's underlying conditions of being" (132). In other words, the suspension of autonomy that sexual violence enacts on the victim calls into question their fundamental, existential condition as an individual, permanently altering every aspect of the victim's self.<sup>2</sup> There are clear parallels between the suspension of autonomy that rape enacts in the real world and the conditions under which supernatural possession often occurs in fiction. The possessed, like the rape victim, unwillingly lose control of their physical (and sometimes, inner) self to an overpowering assailant, facing a threat to their existential conditions. And the effects of possession leave long-lasting psychological scars; as Cahill argues, "to know oneself as not only rapeable, but as raped, is to become a different self" (133). Interestingly, Cahill's framing of the rapist's intersubjectivity also bears strong parallels to that of possessing forces like Himiko, where the assailant is subject to a "paradoxical dependency" on the victim to fulfill their establishment of power. Like sexual violence, possession threatens to dispossess its victim of control over their intersubjective reality, conscious but trapped in the prison of their dissociated form. To be clear, I am not arguing that possession as it is presented in *Tomb Raider* is sexual violence, but rather that it bears many thematic parallels and that the way it is constructed in the broader context of the game sets possession up as a metaphor for sexual violence.

The premise of the story also forms a connection between the tangible violence Lara faces from Vladimir and the other Solarii and the existential threat of Himiko's possession. As Himiko's embodied agents in the game world, the Solarii frequently reference their instructions to either kill or capture Lara. Lara spends a significant portion of the game trying to rescue Sam, who is repeatedly captured by the Solarii.<sup>3</sup> In one scene, Lara is speaking to Sam over a walkie talkie when Sam is recaptured by the cult, frantically screaming "no" as Lara stands by, helpless to respond. Even if the threat of sexual violence against Sam is never made explicit through her kidnapping, her extreme helplessness is heavily gendered and connotes undertones of sexual violence. All of this serves to cement the connection between the violence of the gameplay and the threatened violence of the narrative, Sam's existential death through Himiko's possession.

### Hostile Environments and Loss of Control

*Tomb Raider* further manifests the notion of a loss of control of self through the design and interactivity of the game's environments. Navigating the gameworld in *Tomb Raider* alternates between free exploration around relatively open spaces, like a valley or a village, and narrow, high-speed traversal sequences along predetermined paths. In her trapped form, Himiko's primary power is the ability to exert control over the weather and environment, which is reflected in the traversal sequences of the gameplay, where she constantly leverages the environment to foil Lara's attempts to move through the island. Throughout the game, Lara must run through tight, constrained pathways that unexpectedly crumble, explode, or otherwise disintegrate, requiring the player to correctly perform a sequence of jumping, climbing, and swinging maneuvers to avoid death. From Lara's perspective, navigation of the game world is dominated by the experience of a loss of control over her body, as she paraglides through dense forests and is thrown time and time again down cliffs, waterfalls, and collapsing buildings. Lara is constantly pushed to the edge of her ability to maintain control, and the consequences of failing to maintain that control are sexualized. Should the player fail a navigation maneuver, Lara is subject to a vast array of grisly horrors that many have described as torture porn (Brown), frequently depicting Lara being impaled through the head or neck. These are often accompanied by writhing, loud gasps, and breathy moans from Lara, eroticizing her suffering. The player is invited to take pleasure in Lara's loss of control at the hands of a hostile environment, even as their gameplay renders them complicit (Blythe Adams 61).

Throughout the game's narrative, Lara and the player learn about Himiko through diegetic texts such as journal entries, statues and carvings, and other characters like Father Mathias, the leader of the Solarii. As Lara gradually uncovers Himiko's history and discovers the secret to her immortality, Himiko is positioned as a dangerous antagonist motivated by anger and a desire to reclaim her power. But Himiko herself barely exists in the gameworld; we never read a diegetic text written in her own voice, we never hear her speak, and we see her only briefly, when Lara stabs Himiko's corpse to stop her from possessing Sam. Perhaps most unusually for a video game, Himiko is an end boss that the player does not fight—Lara stabs Himiko in a cutscene and never battles her directly. As a villain, Himiko serves as a kind of false front, giving a narrative veneer of conflict between women while all the actual gameplay conflict occurs between Lara and men, and Lara and the environment. Himiko's supernatural, imprisoned condition provides a narrative condition for a female antagonist without the ability to act, necessitating male agents who subsequently dominate the game's landscape under the guise of a woman's direction.

The game space of *Tomb Raider* has been designed specifically to extend Lara's body (Ahmed 58)—many tombs, ancient ruins, and other supposedly human-made spaces can seemingly only be traversed with Lara's specific sets of tools and abilities. Yet these gameplay spaces are also chronically prone to systematically suspending Lara's bodily control and exposing her to sexualized brutality from an environment expressly oriented toward harming her. Throughout the game, the theme of loss of bodily autonomy is reiterated again and again not only through the possession elements of the storyline, but through a gameworld and mechanics that create a holistic

ludonarrative experience of loss of control over the (gendered) self, an experience whose gendered nature is obscured by Himiko being a woman.

**“Run you bastards! I’m coming for you all!”: Rape-Revenge in *Tomb Raider***

Further evidence for a reading of *Tomb Raider* with sexual violence as a core theme is its aesthetic and thematic relationship to rape-revenge films. In her analysis of the “revisionist” rape-revenge genre, Claire Henry identifies a loose iconography of rape-revenge, almost all of which is evidenced in *Tomb Raider* (4). Despite her significant shift to more realistic body proportions, Lara is still a conventionally beautiful white woman; relative to everyone else in the game she is scantily clad; she is often shown mud-covered or wet; she has many guns at her disposal. The key themes of rape-revenge, trauma, and transformation are explicitly at the center of the narrative, and her death animations border on torture porn, another staple of rape-revenge. In fact, the only aspect of the genre iconography that is fully absent is the femme fatale presentation of the heroine. Unlike previous versions of Lara, whose sexuality was often obscured but at least alluded to, *Tomb Raider*’s Lara has no sexuality to speak of, no stated romantic or sexual interests, and no sexual agency. That this Lara is much less a femme fatale than her predecessors can likely be attributed to the efforts of *Tomb Raider*’s female-headed writing team to address some of the more egregiously sexist aspects of her portrayal.

If, as Henry argues, the pleasures of the rape-revenge genre emerge from both the expectations and affect of revenge, *Tomb Raider* catapults the filmic pleasures of the genre to a new level with the ludic ones, as the player revels in their increasing proficiency at killing Lara’s enemies in new and interesting ways. Alison Young argues that the “law” of the rape-revenge genre is the need for *lex talionis*—the idea that the world cannot be set right until vengeance is achieved (17). The need to enact revenge against Himiko and her cultists is structured into the narrative: Lara cannot protect Sam from being possessed without working her way through the cultists to kill Himiko, and the crew of the *Endurance* cannot return to the outside world until Himiko is killed and the storms cease. But *lex talionis* also provides a justification for the violence of the gameplay. As we see in Lara’s traumatic response to killing Vladimir, the act of taking a human life is meant to be a major transitional point in Lara’s backstory, and throughout the rest of the game, she repeatedly states that she is killing only in self-defense or to save the lives of her companions. This narrative justification is distinctly out of line with the combat gameplay, as Lara’s skill tree progression allows her to expand her arsenal of violence and as the player earns trophies for killing enemies in increasingly creative ways. The conventions of first-person shooter games, which tend to treat enemies as disposable bodies (Blythe Adams 122), project *lex talionis* in *Tomb Raider* to obscene levels. Because Himiko and the Solarii’s antagonism is so tightly entwined and resolved simultaneously (with Lara killing the Solarii leader Father Mathias and Himiko in the same cutscene), we never have to grapple with the question of whether the Solarii’s masculine violence would exist without Himiko’s power, conveniently collapsing the physical and spiritual threats to women’s personhood into an easily resolvable epilogue.



## Conclusion

The positioning of the undead Sun Queen Himiko at the top of a cult otherwise completely composed of violent men helps to obscure the highly gendered orientation of violence in *Tomb Raider*. In this framing, the men in the cult are able to target Lara and Sam in ways that are very specifically related to control over their gendered bodies while maintaining the façade of conflict between women. Himiko's supernatural control over the island's weather and environment puts her in a constant position of power over Lara's body, subjecting her to a gauntlet of eroticized torture, while Himiko's absence from the game as an actual agential being relegates her to the position of figurehead, allowing the game far wider license to brutalize Lara. Situating Lara's quest to kill every member of the Solarii and avenge the (sexual) violence done to herself and other members of the expedition inside the narrative frame of Himiko's possession of Sam obscures the many ways that this is a rape-revenge story. Through these design choices, the narrative of the game hinges around a threat of the loss of (female-gendered) self as agential individual, in a context that opens with the threat of sexual violence, while still allowing the writers and studio head to claim that sexual violence is "categorically" not a theme in the game.

## Notes

1. There is one other woman in the story, a member of the crew of the *Endurance* named Joslin Reyes, who is not subjected to this imperative, presumably because once the Solarii discover Sam, they no longer have need for sacrifices. Reyes never leaves the larger group of the crew, never acts independently, and does not figure into the narrative aside from some minor conflict with Lara about the right course of action for the group.
2. Notably, Cahill argues that it is the process of healing from trauma, not the trauma itself, that produces the transformed self, an element of the process that is typically overlooked in rape-revenge narratives where revenge stands in for healing.
3. See Blythe Adams for an excellent examination of the game's tepid attempts to lampshade Sam's damsel in distress status and the stymied queer potential of Lara rescuing her.

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### Sexual Violence Toward a Digitised Body: Fan and Developer Gaze in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy



Steph Farnsworth

The *Mass Effect* series has been dogged by loud reactions (including trolling) and has courted debate over the depiction, sexualisation, and role of women in futurism narratives. *Mass Effect* killed off women (sometimes brutally) as a “refrigerator mechanic,” a term created by Gail Simone to describe the unnecessary deaths of women characters who were killed off as a way to further the rage and stories of male characters. This discourse was reignited with the remaster of *Mass Effect*. In the original iteration of the series, the second game featured a character, Miranda Lawson, who was genetically engineered to be a perfect woman. In every scene of Miranda Lawson, the game’s viewpoint lingers on Miranda’s bottom, including during highly emotional scenes where Miranda talks about her kidnapped sister. For the remaster, these images were removed so that Miranda’s face and expressions became the focus of her scenes—to the ire of a loud segment of gaming men. The misogyny toward digitised bodies provides a unique opportunity to interrogate any harm/influence that permeates offline spaces. This paper will address questions of the relationship between the gamer and digitised bodies (and the subsequent impact on the concept of homogeneous masculinity), and the distorted nature of the male gamic gaze.

One consequence of the online criticism of BioWare removing the “butt shots” was silencing support for the company’s editorial decision, in favour of promoting voices of rage and entitlement to digitised bodies. Women have always played and continue to play games, but they are a marginalised community in particular “when they do not fall in line with dominant gamer interpretations of video games” (Phillips 30). This power dynamic supported the ubiquity of complaints across platforms—Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter as the most prominent—to condemn BioWare’s decision to remove the shots of Miranda’s bottom. The commonality of the reactions creates a homogenous male gamer, one that is portrayed as white, cisgender, and most definitely straight: the embodiment of traditional masculinity. The concept of shared masculinity or collaborative masculinity, where gaming men can express their individuality, cannot exist under this dominant-marginalised paradigm. Women are silenced, but so too are men who do not adhere to the loud clamours for the digitised female body to be the property of these men.

The reactions ranged from those users who insisted that this was a reason they would not purchase the remaster: “RIP my interest in the remaster this was that final straw I will just stick to the old PS3 copies I have” (Corey II); fans advising “if you want to see her butt that bad then just get her on your squad and turn the camera” (Hudler); to claims modders restoring the content is a victory: “About time. In my last playthrough of MELE I had flat out rejected to help Miranda with her sister because she wasn’t showing the goods” (Konnertz). Withdrawing support for Miranda in

the game can result in her death, as gamers down tools and refuse optimal endings to vent their ire at a loss of access to a digitised body, highlighting the control players seek not only over their own avatar but the digital women around them.

A common strand among the comments was that Miranda, due to her design as a character stated to be genetically perfect, was a “fanservice character”:

To be honest Miranda is a fanservice character from the get go so why remove an aspect that she is supposed fulfill? Well good thing there are mods that can fix this back to what it's supposed to be. (Hytönen)

Fuck's sake, I hate this assault against fanservice. Miranda's ass is a work of art, oh, and many female players enjoy it as well. This is why I posted the other day about only enjoying anime anymore because it's for the most part free of this nonsense. Not that I was going to support Bioware anymore after *Andromeda* but the OT has a special place in my heart and I was hoping it wouldn't be fucked with. Guess I presume too much. [u/glissandont]

Linking Miranda's depiction of beauty and the specific shots of her bottom to a service provided for gamers suggests a transaction-based relationship between developer and player, and the player to digitised bodies—for the player to buy a game, they must in turn be serviced through certain depictions of women, as though there is an unspoken contract between gamer and creator. Anything else is to be “fucked with” by a powerful corporation, as gamers position themselves as marginalised in their relationships to wealthy studios and publishers.

Behind the loud online comments is a sense of entitlement and a feeling that something has been taken from them—access to a digitised body that gamers saw as theirs, built on a decades-long history of how women had always been depicted, and on a history where women had long been unable to voice much criticism, if any at all. Role-playing games can reinforce these norms: the player, at the centre of all things, can choose to reward non-playable characters for adhering to their ideals or punish them for challenging their own world view (as in the case of the player who would deliberately allow Miranda's death).

Amanda Phillips defines “gamic gaze” as a “visual field that gives voyeuristic access to the virtual world, which is then complicated by a recursive set of multisensory input and output that serves to invoke a sense of copresence (and commiseration) with the avatar” (135). The non-playable characters serve as titillation for the avatar-gamer; while the “male gaze” is much discussed, the gamic gaze is being specifically interrogated for the ways in which digitised bodies serve different segments of fan communities (by encouraging and appealing to different idealised-body fantasies).

Digitised bodies have to be crafted according to the dominant player base; to have a leading character who is a woman, she has to cater to a specific audience to circumvent opposition

from a potentially hostile consumer base. The original shots of Miranda, then, become part of a marketing strategy, and one which has evolved since 2010.

Adrienne Shaw examines how the *Tomb Raider* character Lara Croft caters to a gamic gaze. Lara Croft is a character similar to Miranda as a leading sexualised figure and, therefore, of use to this paper; she, too, is strong and combative, breaking the prior expected role for women, which was simply to be a damsel in distress. But Lara Croft is a notoriously controversial character for how she is depicted and what her legacy is for women. Croft is presented as a “kick-ass woman,” but her race, sexuality, and able-bodied status cater to dominant norms; furthermore, she is hyper-sexualised as a way to placate gamers: Lara Croft could be a leading woman but only if she fits a narrow idea of attractiveness to the men who would be playing her and talking about her (Shaw 19). This same method is applied to Miranda, as even an “empowered” digitised body (such as a leading woman) must be moulded according to narrow norms. While Miranda fits the profile of “kick-ass” through her work as a terrorist and intelligent by bringing a person back from the dead, feminists such as Maren Wilson raise questions about Miranda’s feminist legacy due to the way her character is directed and framed throughout the series. The fact that the legacies of women characters are questioned more than the legacies of male characters shows the weight of expectation on women (and their digitised depicted bodies) against a backdrop of industry sexism as women are given only the barest representation (pun unintended). Yet, there are important questions to be asked and answers to be found. Miranda is given admirable attributes. She is cool and composed, and without her, the galaxy would lose the war to the reapers. In so many ways, Miranda had the opportunity to set a new tone for women characters in games. However, her physical design is not empowering to her. As the main playable character Commander Shepard pointed out, Miranda talked about herself and her looks as though “she was a tool to be used.” And that’s exactly what BioWare did in the original iteration of the games.

Miranda became a digitised icon crafted entirely for the idea of the male gaze. But the male gaze extends to the depiction of men as well. For instance, Kratos from *God of War* or even James Vega from *Mass Effect 3* are incredibly strong, bulky ideals of hyper-masculinity. Kratos in particular becomes a leading avatar. But the ways in which the male gaze is expressed differ according to gender. Kratos becomes a figure of glorification, but women designed for the male gaze become the outlet for violent misogynistic fantasies for both fulfilling and breaking expectations of “perfection.” As a perfect human, so much of Miranda’s character is focused upon eliciting a specific reaction from a certain demographic of gamers: one of lust. This could be seen as inevitable when the International Game Developers Association found that the “typical” game developer was white, straight, able-bodied/non-disabled averaging at 35 years old (Woodcock 87). A human’s perfection and, most significantly, a woman’s perfection is left to be defined almost exclusively by men.

Has there been an evolution in the digitisation of women’s bodies? BioWare has tried to course-correct earlier decisions. Shortly after the remaster of the original trilogy was announced, Project Director Mac Walters stated that those shots of Miranda would be removed for the *Mass*

*Effect: Legendary Edition*, acknowledging that “I do think a lot of things have evolved since” (Metro, 2021). And yet, despite Walters’s comments that things have evolved, as has been shown, gamers took to social media to decry the changes and to assert that BioWare was supporting censorship and giving into what is pejoratively called “woke culture.” There were allegations that BioWare was being anti-sex, even though the games will still have just as many sex scenes and include characters who are sex workers (whose services can be utilised by Shepard) and strippers. The gamers that BioWare originally tried to appeal to by producing those shots of Miranda have certainly not changed. It may be fair for women and other marginalised gamers to ask, has anything really changed at all, particularly post-gamergate?

Women have always played games, but games are more accessible and popular, and therefore it is easier for almost anyone to become a gamer. Social media has exploded—and so too have the options for marginalised or disenfranchised gamers to call out bad content and to push for a change in how they see representations of their communities. Gaming development may still be dominated by men, but there is more opportunity to push back against the decisions of white allocisgender straight men and how they depict women, which is largely dictated by their fantasies than the realities of women or marginalised people. Indeed, this is an issue that has persisted since the conception of Lara Croft in the 1990s. Referring to the work of Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer—Witthford, and Greig de Peuter, Adrienne Shaw asserts that Lara Croft’s design “represents a revised approach to game design that more prominently incorporates women into the game world but in a way that intensifies appeal to the male market.”

It would be remiss to assert that there had been no progress on the designs of women characters, and there is more to digital women than lingering shots of their bottoms. Miranda does at least have protective clothing (more than many women in games are given), and while cosplayers have reduced Miranda’s outfit to latex-thin quality, her outfit in both the comics and video games has the thickness of high-quality leather to demonstrate that she is someone used to having shots fired at her. Still, she is made to wear precariously high boots that would be detrimental to working on the battlefield. The process for designing Miranda was undertaken to ensure that she appealed to the sexuality of (certain kinds of) gamers. This is confirmed in *The Art of the Mass Effect Universe*, a book that details the ideas behind the different designs that appeared in the original trilogy: “Concepts of Miranda’s body and clothing tried to balance sex appeal with a uniform befitting a Cerberus officer” (64).

While Miranda’s concept and her digital body are tied to the men who created her, the implication of the character is that to be perfect, she prizes conforming to ideals of beauty that adhere to dominant/supremacist norms. Those norms are determined by the normative and supremacist structures in place, those that empower the idea of a homogenous male gamer and silence those calling for more diverse women. As Victoria Flanagan asserts: “The role that the female body plays in the production of feminine identity is significant in the context of patriarchal discourses of femininity that seek to prescribe only certain body shapes, physical features and behaviours as desirable” (101).

This, of course, extends to which genitals women are assigned in stories, their body shape, their skin colour (or, more aptly, their whiteness), and even whether their hair is visible or hidden. Flanagan's words can be applied to game studies, as women are created and designed, their feminine identity crafted to cater to a gaming base and to aid marketing of a product. It is a burden all women in fiction carry: the axiomatic belief of what makes a woman. These video game images of women are then replicated throughout other media, such as magazines presenting a singular narrative of women across mediums (Fisher 5). They are not their own characters but defined by their audiences' and creators' perceptions of what a woman should be. Miranda encapsulates this history that they all carry, and she is the example of the pinnacle of these forces. The legacy of Lara Croft is still felt in the games industry.

Through examining gender in role-playing games, ReBecca Compton finds that the very concept of the male gaze did not only cater to monolithic men, but the hypersexualisation of digitised women gave women players a (false) representation of the "ideal" body in a way that could not be challenged, as the designs themselves reinforce normative and normalised ideas about how women should look and even carry themselves.

Even when studios, with their wealth and resources, work to correct their own errors, independent modders now have the power to enforce previous narratives. One modder, for instance, created content to restore the infamous "butt shots." Anyone can now produce a digitised body; it is not just those with the most resources creating images of bodies that will dominate and carve out norms, as fans can flock to independently made content that can feed into these narrow beauty and gendered ideas. The mod demonstrates a continually shifting relationship as gamers seek to change the canon material back to the original, but importantly, back to an artefact that was a capsule for perceptions and politics of 2010, an era pre #MeToo. Since then, there has been a shift in the openness of discussion around misogyny, even if games developers and industry leaders have taken little action to stamp down on the issue itself. However, there has been a cultural swing, since #MeToo and particularly since the gamergate controversy. Gamergate started out with an ex-boyfriend of writer Zoe Quinn making unfounded allegations about her career, which sparked gamers to troll her and other prominent women in gaming—a movement that has quieted but has never been fully defeated—and led to cisgender men claiming marginalisation for their gender.

"It's funny to me how the fact that men like ass is to them a shocking and harrowing realization that shakes them to the very core. Probably so used to their sniveling, servile, emaciated soy golems who get off to licking the dirt off their shoes that they forget that men exist as more than walking wallets and emotional tampons." [u/CzechoslovakianJesus]

Men, by this worldview, are disempowered if women are not subjugated: the genders are in competition, and to empower masculinity is to supplant femininity. Yet games, even single-player action-adventure games, can and do often queer its players. Helen Kennedy uses the

example of Lara Croft to show how players are “queered” by gaming: white heterosexual men are the focus of the game’s marketing (and Croft is crafted to a heterosexual male gaze) and yet those very same players occupy her space and her body and assume her as an avatar, essentially a transgender experience. The transhumanist experience of video-game play incorporates gender-play, disrupting and distorting the idea of fixed genders, and of the static idea of the male-gaze. Through delivering on the base desires of the loudest and most homogenous gamers, they are themselves queered and transformed.

The context of the original launch of *Mass Effect* fuelled the idea of a moving ground beneath the feet of cisgender men; the original launch of the first game was met with criticism and outrage during a FOX News segment, where it was falsely proclaimed that children would be exposed to extreme sexual content. The nudity in *Mass Effect* is limited and only related to a final cutscene with the playable character’s romantic interest, but the backdrop of outrage lingers in the minds of gamers who falsely compare the moral indignation about sex scenes in video games, with inappropriate voyeurism during emotionally fraught scenes.

Perhaps *Mass Effect* did not help itself with its own inherent lack of consideration for its women characters. It is clear that the iteration of FemShep—the playable female version of Commander Shepard—was coded after and based upon the figure of the male Shepard. As Phillips states, this helps to “reveal a core belief in women as the second, ornamental sex” (151). Miranda is heavily tied to the idea of an ornamental sex: a character whose backstory is that she was genetically designed to be perfect and the reaction to her was one of entitlement and control to a digitised body. The culture of loud misogyny gravitates around digitised bodies, as gamers seek to ensure that women are created and designed for them, and it leaves women who game further still on the margins, and communities of men stuck on an isolated land that is collapsing beneath their feet.

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### Tackling Trauma and Sexual Assault in Young Adult Fantasy: Kristin Cashore's *Bitterblue*



Cheyenne Heckermann

While themes of sexual assault, trauma, and abuse hold a constant presence in pop culture, including Young Adult (YA) fantasy literature, few titles have plots that explore these experiences without romanticizing or sensationalizing these subjects. Meanwhile, trauma and abuse hold great presence in the first three books of Kristin Cashore's *The Graceling Realms* series (*Graceling* [2008], *Fire* [2009], *Bitterblue* [2012], *Winterkeep* [2021], and *Spearsparrow* [forthcoming, 2022]), though the extent and focus greatly differs from book to book in a contrast between depictions of both healthy relationships and the effects of trauma and abuse. Cashore does not simplify these plots with the issues terminating when King Leck, the overarching villain, is defeated, and continues addressing lasting effects of abuse even long after it has happened. Cashore exhibits the effects and goals of retributive and restorative justice, which "offer a connection to individuals coping with trauma but also create opportunities for other students to understand the effects of sexual abuse" (Charles 2). Because Cashore's series is sold in the YA genre, the themes are key "because young adults are heavily represented in sexual violence statistics" (Colantonio-Yurko 2).

#### Vicarious Viciousness

King Leck is the core antagonist of the series with his influence spanning the first three books at various stages of influence: in *Graceling* as the ruler of a kingdom, in *Fire* as a child, and posthumously as a memory that haunts many in *Bitterblue* through the lingering results of abuse, including those committing atrocities on Leck's behalf. In the *Graceling* series, people who are Graced have a unique magical ability, and Leck's Grace is that anything he speaks is viewed unquestioningly as truth, even after his words are passed on to others. For example, this ability includes the belief that "King Leck was well liked by his people and had a great reputation for kindness to children, animals, and all helpless creatures," and the compulsion to believe this lie carries from victim to victim (*Graceling* Ch. 2). The reader learns that he appeared in the childless royal family's city, telling stories until he drew their attention. The king "named the boy his heir . . . even though they knew nothing of his past," followed by the mysterious deaths of the ruling family, leaving him the monarch with word of his "utterly charming" reputation, granting him greater ease of targeting victims (*Graceling* Ch. 17).

Leck and his Grace are a fantastical manifestation of an abuser's ability to charm, control, and manipulate others and fits closely with the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of gaslighting: "To manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity" ("Gaslight"). Leck's Grace enables him to quite literally rewrite the narrative to his wishes and

impose his own views on his victims, bystanders, and more. He convinces his victims, including his wife, Queen Ashen, and his daughter, Bitterblue, that their experiences happened differently than they occurred, even in the moment where “[Leck] knows [Ashen is] in pain and is showing [Bitterblue], [he] will take [Ashen’s] pain away and replace it with something else” (*Bitterblue* Prologue). Leck as an abuser is able to prevent Ashen from alerting Bitterblue that they are in danger and that she is not consenting, to convince them that they are happy, and to prevent them from feeling the need to speak about his abuse.

While Leck’s powers enable him to quiet his victims and erase their ability to fight back, they also allow him to force his victims to commit abuse. Leck enjoys this level of control over others as he exploits some of his victims and continues harming others the way he wishes, beyond his personal sphere of influence. This explains why he makes Thiel, Rood, Runnemood, and Darby—who were originally physicians—his advisors: they heal the wounds they inflict in Leck’s name and experiment on young girls, Leck’s preferred targets (*Bitterblue* Chs. 14, 35). The victims Leck weaponizes carry the guilt for actions that Leck inflicted on them. Through this vicarious control, he is able to convince an entire kingdom and beyond that he is a positive figure in the world, forcing them to turn away either by mind-control or indirect manipulation from the harm he commits both directly and indirectly.

#### **Aftereffects of Assault: Bitterblue**

*Bitterblue*, the third book in the series, opens with Leck’s abuse of Ashen, Thiel, and Bitterblue while Bitterblue is a child. Bitterblue explains her awareness of his abuse and control over Ashen’s actions and that she herself will “smile, too, because [her] mind is no stronger than Mama’s” to Leck’s manipulations, despite her awareness (*Bitterblue* Prologue). This is the first glimpse the readers are given of the extent of Leck’s abuse and manipulation of others during *Graceling*, and the rest of *Bitterblue* continues exposing the ways his abuses still affect Bitterblue and the kingdom. This includes grooming her to be dangerous and manipulative while depriving the citizens of his kingdom of their original culture and access to information by eliminating access to education and publishers. This is the plot of *Bitterblue*, exhibiting that Bitterblue herself “[deals] less with overcoming evil than with surviving its aftermath . . . [concerning] itself just as much with the possibilities for healing and justice once its villains are dead,” that even after the abuser can no longer do harm directly, the effects of abuse linger and are not so simple to recover from (Matthews 95).

When Bitterblue was a young child, Ashen taught her to “do arithmetic, because numbers are an anchor” when she is “confused or can’t remember” to remind herself what has happened beneath Leck’s manipulations, as math is concrete and indisputable versus memories and experiences that are under Leck’s influence (*Bitterblue* Prologue). She retains this habit and exhibits it throughout the book to ground herself and reframe her view of information and situations she learns of—though it is not portrayed as infallible. When Bitterblue is able to reframe her situation to recognize that Ashen and Thiel are in danger and she destroys Leck’s records,

which he wrote in another language, Leck threatens to force her to abuse her loved ones as punishment for her behavior. He is able to force her to forget what is happening and threatens to cut off Ashen's fingers and to force her to actually abuse her loved ones if she continues to destroy his work, weaponizing her love of her mother by convincing Bitterblue that if her mother is hurt, it is Bitterblue's fault. Leck forces her to tell him she loves him before slapping her and convinces Ashen and Thiel that one of them hurt Bitterblue, not him (*Bitterblue* Prologue). This further makes Bitterblue believe that her abuser is the person she can trust and love safely instead of those who try to protect her and that her technique of anchoring herself could cause false confidence in her experiences with Leck's ease of manipulation. He utilizes a similar tactic on Ashen: when Bitterblue resists, Leck implicitly threatens her with sexual assault and experimentation, saying "[Bitterblue] is a lovely age" and intimates that Ashen could give Bitterblue private lessons (*Bitterblue* Prologue). Bitterblue's fear of Leck's capability as a Graceling extends to other Gracelings who may be able to influence peoples' minds, resulting in caution and distrust, especially of those who claim to be unaware of what their power is.

Nine years later, Bitterblue is queen with her father's four advisors, still unaware of the full extent of Leck's influence that remains on her and the kingdom. She manages court cases involving chaos sown by key figures whom Leck empowered during his reign. It is during one case that Bitterblue discovers that, while she declares that the people of a certain section of the city should be taught to read, her judges and advisors take issue. Their issue is setting the precedent that "the queen's court is available to educate any citizen who comes forward claiming to be illiterate," alleging that most people can read; that, for those who cannot, it is an active choice; and that this does not impair their ability to work or feed their families when this is indicated otherwise (*Bitterblue* Ch. 1). Realizing she knows little about her citizens' experiences, including the rarity of literacy, Bitterblue sneaks out of the castle into pubs where she listens to stories her citizens tell, the only common way information and experiences are conveyed among the majority of the population, allowing her to learn about others' experiences.

These excursions are how she meets Teddy, a man whose family suffered and burned on account of their family-owned printing press. When Leck was king of the city, "it had been particularly incautious to run a printing shop," as printing shops had been burned to control the spread of information and limit the access of knowledge to those who could begin new print shops (*Bitterblue* Ch. 7). Meanwhile, Teddy is trying to create a dictionary to aid literacy in the city alongside a "book of truths" to help people learn and understand more, which aligns with Bitterblue's goals (*Bitterblue* Ch. 4). Leck's influence traveled exclusively by word of mouth: to limit the counter-influence of others' writing, he removed literacy education so only those in control were able to read and banned printing presses to limit the spread of information he did not want shared.

Much of Bitterblue's journey is focused on two facets of how information can be consumed to allow herself and her kingdom to learn the truth, heal, and progress. The first is by discovering hidden texts that reveal the history and details of Leck's reign in truth rather than in his desired

image. This involves discovering the translation to Leck's journals, which were written in a foreign language, as well as the revelation that Ashen's embroidery functioned as a coded journal, allowing her to evade Leck's discovery by chronicling her experiences in sewing and to reread her memories to remind herself of the truth. The second focus on information is enabling and empowering others in Bitterblue's kingdom by fighting to give them education so they may read, communicate, and learn what has happened, in a similar manner to how she does, so they may have a chance to heal and recover what was lost to Leck's abuse.

### **Aftereffects of Assault: The Four Advisors**

While they function as the antagonists of *Bitterblue*, Thiel, Runnemood, Rood, and Darby are all victims of Leck's abuses and mind-control power. The four were originally skilled doctors that Leck made into his advisors to force them to perform experiments on patients, treat those abused so they could endure further torture, and use them as instruments of abuse. Under Leck's control, they commit much of the rape attributed to the king. They fall into the challenge of male rape myths perpetuating harmful beliefs that men are unaffected by rape:

Male Rape Myths perpetuate the idea that males (boys and men) are unaffected by sexual assault and rape. These myths include the following ideas: that a male cannot be raped, that a male who is raped must have wanted such treatment, that only gay males can be raped, that males are not traumatized by being raped, that a male cannot be raped by a female, that male rape only happens in prison, that same sex rape means that the victim will become homosexual, that homosexual and/or bisexual males deserve rape because they are deviant, that if a victim responds sexually during rape he must of wanted to be raped. (Murphey 40)

The four advisors are victims of male rape myths because they are victims who blame themselves for their actions under Leck's total influence when they had no power or control in these situations. The advisors distract Bitterblue from the changes she wishes to make so they can continue ruling, hiding the acts they were forced to commit out of the misplaced guilt they feel and concealing their involvement. Records of their capability as doctors were destroyed, and the four continue hiding their medical expertise due to their own trauma, including the disappearance of the medical pamphlets they had written as students (*Bitterblue* Ch. 15).

Each of the advisors shows signs of struggling with mental health. The earliest mention of Rood and Darby has Bitterblue realizing they are absent from work because "Rood was having one of his nervous episodes, and Darby was drunk," both recurring reasons for their absences (*Bitterblue* Ch. 1). Thiel is shown to have "a long, diagonal slice across [his] inner wrist and the base of his hand, neatly stitched," inflicted via a broken mirror that he tries hiding from Bitterblue despite wincing in pain, and she later sees that a "thin line of blood was seeping through another part of Thiel's shirt, high on his sleeve," indicating Thiel's continued self-harm caused by his trauma (*Bitterblue* Ch. 14, Ch. 32). Thiel is not the only advisor to do so, and none receive treatment or help.

When *Bitterblue* unearths the truth, Thiel kills Runnemood to hide their actions. He then explains on a bridge that Leck has forced primarily him and the others to cut and rape children. Thiel says he “felt pleasure when [Leck] told [him] to,” “[feels] it when [he] sees their faces,” and has struggled to heal, insisting that what he had done is not forgivable when his consent was removed (*Bitterblue* Ch. 38). Thiel makes clear the misplaced guilt that the four advisors felt over actions they were forced to commit, for “being forced to perform sexual acts on another person is also traumatic” (Murphey 49). While Thiel and the advisors clearly view themselves as culpable for the experimentation, rape, and deaths, *Bitterblue* does not; she continues viewing Leck as at fault, recognizing the extent of control he could inflict both as a close victim of the abuser and as a witness to Leck’s abuse of Thiel. However, when the advisors manipulated the government to conceal the truth out of their sense of guilt, they prevented other victims from healing and themselves from being able to receive absolution and mental health aid.

### **The Struggle for Restorative Justice**

Even though Leck is dead, being free of abuse and the abuser does not terminate the lasting aftereffects of trauma; not dealing with these aftereffects can cause the trauma to resonate. Through this, Cashore tackles “the question that ideologies of restorative justice have the most trouble answering: what do we do with those who harm others? How do we create systemic change that helps a society recover from that kind of large-scale harm?” (Matthews 95–96). After Thiel reveals what Leck had done to them all, he commits suicide in front of *Bitterblue*. She hears afterward that Darby also committed suicide while in prison, and Rood admits to having contemplated suicide multiple times. Their deaths do not restore or repair peace to their or Leck’s victims nor does it permit the victims to have justice. Once *Bitterblue* can work on her kingdom unimpeded, one of her first suggestions is creating the “Ministry of Mental Well-being” to help many struggling with mental health, inspired by several of her citizens and her four advisors (*Bitterblue* Ch. 40). While she exhibits distrust toward them and intends to correct the ongoing issues within her government, she acknowledges “how horrible [it was] to send them to the prisons,” shares that she knew both were suffering but still had a capacity for gentility and morality, and distinctly does not demonize them for their actions (*Bitterblue* Ch. 40).

The deaths and suicides of the majority of *Bitterblue*’s advisors lessens the impact of restorative justice because punishment deemed suitable for the crimes could not be enacted. The deaths of Thiel, Runnemood, and Darby also mean that their knowledge of what happened is removed, as is the extent of their ability to inform the victims of Leck of the truth to allow them to seek justice. Their actions simultaneously prevent their own punishment for protecting and concealing Leck’s abuse of many, as *Bitterblue* does not need to enact justice, nor does the community need to come to a decision for reparation or restorations, though the advisors were humanized in *Bitterblue* while Leck never was in *The Graceling Realm* series.

However, this can be analogous to abusers who are able to escape or refuse to take part in restorative or retributive actions by choice or by punishment, in which the victims must fully

support themselves or each other in choosing what directions are necessary to progress and heal. Such an example of doing so is Bitterblue's Ministry of Mental Well-being, which Bitterblue herself stands to benefit from on a personal level due to her trauma caused by Leck, retraumatization from recovering records of past events, and experience of the truth and loss of her four advisors.

### Conclusion

The first three books of the *Graceling Realm Series* deal heavily with relationship abuse, sexual assault, and especially abuse of men, acknowledging that many of the events that affected characters' lives happened in the past but persist in shaping their lives. Their problems were not solved simply because the abuser could no longer act. It fits the demand of Murphey that "we must demand more accurate depictions of the aftermath and trauma that victims experience from sexual assault, even in fantasy" out of social responsibility (Murphey 49). These books' success in this appears to be a rarity, for several books by popular writers either fail to do so, romanticize these themes, or perpetuate the aforementioned rape myths. Cashore is able to fill this void for retributive and restorative justice and healing long after the trauma has happened in a YA Fantasy series.

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# SYMPOSIUM: MEDICAL HUMANITIES AND THE FANTASTIC



## A Glimpse into the Lived Experience of Disability

Mónika Rusvai



Medical Humanities and The Fantastic was a free one-day online symposium, held on 11 February 2022, funded by the University of Glasgow's Centre for Medical Humanities and co-hosted by the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic. The event focused on neurodivergent and disabled lived experience and its representation in popular culture. Key topics included the way the fantastic represents or subverts neurodiversity and disability, the expressions of lived experiences depicted with the aid of the fantastic, the possibilities of reframing the social, political, and medical perception of neurodiversity and disability through fantastic re-contextualisation, and tracing the social impact of representing disability and neurodivergence in popular culture. The organisers Beáta Gubacsi (University of Liverpool) and Anna McFarlane (University of Leeds) greatly contributed to a smooth and enjoyable online event.

The introductory keynote was given by Ria Cheyne (Liverpool Hope University). I am calling her speech introductory, not only because it technically preceded the symposium, as participants could watch the recording online before they gathered for the Q&A session, but it was also introductory in the sense that it provided a detailed, precise, and meaningful introduction into the cultural research of neurodiversity, including future hopes and potential pitfalls of the field. Cheyne highlighted that recent years have brought a massive upsurge and interest in neurodiversity, hence it is our responsibility to use this increased interest to the benefit of all members of our (neuro)diverse society. Her lecture included very important clarifications of general terminology; for instance, the differentiation of the neurodiversity paradigm (variation of the human mind) from the neurodiversity movement (social justice movement); and it also included a short summary of basic terms (neurodivergent, neurotypical). Cheyne called attention to the fact that there is a multiplicity of ways academia and the wider public defines neurodivergence – hence researchers have the responsibility to consider the consequences to using these. She also formulated a warning about analysing speculative fiction and film: you cannot simply substitute the Other for any marginalised group, but you always need to give further thought to why you are using neurodiversity in a critical context.

Panel 1 bore the title “The Fantastic as Methodology,” and it contained three superb presentations. David Hartley demonstrated how cinematic versions of autism represent the state of estrangement. Based on the modes of engagement with estrangement, he identified two types of filmic approaches to autistic neurodivergence. In his view, *autism films* are those that include an autistic character, whilst *autistic films* are pervaded by a unique, autistic aura. His conclusion, that an ethical representation of disability may result in a re-evaluation of what it means to be human, is a clear message for us researchers, readers, and watchers of such cultural products. Emma Dee

then provided the audience with a brief, but very interesting insight into hauntology. A literary author herself, Dee revealed through short excerpts of her own texts how she turned re-lived trauma into an embodied experience. Responsibility was also a key term in Dee's presentation, highlighting that authors have responsibility in depicting all facets of human experience. Josefine Wälivaara's presentation focused on non-normative time in speculative fiction and film. Wälivaara dived deep into the concept of normative time as a cultural construct; the white, cisgender, hetero, able-bodied and able-minded point-of-view of a much more complicated phenomenon. Speculative narratives, however, may provide the necessary estrangement from the familiarity with which we organise time.

Panel 2 consisted of two sections: "Senses and Sensing the World Differently" and "Lived Experiences." The first section felt like an exciting journey through the senses and the ages. Sara Neef gave an interesting example of how blindness is represented in contemporary urban fantasy, then we travelled back in time to Sidney's *New Arcadia* and observed the depiction of mind-blindness and how it might be compared to our 21<sup>st</sup> century perceptions of neurodiversity and neurodiverse people. The third presentation led the audience to the future: Leigha McReynolds showed how conventional categories of mind and body are disrupted in Samuel R. Delany's classic science fiction novel, *Babel-17*. The second section of this panel uncovered very interesting landscapes for future disability researchers. I particularly enjoyed Jennifer Slagus's presentation on graphic novels for children that focus on the lived experience of neurodiversity. The social impact of this kind of research is invaluable, as in the long term, it may contribute to the mental wellbeing of neurodiverse children. Brian Keeley's very important presentation on the representation of heart transplantation in films left me slightly disturbed and with questions I have never thought of before. Clearly, more attention should be paid to the lived experience of heart transplantees and post-surgery experience in general.

Panel 3 focused on two themes: "Disability and Neurodiversity on Screen" and "Disability, Myths and Mythmaking." Yet again, the symposium managed to cover a large area of screen representations of disability and neurodiversity ranging from a novel adaptation series (*Good Omens*, presented by Margaret Tedford) through a lesser-known Disney movie (*Treasure Planet*, presented by Jess Gibson) to the representation of augmented bodies in American and Japanese animation (Rebecca Jones). This section clearly showed that in pop culture research, more and more connections are developing between the wider audience and researchers (who, in many cases, are themselves fans). The two presenters of the "Disability, Myths and Mythmaking" section, however, presented on completely diverse, yet very up-to-date topics. Clare Moore, unlike any other presenter of the symposium, extended the disability topic to landscape, and demonstrated how this terminology might be applied to the landscapes of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth. This was a unique take on disability and had a heart-wrenching conclusion in the face of the ongoing climate crisis. The other presenter, Ellena Deeley, focused on diasporic experience through the representation of (formerly) conjoined twins in Nalo Hopkinson's marvellous realist fiction. It was

interesting to consider how the rare bodily experience of sharing a conjoined body with your twin might affect your mental health.

The symposium concluded in a creative panel with author Bogi Takács and editor Jo Ross-Barrett, both of whom belong to the neurodivergent community. An interesting discussion ensued, focusing on how disability-aware fiction is made and what the lived experience of a neurodivergent author and editor incorporate into their work. Ross-Barrett shared details of her experience as guest editor of the disabled and neurodivergent people's issue of *Shoreline of Infinity* (November 2021). She reflected on such key concepts as the neurotypical gaze and how it affects our perception of neurodiversity on a daily basis, then she went on to list the most typical tropes regarding neurodiversity and disability and revealed in what ways they are harmful to both 'normal' and disabled people. I especially liked her harsh criticism of the trope that shows neurodivergence as supernatural in origin. Takács started a very interesting conversation about the role and dangers of allegory in neurodivergent fiction. By that time, the creative panel's atmosphere turned cheery and colloquial, making room for such comments as Ross-Barrett's 'definition' of allegory as "a taboo-friendly nonsense we have grown up with" – stating that allegory feeds the keeping-up of taboos. I found Takács's reflection on this particularly thought-provoking as e said that this may be the reason why Eastern European speculative fiction (Takács emself is originally from Hungary) is still so fond of using allegory.

On the whole, I am very grateful for the University of Glasgow's Centre for Medical Humanities and the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic for making this event possible. Extra thanks go for keeping the online format – otherwise many of us would not have been able to participate. As the keynote lectures are available on the [YouTube channel of the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic](#), I certainly recommend them to watch and share the experience with us.

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## Autism, Film & Estrangement



David Hartley

What do we think of when we consider autism and cinema? It may be that we still begin with Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988), that autism-and-cinema urtext that seemed to become instantly synonymous with the condition. The success of that film created a stereotype: the difficult but loveable (and usually male) 'idiot savant', good only for feats of mathematical wizardry. We might also be familiar with subsequent dramas like *Snow Cake* (2006), *Adam* (2009), and *Mozart and the Whale* (2005), or, more recently, the thriller *The Accountant* (2016) as well as the documentaries *Life, Animated* (2016) and *The Reason I Jump* (2020). Readers might also be aware of *Music* (2021) by the musician Sia, which received an angry backlash from autistic commentators for its caricatured representation and its misguided scenes involving violent restraint (Thornton 2021). Beyond the films themselves, we might think of the various endeavours by cinemas to create 'relaxed screenings' designed for the neurodivergent who find the more common cinema-going experience to be too sensorily overwhelming. While these screenings are a largely positive attempt to accommodate disability, autistic journalist Laura Kate Dale has noted that they tend to be arranged exclusively for family-friendly films aimed at children rather than as standard across all types of film (113).

When we narrow the criteria even further and ask where we find autism in science-fiction films, the challenge increases. It is hard to identify a mainstream sci-fi feature that openly takes autism as its subject matter. The closest is Shane Black's reboot of *The Predator* (2018), which features a prominent autistic savant who the titular aliens decide is a prize worth stealing when his mathematical abilities are recognised as valuable. One of the entrapped characters in Vincenzo Natali's horror sci-fi film *Cube* (1997) is autistic, again blessed with the superhuman numerical ability that enables him to escape the mathematical death trap. Rather better is Dean Isrealite's *Power Rangers* (2017) reboot where the Blue Ranger is openly autistic and is a key member of the superhero gang rather than someone side-lined or rendered wholly vulnerable. Although even here the stereotype of savantism is utilised, as Blue is positioned as the brilliant technician of the gang who deciphers alien technology to help accelerate the plot.

Nevertheless, science-fiction as a genre remains a particularly pertinent realm for explorations of neurodiversity given its thematic interest in estrangement. For autistic people, feelings of estrangement can be a daily occurrence. Social interactions can prove baffling and frustrating, while issues around sensory sensitivity can make commonplace environments like schools, supermarkets, and cinemas feel alienating. It is not uncommon to hear autistic people describe themselves as feeling like aliens from another planet, with pervasive cultural stereotypes only adding to these feelings of distance. In this context, Darko Suvin's foundational theory of sci-

fi as the genre of “cognitive estrangement” (3) might be productively read as a synonym for ‘neurodivergence’, a move that serves to illuminate how the taken-for-granted real world can feel science-fictional for those who it does not appropriately accommodate.

This article aims to consider where estrangement is positioned in cinematic explorations of autism. The analysis is largely guided by the discussions that have taken place on the *Autism Through Cinema Podcast*, which I have co-hosted since May 2021 alongside fellow researchers and film fans. The podcast consists of conversations between the hosts and special guests, the majority of whom identify as autistic, and each episode focuses on a single film that has in some way resonated with the autistic way-of-being. This article is guided by these discussions to reflect on how estrangement operates in films where an autistic presence has been depicted or detected. It begins by acknowledging a fuzzy divide between depiction and detection, before reflecting on the term ‘estrangement’ and identifying its usage across a range of films.

### **Autism Films & Autistic Films**

As a collective, the co-hosts and guests on the Autism Through Cinema podcast are asked to suggest films to be discussed. Invariably, the autistic contributors have gravitated towards films that they have felt a particular connection with, rather than those that profess to depict the condition outright. The autistic film critic Georgia Bradburn, for example, admits a fascination with the work of David Lynch, suggesting that his films offer her something she “can really identify with” (*ATC*, episode 8). Video artist John-James Laidlow brought Agnes Varda’s documentary *The Gleaners and I* (2000), an idiosyncratic exploration of outsiders captured by Varda’s distracted and playful camera, which he suggests is Varda “taking pleasure in digressions” (*ATC*, episode 5). For film journalist Lillian Crawford, there are autistic evocations in the neat tableaux of the work of Wes Anderson, particularly in *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) (*ATC*, episode 29), while illustrator Ash Loydon waxed lyrical about the joys of autistic pleasure in the world depicted in Disney-Pixar’s *Cars* (2006) (*ATC*, episode 17).

These choices, I suggest, might be categorised as ‘autistic films.’ Using the term as an adjective suggests the films themselves are in some way autistic, or at least are suffused with an autistic sensibility or aesthetic. This latter is not easily or neatly defined (which is entirely fitting for a condition that itself evades neat categorisation), however, if we were to entertain the idea of an autistic cinematic aesthetic, we might find some shared characteristics that begin to form a theoretical approach. It may be said that autistic films foreground sensorial experience through a *mise-en-scène* rich with detail and imagery and may feature a cinematographic style that aligns with a neurodivergent protagonist, such as Henry in *Eraserhead* or Sam in *Moonrise Kingdom*. The gaze of the camera may favour a form of distracted looking, as seen in *The Gleaners and I*, while the narratives of the characters will often relate to experiences of being a misunderstood outsider. For the ‘most’ autistic of these autistic films, the experiences of these characters are evoked through the audio-visual aesthetic, rather than purely captured as an exhibit for a presumed neurotypical audience.

In comparison (but not always in contrast), an ‘autism film’ is one where the explicit subject of the film is autism itself, or where autism plays a significant role in the plot. These include *Rain Man* and *Music*, but also films like *Mercury Rising* (1998), *Please Stand By* (2017), *My Name is Khan* (2010), as well as *Temple Grandin* (2010) and *Keep the Change* (2017). These latter were featured on the podcast and favourably received, not least *Keep the Change*, a celebrated romantic drama featuring a predominantly autistic cast. Documentaries that position autism as the central subject also feature in this category.

Due to the nature of the audience’s continued fascination with autism as a phenomenon, autism films inevitably stake a claim into the cultural construction of the condition and, like *Rain Man*, risk becoming an authoritative text in the minds of consumers. As such, autism films have tended to be the ones that have formed and perpetuated certain stereotypes, often preferring to exaggerate elements of the condition that best fit the narrative structures of mainstream cinematic storytelling. In comparison, autistic films are those identified by autistic viewers as evoking the lived experience of the condition, whether through aesthetic choices or via narrative metaphors that explore divergence. Curiously, many autistic films are not necessarily created with autism in mind, which perhaps enables a greater authorial freedom on the part of an interpretative viewer.

Of course, this summary is neither exhaustive nor complete, and it is true to say that there is an enormous amount of cross-over between the categories, with some films occupying space in both. I would contend, however, that one shared element is the presence of estrangement. Furthermore, the use of estrangement differs depending upon the intentions the film has towards autism as a state-of-being. To elucidate further, it is firstly useful to reflect a little more on the word ‘estrangement,’ how it is defined, and where it may be encountered in narratives involving neurodivergence.

### **Estrangement**

Returning to Suvin, estrangement in science-fiction is placed in an inextricable relationship with the “cognition” of the author and reader’s apprehension of an empirical reality (4). The tension between these two elements—the latter as a basis for comprehending and assimilating the novelty of the former—generates what Suvin terms a “novum,” or new thing, which becomes the core of the science-fictional attitude (63). The concern here, however, is Suvin’s relatively rigid approach to the two halves of his formula. If, for example, a cognitively apprehended scientific ‘truth’ in a work of sci-fi is later found to be incorrect, should that result in the removal of the generic label? And, most pertinently to this discussion, is the readerly experience of estrangement essentially universal? Fantasy author China Miéville has noted that texts do not exist “in an a-sociological vacuum,” asking “whose cognition” does Suvin prioritise (235)? Following this further, we could also ask: whose estrangement? As autistic commentators frequently indicate, the behaviours and social organisation of the so-called ‘neurotypical’ are so fundamentally at odds with an autistic experience as to be alienating and estranging in their own right. Star Ford’s book



*A Field Guide to Earthlings* (2010) playfully explores this concept while also acting as a guide for other baffled neurodivergent outsiders.

So too are autistic people estranged from themselves. Activist Penny Winter relates how interventionist behavioural ‘therapies’ actively suppress the ‘weird’ behaviours of the autistic, resulting in people who “will likely grow to hate their autism, and themselves with it” (116). Culturally, the proliferation of autism represented as a white, male, middle-class, quirky, savant condition misrepresents the majority of autistic people. For activist Julia Bascom, such a narrowing of representation has “made us strangers to ourselves” (8). Autism thereby exposes the fragility of both of Suvin’s theoretical elements in his ‘cognitive estrangement’ formula and prompts a reconsideration of how we might more inclusively comprehend what it means to feel estranged.

Sara Ahmed provides a more dynamic definition of ‘estrangement’ than the one suggested by Suvin:

The word ‘estrangement’ has the same roots as the word ‘strange’. And yet, it suggests something quite different. It indicates a process of transition, a movement of one register to another. To become estranged from each other ... is to move ... from familiarity to strangeness. The term is suggestive precisely because it names the process of moving from one to the other, *rather than referring to different states of being*. (92)

The emphasis here is placed on a dynamic movement between the real and the unreal, or the familiar and the unfamiliar, allowing space for fluidity and exchange. Autistic scholar Remi Yergeau describes the lived experience of autism as a “negotiation between rhetorical and arhetorical worlds” (205), suggesting a similar transitory experience where the rigidity of patterns, schedules, and order complements experiences of chaos, sensory overwhelm, or the pleasures of self-stimulation. Importantly, Yergeau doesn’t suggest that one of these states is inherently better than the other, but instead attempts to highlight how the neurodivergent find themselves in a state of constant “betweenity” (177).

Considering estrangement in these more dynamic terms brings us closer to the lived experience of an autistic person in a world still predominantly structured around neurotypical codes. In terms of genre, the excising of the ‘cognitive’ part of Suvin’s formula may well push us beyond the strictly science-fictional into wilder fantastical realms. This is by no means a bad thing, however, as Suvin’s insistence on retaining a link with “the author’s empirical environment” remains a useful structural device (4). While the precise coordinates of autism as a diagnostic category still prove elusive and fuzzy, it remains important to continue to acknowledge that it exists, persists, and forms the fundamental core of the identities of autistic people. As such, we can now move forward with a reconfiguration of Suvin’s formula into the cinematic analyses that follow. I will briefly consider how two ‘autism films’ and two ‘autistic films’ make use of a ‘neurodivergent estrangement’ in their explorations of difference.

### **Estrangement, Autism, & Film**

In Ben Lewin's comedy drama *Please Stand By*, autistic woman Wendy (Dakota Fanning) has written a *Star Trek* script that she intends to send to Paramount Pictures as part of an open competition. She has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the show, often escaping to a *Trek*-style universe in her mind. Having missed the last postal date after a sensory meltdown, she instead decides to leave her assisted living home and travel across the state to hand the script in herself. Along the way, Wendy encounters a variety of commonplace neurotypical people: a bus driver, a check-out assistant, a ticket conductor, a police officer, and a kindly grandmother, among many others. At the point of each encounter, we see a reverse shot of the neurotypical looking at Wendy with puzzled and wearied expressions. The implications are clear; she is an alien that has disrupted their worlds, a crash-landed Captain Kirk.

Wendy's autistic difference has already been made explicit through a montage of her morning routine showing how *Please Stand By*, like many autism films, assumes neurotypical viewers who "have the interest to speculate upon, but not the time to know about, what the ontological question raised by autism might be" (Murray 129). These everyday neurotypicals become, therefore, a gallery of spectator stand-ins, as if the film is asking its presumed viewers how they would react in an equivalent situation. With incredulity? Deception? Kindness? Most curiously of all, everyone in the film seems to exist in an alternate universe where the word 'autism' is steadfastly avoided, where a clearly vulnerable young woman is dismissed out-of-hand as an inconvenience. Estrangement here remains located firmly inside Wendy, while her method of 'escaping' to otherworldly imaginings of *Star Trek* is shown on screen but only briefly, and only when there is a reflection to be made of the real world. In many ways the film's title is apt: Wendy is perpetually waiting for guidance that never truly arrives.

Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) was covered in the first episode of the Autism Through Cinema podcast as it was the first film eagerly pitched by co-host Georgia Bradburn. In the film, Adam Sandler stars as Barry Egan, a highly-strung sales manager whose life spirals into chaos when his overbearing sisters set him up with a woman named Lena, played by Emily Watson. The film is essentially a romantic comedy, as Barry and Lena do hit it off, but along the way the ever-anxious Barry gets embroiled in a sex-line scam that results in him facing off with terrifying small-time crook played by Philip Seymour Hoffmann. There is much about Barry's mannerisms and his communication style that suggests a neurodivergence, particularly autism, but the film is never concerned with diagnosing him. Instead, Anderson whips up an aesthetic audio-visual chaos around Barry, mirroring his confusions and frustrations. In one key early scene, Barry is at his workplace when his aggressive sister shows up with Lena demanding that they all go to lunch. At the same time, Barry is receiving threatening phone calls from the sex-line scam and, part way through the scene, one of the workers in the warehouse drives a fork-lift truck into a wall. The scene is frantic, the cuts are fast, the characters march around the space at speed, and the camera is constantly on the move. Low-angled shots show lights and shadows dancing on the ceiling while a percussive multi-instrumental score pervades the audio track. It is a funny

scene, but stressful and exhausting, and the rest of the film barely relents. Georgia describes it as “one of the best representations of sensory overload I’ve seen in film” (*Autism Through Cinema Podcast*, episode 1). So, while Anderson avoids diagnosing Barry on-screen, and perhaps never even intended for him to be autistic, he does make use of an estranging cinematography to evoke the stresses and intensities of Barry’s state-of-mind. Together with a collection of strange narrative incidents, there is an autistic sensibility soaked through this film.

The subject of Roger Ross William’s documentary *Life, Animated* is Owen Suskind, an autistic man preparing to leave his family home and move to college. The film reflects on how Owen’s deep interest in Disney films has helped him to navigate life. This is mostly told through fly-on-the-wall footage of Owen and talking heads of his family and friends; however these are punctuated by multiple scenes of animation that show the young Owen dealing with difficult moments in his childhood. Eventually these animations are weaved into a story of Owen’s own creation, ‘The Land of Lost Sidekicks,’ an adventure tale based on his favourite Disney sidekick characters. The animations are lovely additions to the film, but are brief compared to the non-animated footage, and the story of the lost sidekicks is itself side-lined in favour of a more instructional reflection of Owen’s life. Like the *Star Trek* fantasies of *Please Stand By*, we as viewers are held at a distance from being fully folded into the estrangement of these fantastical realms. In a sense, they belong wholly to Owen. We are given a glimpse, but our ‘real world,’ the film seems to imply, is with the safety of the neurotypical talking heads.

Finally, let us briefly consider *Eraserhead*. There is a wider argument that might claim David Lynch as an auteur of the autistic film, but taking his debut feature as a starting point, we find another neurodivergent protagonist caught up in an estranging aesthetic as his angst-ridden life begins to unravel. Henry (Jack Nance) is a factory worker who lives in near-poverty in an uncanny industrial landscape recalling Philadelphia. He discovers that a former girlfriend has given birth to a sickly, alien-like baby, so Henry marries her and takes up his role as father. The baby’s constant wailing drives the mother away, leaving Henry stuck with the infant until, overwhelmed, he ends up committing accidental infanticide. Meanwhile, he also encounters a woman with cratered cheeks who sings to him from a radiator, and he regularly falls into deeply strange dream-visions featuring decapitation and decay. *Eraserhead* is a hard film to describe, and just as difficult to experience, as Lynch heaps surreal image upon surreal image into a nightmarish monochrome aesthetic of alienation and anxiety. Henry remains baffled throughout, but then so are we as viewers as we submit ourselves to ninety minutes of relentless estrangement. Lynch is commenting, perhaps, on the fragility of masculinity in a post-industrial age, where pressures to be a breadwinner and a caring father are jostled by temptations of fantastical escape into irresponsible realms. But Henry can never escape; one dream suggests he is destined to become just another arbitrary and disposable fragment of a baffling society as his severed head is reconstituted by a machine into the eraser on the end of a pencil.

We covered *Eraserhead* on the *Autism Through Cinema* podcast, in which John-James Laidlow suggests that the film is attempting to “expose the absurdity of everything going on with

society,” while Georgia Bradburn points to Lynch’s continual “disruption of normalcy” as an approach to art that feels in tune with her autistic way-of-being (*ATC*, episode 8). In contrast, John-James goes on to joke about how the film made him feel even more autistic because he frequently “had no idea what was going on” (*ATC*, episode 8). Ultimately, everything remains subjective, and a film that connects with one autistic person may not necessarily do the same for another. Instead, we should seek autistic sensibilities in film wherever an autistic viewer indicates they are located. ‘Neurodivergent estrangement, I suggest, can be a fruitful pathway towards those locations.

### Conclusion

I have presented here two examples of autism films; *Please Stand By* and *Life, Animated*, and two autistic films; *Punch-Drunk Love* and *Eraserhead*, drawing the distinction that the former take autism as their subject matter while the latter evoke autism through aesthetic and narrative choices. Estrangement is present in all four films as a disruptive factor that interrupts and threatens conventions in order to negotiate with the presence of cognitive divergence. It is also a dynamic force, as suggested by Sara Ahmed’s definition, creating realms that viewers shift in and out of, in many cases mimicking the “negotiation between rhetorical and arhetorical worlds” of autism (Yergeau 205).

However, there is a key difference between the two types of film. In the autism films, it is often autism itself that is positioned as the estranging element. Autism is the unusual thing that we are meant to be fascinated and entranced by and, therefore, when other estrangements break in, such as Wendy’s imagined planet and Owen’s animated stories, we remain one step removed from the full estrangement these moments could provide. We attribute the aesthetic break to the autism we are already bearing witness to, so we do not necessarily move into further estrangement. In autistic films, something different happens. Here, where autism is not foregrounded as the subject or the focus, the estranging strain of aesthetic rupture moves *along with the characters* into estranging space, where unnerving and spectacular things can subsequently happen. These moments also move non-autistic viewers into the autistic space of estrangement and therefore have the potential to generate more meaningful bridges into insight.

This insight, I suggest, relies upon autistic audiences making connections and articulating them as meaningful, which is a key part of the work we continue to do on the *Autism Through Cinema Podcast*. This is not to say that an ‘autism film’ cannot or has not used aesthetic techniques to evoke the condition through audio-visual estrangements, more that there remains a tendency to avoid or compartmentalise estranging space in favour of a straightforward framing that captures autism like a specimen in a jar. For a richer future of autistic presence in film, a framework of ‘neurodivergent estrangement’ might help us make better autistic cinematic creations and discoveries.

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Hauntology and Lost Futures: Trauma Narratives in the  
Contemporary Gothic



Emma Dee



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**Introduction**

We begin, not with a text, but with an image.

This is a depiction of a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, a well-known German Romantic painter and explorer of the sublime. Not only is this a representation of what many of us might think of when we hear the term ‘Gothic,’ but the story of this particular image might help elucidate a concept of hauntology that this article is exploring. This picture is not the original.

In 2009, the artist Hiroyuki Masuyama created a series of five light boxes entitled ‘The Lost Works of Caspar David Friedrich,’ so named because none of the originals exist. Masuyama, working from photographs of the vanished and destroyed paintings, created a composite image

of the original. The image is essentially haunted by the lost works, created by a series of digital memories and yet not of them. This summates a concept I have been exploring through my novel-in-progress as part of my Creative Writing PhD, namely, that of hauntology and how it relates to the embodied experience of trauma. The Gothic relates to extremes of experience; in this I'll be looking specifically at gender-based sexual violence, the threat of which manifestly preoccupies the Gothic canon, and in the contemporary Gothic novel, how the text can be used to mirror the experience of sexual assault.

This article will examine depictions of 'madness' in the Gothic, particularly bipolar disorder, and how a more compassionate, understanding, and informed view of the same is needed. The Gothic has long been a space for exploring extremes of experience, to the point of 'madness,' a journey that could be described as a trauma narrative. This is where I feel the contemporary Gothic is able to forge a space beyond the 'frightening' sensationalism of the traditional Gothic canon into a radical revisioning.

Just as Masuyama worked with many digital ghosts, just as a painter works with numerous sketches, I will work with the seemingly disparate strands of hauntology, trauma narrative, illness narrative, and the Gothic canon in attempt to reconcile these into a revisioning of one of the Gothic's most enduring, and problematic features, namely: "The Mad Woman in the Attic" (Gubar and Gilbert).

### **Hauntology and Lost Futures**

In Merlin Coverley's comprehensive and expansive text *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past*, the term 'hauntology' is traced from Derrida and his work on Marx's famous socialist spectre, to Mark Fisher and his work in the 1990s and early 2000s musical culture in 'k-punk' magazine. Coverley defines this as "the ghostly coming to invade every aspect of our lives, from the political and the technological to the cultural and the literary: to be is to be haunted" (Coverley 8). These ghostly invasions, not only of the past in the literal figure of the revenant, also represent an impossible future. Or, in the words of Fisher's blog, "what he described as a 'failure of the future'" (9). Coverley and Fisher are examining these on the scale of the public body, but what of the body personal?

Coverley notes that "[t]he past, as [Derrida] had suggested, refused to remain quarantined from the present and instead returned in unsettling and disruptive ways" (19). This not only is literally depicted in the Gothic, but it reminds me of the concept of trauma, and the embodied experience of it. If we accept Derrida's assertion that to be is to be haunted, that every story is a ghost story, and every individual a sum of their past, this begins to link the concept of hauntology with the lived experience of trauma. Certainly, the phrases used when referring to a negative or unpleasant experience is that we are 'haunted' by it, that the experience will 'come back to haunt us,' turn us into ghosts, as a pale shadow of experience, mirrored in the very language we use?



### Hauntology and the Classic Gothic Canon

If we consider hauntological thought in the classic Gothic canon, it is easy to see points of connection. Evil deeds return in echoing heartbeats under floorboards (Poe). Characters are trapped in haunted houses: “if those walls could speak, they could tell strange things, for they have looked upon sad doings” (Varma 19), wherein they are condemned to enact familial curses distilled from unspeakable desires, from *The Castle of Otranto* (Walpole) to *The Monk* (Lewis). Like the image at the beginning of this article, the Gothic contains echoes not only of the action within the novels themselves, but also from society, returning a distorted but engaged image. The Gothic becomes a hauntological metaphor for collective anxieties—repressed and dangerous sexualities from lesbianism in *Carmilla* (LeFanu) to incest in *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë), grief, and the taboo.

It is for this very reason that members of the LGBTQ+ community (Hughes and Smith), people of colour (Taylor), women (Anderson), and other marginalised folk are drawn to the Gothic, for its depictions of alternative realities and ways of being. In depicting existence that goes against the norm, there is clear space for a neurodivergent experience within the Gothic. However, as seen in the above examples of the classic Gothic canon, these depictions often end in destruction. The Classic Gothic canon is haunted by these depictions, not only in the trauma of annihilation, but the potential future; an engagement with these experiences resulting in depictions that can elucidate, illuminate, and interpret lived experience.

Because it is not only the event—the trauma—as depicted in the Gothic returned literally by the figure of the revenant, but the potential future that has been lost, the ‘ghost of futures past’ as Coverley subtitles it. It is, of course, important to note that the experiences of marginalised people are not inherently traumatic; however, we can agree that society enacts trauma on those who do not ‘fit’ into the post-Enlightenment ideal of the straight, white, able-bodied, neurotypical man. As Hepzibah Anderson notes, “[i]n stories by women, when something goes bump in the night, it’s often the sound of the author butting her head against society’s rigid definitions of her role.” (Anderson n.p.). Similarly, many experiences of marginalised people can be objectively traumatic. And when trauma occurs, how is it dealt with? If we are thinking specifically of neurodivergent experiences, particularly issues with deteriorating mental health, some experiences can be traumatic—psychosis, anxiety, depression, delusions, hallucinations, to name but a few. All of which are elements of the Gothic, and in particular, that of “the mad woman in the attic” (Gilbert & Gubar).

As such, the contemporary Gothic is haunted by its legacy, but also by its duty to depict the experiences of marginalised—in this case, neurodivergent—people with more responsibility, to not enact further trauma on the stories of those who are neurodivergent, stories that the Gothic has been feeding vampire-like off for years. The narrative of ‘the mad woman’ and the narrative of ‘madness’ have often been observed adjacently, by the (often young, virginal, female) characters in the story, such as in Charlotte Brontë’s masterpiece *Jane Eyre*. It is worth noting that in Jean Rhys’

intertextual response, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette ‘Bertha’ Rochester is given a voice, but only up until what we would perhaps now call her episode of psychosis. The ‘mad’ woman remains voiceless. As Susan Sontag notes in *Illness as Metaphor*:

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag 3)

This surely relates not only to physical illness (Sontag is referring specifically to cancer and AIDS), but also mental health and all that this entails. The statistics are stark; mind.org states that one in four will experience a mental health problem of some kind each year in England. As Sontag goes on to elucidate, we have a duty towards a depiction that is not metaphorical and thus voiceless, based on pure ‘sensationalism.’ How then to reconcile this reality with the hauntological—indeed, metaphorical—language of the Gothic?

### **The Lived Experience of Trauma and Trauma Narratives**

In her germinal work, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk explores the effects that trauma has on the brain and the body, noting that “[t]rauma [which] by definition is unbearable and intolerable.” (Kolk 1), and “while we all want to move beyond trauma [...] it may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilize disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones” (2). Similarly, in the first section of the text (called “The Rediscovery of Trauma” in an interestingly hauntological turn of phrase), Kolk uses literary hauntological language in a quote from Jessica Stern, “That’s what trauma does. It interrupts the plot... it just happens, and then life goes on. No one prepares you for it” (7).

In my own novel, I explore this idea of trauma appearing and disappearing, like a bright star that blazes through the orbit of our personal worlds and out again, sometimes leaving no physical damage, but the memory.

And how is it, how is it, that some things happen. The most terrible of things, and yet you survive them. You come through them unscathed. They don’t leave a mark. You’d think, when you read in the papers, or hear on the news, of these terrible things, you’d think; I would be changed by that. I would never live through it. My self would warp and twist like a tree struck by lightning, as random and terrible. And it happens. And you live. And it barely leaves a mark. You don’t think about it every day. It is just another thing. That happened. (Extract from my unpublished novel-in-progress *A House Called Winter*)

In this section, I deliberately use the second person. There is a sense of remove, of observation, which is mirrored in the nature of reading a novel itself wherein we see the world through someone else’s eyes. In this way, then, perhaps the text is holding up a hauntological mirror to the reader in direct address.

Gothic characters and survivors of trauma in these moments, are haunted by what happened, but also the potential of it not having happened. This is the moment where the lost future of the self occurs, in a schism, and past and future is forever delineated, as well as a third, potential future lost forever; the future where trauma did not occur. As Kolk notes, “[i]t’s hard enough to face the suffering that has been inflicted by others, but deep down many traumatized people are even more *haunted* by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do” [emphasis mine] (13). The paradox is as it stands: how can there have been a future after this experience that was so awful? How can there be a future wherein the individual did not behave as they might believe they ought?

The Gothic often plays with an unreliable narrator and a sense of doubt. Trauma survivors can lack the ability or inclination to express what has happened. In my novel-in-progress, my main character, Jenny, is experiencing a manic episode brought on by the experience of trauma. How then to write this experience, to use linguistic tools, in a way that is responsible? In the same way that the body physically keeps the score, what about the body of the text, and the subversion of traditional technological markers? The hauntological Gothic, and trauma experiences and recurrences concertina time; hours seem like minutes, the past is present, the future frozen and unattainable. How to reflect this in the body of the text?

In the process of my research, I encountered many insightful and informative texts about illness narrative, particularly *Tristimania* by Jay Griffiths. Within it, I was struck by how this particular narrative of a bipolar episode had many contact points with the narrative arc of Gothic fiction, from an inciting incident or catalyst, through ‘the dark night of the soul’ and back again. Or, as Aristotle would plot; equilibrium, disequilibrium, equilibrium. Indeed, the cyclical nature of some types of neurodivergence mirror narrative arcs. This itself contains troubling potential issues; in imposing a structural arc upon a lived experience, does this create an expectation of a certain ‘kind’ of ending, and a certain ‘right’ way to have lived an experience?

Similarly, if a lived experience is to be depicted responsibly, how can the texture of the narrative reflect that? In terms of Derridean thought, words are ‘haunted’ by their adjacent meanings. They are defined in terms of negation. The experience of bipolar sometimes gives rise to ‘clang’ associations, where words disrupt meaning, associated by sound or texture rather than meaning. Similarly, compelling fiction follows the same rules as the reality of trauma—trauma is not remembered, it is relived, “reactivated” (Kolk 2)—and compelling fiction is embodied. Mary Kerr notes that “strangely, readers ‘believe’ what’s rendered with physical clarity.” (n.p), something that she refers to in her work as “sacred carnality,” and there is something sacred about the exploration of these extremes of experiences. The prose returns to embodied feeling. In the section where Jenny recounts her trauma, I have tried to hold these occasionally at-odds ideas in balance. The narrative is for those experiencing trauma, but also those who are not, but can access it through this idea of carnality, not only for curiosity or ‘sensationalism’ but understanding.

I have tried to be mindful of the way that language itself can also enact and maintain trauma; the history of any medicalised or pathologized experience—from womanhood, to neurodivergence, to gendered violence—is fraught with phraseology used to enact, justify, and perpetuate trauma. Through the lack of punctuation and the deliberate run-on sentences I am trying to depict the unrelenting (re)enactment of trauma, and through repetition the strange details that stick in one's mind. The hauntological and Gothic image of the underground transport system, where Jenny's trauma is first enacted, is one that I feel is deeply Gothic in a modern sense; reducing distance and time, as well as creating a simultaneous sense of movement and stasis as we move through the (re)memory, through past in present, into the relative calm of post-memory.

*I am angry that I turned when a hand was on my arm and I am angry that he went to touch my face with violence and I am angry that I got my face away but I couldn't save my hair and I am angry that he touched me with violence and his body on mine and the insides of his body that he had touched whilst looking at me touching me with his eyes and his ugly ugly mind like a worm and he in his hand he his hand he had in his hand and he got my hair and the doors shut with him inside and me outside on the floor*

'It is a thing.' She feels her mouth say. 'It is a thing, a ring, a sing, a wing that happens. Just a thing.' (extract from *A House Called Winter*)

### **Futures Found**

It is here that I feel the contemporary Gothic has a duty and a responsibility to the voiceless of its past, the mute Gothic ghosts. It has often been a trope that draws marginalised people to it with its depictions of alternative, subversive existence. Yet it often fails at the final hurdle. The Gothic has always been exploring these hauntological and trauma narrative tropes, indeed it is haunted by them, but unfortunately with the language and tools available at the time, sometimes purely for 'sensation.' Georges Bataille states that literature is evil; against the good. I take this to mean, it goes into spaces of taboo and extremes of human experience to provide answers and clarity of experience. The contemporary Gothic, therefore, will become as the image at the beginning of this article; of its past, and yet embodying its impossible future, a future that is no longer lost. Within the novel, the reader enters into that sacred space, where the lost futures of the Gothic can be reconciled and exorcised with narrative experience. In fact, writing that doesn't dare to do this is dull indeed.

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## Out of Time: Crip Time and Fantastic Resistance



Josefine Wälivaara

Part of my ongoing research investigates the subversion of normative time and disability in science fiction narratives through the depiction of characters experiencing time in non-normative ways, focusing on what I call characters *out of time*.<sup>1</sup> This analysis takes inspiration from Ellen Samuels, reading these characters as “bodies of crip time,” but it also connects to other disability and/or crip scholars such as Alison Kafer and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. I suggest a way of engaging with disability and ability in non-realist texts not only by focusing the analysis on explicit representations of characters with realistic, culturally recognizable traits of disability, but also through fantastic elements and storytelling conventions of the genre. This could potentially make visible the ways in which discourses of disability and ability are utilized within the narratives.

### Normative and Crip Time

Time is often considered a linear process, from the past to the present and towards the future. This notion is fraught by discourses of progression and development and can often be found in science fiction, where disability often is considered in terms of medical or technological developments, progress, and cures (Wälivaara). Not least in adherence to what Alison Kafer calls “disability-free” futures leading to the notion that a better and more desirable future is a future without disability (3). This linear and progressive notion of time also applies to our thinking about the structure of lifetimes, that a person, during their lifetime, should develop from birth to death via certain phases such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. During this time, one is supposed to experience certain life events in an expected order—at the right time—such as entering the labor market, finding a partner, getting married, having children, retiring, and so on.

However, not everyone follows this normative organization of time and life course, and those who do not are often considered deviant. As shown by research about temporality in, for example, feminist, queer, and disability studies, the way we organize time is normative, and based on white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied and able-minded people (Freeman; Halberstam; Kafer). Kafer, for example, charts how disability is conceptualized in terms of temporality and “how might disability affect one’s orientation to time” (26). Crip time, according to Kafer, requires us to reimagine normative time and recognize that it is based on “very particular minds and bodies” (27). The impulse is not to assimilate disabled bodies into normative time, but instead reconsider how normative time can be challenged by crip time. She states: “Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (Kafer 27).

While crip time can be used to indicate subversive ways of living in time, Ellen Samuels offers a reflection on the “less appealing aspects of crip time” in a creative non-fiction essay published in the academic journal *Disability Studies Quarterly*. Samuels highlights the ways in which not being in-sync, aligned, and part of a world structured according to normative time can leave marks. I read it as a type of testament to the force of normative time and the strain it can put upon those of us living in crip time.

### **Crip Time and the Fantastic**

Notably, two of Samuels’s six perspectives on crip time are illustrated through connecting them to concepts drawn from fantastic fiction: “*Crip time is time travel*” and “*crip time is vampire time*.” Not only do these make up a sizable part of the essay, two out of six, but they also serve as a framing for the entire essay, its beginning and ending. As a scholar of science fiction and disability, I find myself intrigued by the connection Samuels establishes between her own more negative experience of living in crip time and how it is described through the language of fantastic fiction. I am, however, not surprised by this analogy. Perhaps the fantastic, and the stories in which the laws and taken-for-granted truths of current reality can be set aside in favor of an exploration of other realities, provides a language and an analogy of recognizable narratives seldom found elsewhere. While much mainstream fiction does not depict the experiences of people with disabilities, much less the experience of living in crip time, much fantastic fiction deals explicitly with explorations into the nature of time itself. Fantastic genres recurrently tell stories about characters with alternative or non-normative relationships to time: characters controlling time or losing control of time, becoming stuck in time, or being pulled/scattered across time; characters having unlimited time or being out of time. Such fantastic narratives can indeed provide us with numerous examples that can challenge normative ideas of time as linear and progressive, as the Doctor kindly reminds us: “People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint - it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly... time-y wimey... stuff” (“Blink”).

Looking at this preoccupation of time in science fiction and those characters experiencing time in non-normative ways from the perspective of disability might shed light on the ways in which such narratives can provide theorization about the relationship between normative time and crip time. For example, characters with unlimited lifetimes can put into question and defamiliarize to us the very ways in which we think about life, its phases, and transitions. By living multiple lifetimes, at different pacing, outside of the linear and progressive time of normative society they exist very much outside of normative time, or in vampire time, to borrow Samuels’s phrasing.

Those *characters out of time*, which will be my focus here, can also pose a similar challenge to normative notions of time. I have very tentatively begun to define such characters in science fiction as characters that are manufactured only to have limited lifespans or expiry dates. Their limitations in lifespan are not motivated by illness or disabilities itself, but applied to fantastic,

unrealist, and seemingly able-bodied characters. Moreover, these characters are, or become, aware of this *out of timeness* during the course of the narrative. This potentially covers an assortment of texts and characters including for example the films *The Island* (2005), *Parts: The Clonus Horror* (1979), *Never Let Me Go* (2010), and *Moon* (2009) all focusing on clones.

I thus suggest a reading of these as “bodies of crip time”: a reading that takes as its starting point Samuels’s notion of crip time as time travel. She writes:

*Crip time is time travel.* Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. [...] we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear, and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time. (n.p.)

While these characters are undoubtedly able-bodied or even extraordinarily able-bodied, this crip reading of such characters can reveal ways in which discourses of disability and ability are utilized in science fiction. Indeed, elements such as characters with non-normative relationships to time can play a role in subverting the way we think about disability and ability as a system of power and privilege. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson suggested that in *Never Let Me Go*, the roles of normate and disabled are reversed through the strange logic of the story and that this reversal challenges assumptions about disability and ability. I argue that similar challenges can be made in other examples precisely through the storytelling conventions of fantastic fiction, in this case through the depiction of characters *out of time* that can serve to defamiliarize the familiar and taken-for-granted truths and norms of our current society that are closely intertwined with normative time. This is not to suggest that these stories are to be seen as subversive texts or characters, far from it, but that such a reading can provide new ways of understanding these narratives from a disability perspective.

### **Out of Time and Resistance**

As an example, I am going to briefly discuss the two films *The Island* and *Parts: The Clonus Horror*. Two quite similar films, which is not surprising as shown by the lawsuit filed by the creators of *Clonus* against *The Island* (Booker 184). Both films follow a similar narrative arc beginning with the protagonists unaware of their status as both clones and captives manufactured to provide spare parts for a wealthy elite. They are held in confinement without any knowledge of the everyday-life or even existence of the outside world, with the exception of respective film’s utopia: the Island or America, where the lucky few eventually are chosen to go. However, these utopias do not exist, and those chosen to go there are instead harvested for organs. The protagonists begin to question the word of authorities, the taken-for-granted life of their society, and the awful truth is eventually revealed to both audience and protagonists. The protagonists then flee, seek help, and try to expose the injustice.



Both films begin with clearly establishing the clones' physical prowess, in *Clonus* through depiction of athletic competition, pushups, and cycling; in *The Island* through health controls, exercise, restricted and controlled diets, and the announcement that "A healthy person is a happy person." The films thus set up a premise in which these characters are to be understood as able-bodied, or even extraordinarily able-bodied. These characters, like those in *Never Let Me Go* as described by Garland-Thomson, have the status of disability, but the embodiment of the normate. This reversal potentially puts into question normative notions of disability and ability through defamiliarizing it by using storytelling conventions offered by the fantastic.

These clones are indeed characters out of time in at least two ways. First, they are outside of normative time—extracted from linear, progressive time and its normative life stages. They are held apart from the rest of society, living according to their own temporality, and governed by a medical and scientific authority. For example, in *The Island*, the clones' lives are limited to work, sleep, exercise, and controlled entertainment while waiting to go to the Island, for the protagonist a tedious existence. Sexual impulses are removed, thus hindering the possibility of reproduction. In *Clonus*, a similar structure is in place, with the addition that most clones, except for the protagonist, have had their intelligence reduced during the cloning process, and if they are disobedient, they are lobotomized.

Second, they are running out of time—at any moment, they or those they love are subjected to organ harvest and death, which serves as a temporal driving force through the narrative when the protagonists uncover the truth. The films are constructed as narratives of resistance, of protagonists fighting against the odds against an overwhelmingly powerful force of immoral antagonists set to uphold oppressive structures. As the protagonists learn the truth of their existence, the ways in which their time is limited, and the ways in which others live their lives through love, reproduction, and freedom, they rage against the privileged positions of those "in the sheltered space of normative time." They rage, not silently but violently, against the unjust and oppressive system that reduces them to something less than human, unworthy of life, and kept only to maintain the able-bodied population. The clones are reduced to something less than human, products, or things in order to justify the exploitation of their bodies.

### **Conclusion**

Reading these characters as bodies of crip time can showcase the ways in which the characters experience being out of time (or indeed experience crip time) and the ways in which the narrative arc of resistance can be understood in terms of a challenge towards the privileges of those within normative time. However, as the resistance is over, the clones of *The Island* becomes integrated into the sheltered space of normative time and, while the main characters of *Clonus* are either killed or lobotomized, the final scene suggest that the resistance was successful as the existence of the clone facility reaches the press. The films emphasize the primarily negative experience of being bodies in crip time rather than the subversive aspects of crip time but, by doing so, they showcase the unjust and oppressive gatekeepers and the privilege of living within normative time.

The depiction of non-realist characters experiencing time in non-normative ways can assist in reimagining, and defamiliarizing or making strange, the familiarity of the organization of time masquerading as a universal truth and highlight the privileges of those within normative time.

## Notes

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### “City of Unseen Steps”: Blindness and Palimpsestual Sensory Impressions in *Jonathan Dark or the Evidence of Ghosts*



Sarah Neef

Urban fantasy literature provides invaluable political and social criticism. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that critical reflections on everyday cultural discourses, especially surrounding contemporary urban spatial practices and identity, are the very fabric that these texts are made of. Although urban fantasy literature frequently depicts marginalised and disadvantaged individuals (cf. Ekman 453) such as the homeless or ethnic minorities, A. K. Benedict's *Jonathan Dark or the Evidence of Ghosts* serves as a rare example of urban fantasy literature depicting disability.

As I will demonstrate, the novel employs blindness as a narrative strategy to create an urban palimpsest consisting of a cacophony of different sensory impressions and to juxtapose the characters' diverging perceptions of the city. The depiction of blindness is also part of an attempt to provide a diverse set of characters and to challenge homogeneous concepts of urban identities and space. However, as a closer analysis reveals underlying power imbalances that suggest an inherent perpetuation of both gender stereotypes and ableism, the text can also serve as a cautionary tale highlighting the power that such popular literary genres possess to strengthen the very shackles they seek to break.

The novel follows DI Jonathan Dark as he seeks to solve a case surrounding a stalker threatening Maria, a young blind woman. To be more precise, Maria used to be blind. However, capitulating to the incessant outside pressure from others—especially from her former partner—she undergoes surgery to restore her vision. Since Maria grew up blind and is used to experiencing her surroundings by means of touch, smell, sound, and taste, she does not want her impression of the capital to be tainted by vision, which she considers a more superficial and undesirable sense. For this reason, she wears a blindfold at all times, rendering her de-facto blind.

The narrative is told from the point of view of various focaliser-characters (including Maria, Ed the stalker, and the police officer Jonathan) to create a juxtaposition of divergent perspectives on the urban setting. Applying Bakhtin's terminology, we can refer to this juxtaposition of a range of unmerged narrative perspectives as polyphony (cf. Bakhtin 6). For Bakhtin, this points towards a dialogic concept of truth, meaning that the truth is not a fixed, disembodied reality, but something that requires a multitude of different perspectives or forms of consciousness (cf. Robinson n.p.). This narrative strategy allows Benedict to uncover the way in which Western societies give precedence to vision and consider it to present a fixed truth, thus disregarding the

fact that all impressions of urban space—be they of a visual or any other sensory nature—are in fact highly subjective. Consequently, our understanding of urban space is not merely subject to, but also contributes to, contemporary socio-cultural and political discourses. This explains the popularity of dialogic narrative forms in urban fantasy literature, as these texts put great emphasis on the diversity of urban space, culture, and society. Choosing a narrative situation that dismisses homogeneous concepts clearly contributes to this endeavour. In this particular case, the narrative style lends a voice to underrepresented and marginalised individuals such as Jonathan, a police officer who likes to cross-dress, and Maria, a blind woman. The text portrays Maria's way of sensing the urban space as one of many other ways of doing so—all of which need to be considered valid and equal. This exemplifies urban fantasy's tendency to employ multiperspectivity in order to represent the diverse and multi-faceted nature of the postmodern city.

On the intratextual level, Maria's layered approach to decoding the urban environment contributes to this challenge of homogeneous representations of urban space. Her blindness is a core narrative strategy for conveying the palimpsestual nature of urban space and society. Jonathan referring to Maria's blindness as "a gift, not a disability" (Benedict 135) summarises the novel's stance on disability. It is continually portrayed as an advantage over other able-bodied characters, as Maria's ability to read and navigate the city far exceeds any other character's knowledge and skills (cf., e.g., Benedict 134). The novel also attempts to do away with common misconceptions surrounding blindness, as the following quote written from Maria's perspective reveals: "Neither of the men replies. Maybe they'd thought she couldn't hear: some people believe that since her sight is out of action, her other senses are as well; others that alternative senses compensate. Disability is a city of myths" (Benedict 22). This quotation, which also establishes a clear connection between the city and Maria's body and identity, alludes to the misconception that one sense is merely replaced by a number of other senses. On the contrary, for Maria, all of the senses mix: "Her world is complete, she doesn't need to see: her city gleams like the notes on a glockenspiel; her Thames is the colour of the way plums taste and she wants it to stay that way" (Benedict 6). This synesthetic experience presents the urban setting as a hyper-complex web of different overlapping and interconnected sensory layers. To reflect this spatial complexity, I propose to introduce the term 'meta-palimpsest,' suggesting an extension of the term 'palimpsest': in addition to the palimpsestual layers created by the combination of numerous senses, each of these senses in turn consists of various impressions or layers, as Maria for example smells or hears a multitude of things simultaneously.

In this way, Maria is in a superior position to Jonathan, who gives clear precedence to visual impressions. When she convinces him to wear a blindfold to perceive London in the same way she does, he remarks:

'[there] were lots of images . . . [but] they were ones that I'd seen with my eyes. Even taking away my sight for an hour intensifies everything but I can't get near your experience. You have no visual pictures to reference. I can't imagine how fascinating your world must be.'  
(Benedict 134)

In other words, he can only replace visual impressions with memories of the same kind, thus his perception is pre-fabricated and inflexible. Similarly, the general public is accustomed to vision as their primary sense of orientation, as the following quote reveals:

‘Three lamp-posts in from the beginning of the street. Here we are,’ Maria says as she dives into a doorway. Maria’s map is such a different version of the same city. ‘Every time a council decides to cut its spending and take away a street light I have to rethink the city again.’ ‘And the police receive more reports of crime. Which costs the council more in the long term. It is short-sighted.’ (Benedict 135)

This demonstrates the novel’s awareness for the politics of space, as even inanimate objects—here the lamp-posts—possess the agency to discriminate against people like Maria who perceive the urban space in a manner that does not conform to the norm. Once again, the text portrays the urban space not as a fixed, non-negotiable truth, but instead reveals its heterotopic nature: the same part of the city embodies entirely different meanings for different individuals. While the DI’s reply in this quotation reveals a focus on the visual city, for Maria, the lamp-posts’ ability to reveal potential dangers is of minor importance, as she employs them as haptic clues and thus as a source of orientation. Hence, the text criticises authorities’ lack of awareness for the diversity of urban citizens and their individual needs.

The dominant vision-based perception of the urban setting (here exemplified by Jonathan) is of a one-dimensional, nature and thus only offers restricted insights into a much more complex reality. By contrast, the impression of the city that originates from Maria’s blindness may at times be chaotic and disorienting, but it is ultimately represented as preferable and more truthful, due to its multidimensional and complex nature. This reveals that alongside the narrative perspective, Maria’s de-facto blindness is one of the key means by which the novel accomplishes a dialogic, palimpsestual depiction of the setting that gives room to all layers and subjective truths of the contemporary metropolis. This representation of urban space is employed to reveal subconscious mundane spatial practices and biases and to challenge homogenous concepts of urban space and identity.

The novel adds another type of spatial layer to the aforementioned sensory meta-palimpsest, namely body politics. In her essay “Bodies—Cities,” Elizabeth Grosz argues that the city is “the most immediate and concrete locus for the production and circulation of power” (48-49). In *Jonathan Dark or the Evidence of Ghosts*, such space-related power imbalances centre around gender and disability. The text pits Maria’s blindness against the other characters’ prejudiced perception of her disability. Despite her extraordinary ability to read the city, the choices Maria makes regarding her own body never cease to be contested—especially by the male characters. As they are unable to adapt their pre-existing perception of blindness to her lived reality, they attempt to impose their ideology onto her. Her own former partner, when trying to urge her to undergo regenerative surgery, even goes as far as to insinuate that her rejection of vision turns her into a monster (cf. Benedict 107), thus demonstrating how the disabled body is Othered. In addition,

her inability to see others is juxtaposed with their incessant gaze. The unchecked male gaze, most prominently represented by the stalker, makes her feel threatened and ultimately leads to her no longer being permitted to leave her home. While this is in order to protect her, it renders her blindness—formerly described as a gift—a disability. She is subjugated by a socio-cultural system that marks her as inferior to the male, able-bodied criminal. In other words, the novel presents vision as a more powerful sense which endows the owner with more agency than all of the other senses combined.

It is via the stalker Ed that the male gaze is taken to an extreme, as he eroticises Maria's disability. In addition, the free indirect discourse presenting Ed's interior monologue introduces another aspect that is interconnected with this theme of body politics and agency, namely the gendering of senses:

What would making love be like for Maria? She certainly is interested in sex. Maybe it doesn't matter that she's blind. Women aren't supposed to be as visual as men. He's also heard that they have better imaginations but that is not good. When they close their eyes you don't know who they are thinking of. (Benedict 186)

Here, the stalker clearly describes vision as an inherently masculine sense. In accordance with this view, the characters' gender does indeed determine their way of sensing the city: as mentioned above, Maria perceives the city with all of her senses alongside mental images or maps. Meanwhile, both the stalker's gaze and Jonathan's initial spatial practice represent male vision and the masculine urban experience. Jonathan's initial way of perceiving the city hints at the aforementioned gender-based power dynamics:

Walking through London at night used to make him feel better . . . . He's been strolling through the dark city since he was a teenager, walking from Wandsworth to the Wapping streets he grew up on, taking an alleyway rather than a brightly lit street, searching out a road he's never gone down before and drifting along it. It used to feel that he was having an affair with the Night City, the one that lets slip a shoulder of moon through the clouds to see him through, that held his hand from the South Bank to Camberwell to Nunhead and back, that made him want to learn its every line and dimple and for it to know him. (Benedict 55)

Jonathan's masculinity and vision empower him to walk potentially dangerous streets in a flâneur-like, idle manner and to perceive the urban space as a female entity, an object of male desire that is to be explored and conquered. In other words, the city is a passive agent in a network that is dominated and controlled by male individuals. Yet, as the novel progresses, this traditional masculinity and dominance over the urban space gradually diminishes. As Maria teaches him to perceive the additional sensory layers of space, Jonathan becomes increasingly disoriented, until eventually, "the world is not as he thought a day, a week, a year ago. . . . Everything he thought he could rely on has changed" (Benedict 196). His increasing spatial disorientation demonstrates how the characters' development is closely tied to their perception of the urban space. While

his original sense of space is put into question, he simultaneously raises questions relating to his (sexual) identity. London is used as a metaphor to give expression to his non-binary identity: “It’s a misleading description—transvestite, cross-dresser—as if gender were two opposing riverbanks: if that is to be the way, for now, he would rather swim between them” (Benedict 210). The fact that it takes a woman to introduce him to the additional sensory layers of London needed to solve his case further adds to his emasculation. Jonathan’s departure from traditional masculinity thus coincides with a decreased focus on vision and a decline in agency, thus confirming the stalker’s concept of vision as a predominantly male sense. Consequently, Jonathan’s new identity and Maria represent the novel’s attempt to include non-hegemonic urban spatial practices and identities, whereas the stalker alongside Jonathan’s previous identity represents traditional gender roles, homogeneous spatial practices, and ableist ideologies. The novel thus oscillates between traditional perspectives on urban identities and space on the one hand, and a demand to better integrate and understand disabled citizens and their individual needs on the other. While urban fantasy commonly features social criticism surrounding issues such as racism and classism, Benedict’s novel extends the genre’s political reach to include additional facets of body politics and politics of space.

However, the novel’s ending puts this progressive venture into question. Not only does it take a male, able-bodied character to save the disabled damsel in distress—despite her independence and extraordinary skills—the text also concludes with a conventional ending, namely the romantic relationship between the protagonists. This happy ending is, however, only possible once Jonathan’s gender identity and spatial disorientation allow him to understand Maria’s sense of the world. This is reminiscent of a canonical literary depiction of blindness. Much like Rochester’s loss of vision in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, it establishes an equilibrium between the protagonists and is thus a prerequisite for their liaison.

The novel’s ending, which further underscores its underlying ableist and misogynist tendencies, is not redeemed by Benedict’s choice to include female solidarity and revenge, either. Tanya, who plays a major role in the stalker’s death, appears as a ghost and states, “I watch him. I’ve been in his apartment” (Benedict 212). The roles of victim and perpetrator have been inverted, as Tanya—a woman and former victim of his—tails the male, former stalker in the final scenes of the novel, while he suffers from his inability to escape:

Ed runs towards Maria and Jonathan. Tanya is behind him. She is always behind him. She walks slowly yet never more than a few metres away. . . . Ed wishes the Thames would take him far away from Tanya; from what he has done; from this city of unseen steps. It won’t. He can’t get away. Death has no sequel. (Benedict 262)

While on the surface this can be read as a cathartic outcome that re-establishes justice, the underlying message cannot be ignored: not only does Tanya have to die and swap her former human shape for an existence as a ghost, i.e., a supernatural being with elevated powers compared to the human counterparts, in order to be able to prevail over Ed, but she also has to commit



the exact same crimes by killing him (cf. Benedict 243-244) and then stalking his supernatural remains. We can thus conclude that true gender equality, in this novel, is only feasible between ghosts, not humans. Nonetheless, the two characters' actions are judged in entirely different ways. While Ed's motive is left largely unexplored, Tanya's act of revenge is presented as a justified act of female empowerment and solidarity. Furthermore, it is implied that the Thames helps complete Tanya's murder of Ed by "[rushing] in and [reaching] for his legs" before it "closes in around him, fills his throat, taking him for its own, taking him on his own journey" (Benedict 243-244). This *deus ex machina* solution allows the author to alleviate Tanya of any potential guilt or judgement, as the final steps of the murder are carried out not by her but by the force of nature.

In conclusion, Benedict's novel employs both blindness and polyphonic narration as strategies to achieve two goals. First, it creates a palimpsestual sensory representation of the contemporary metropolis that does justice to the contemporary city's hypercomplex and heterotopic nature and challenges homogenous concepts of urban space. Second, it employs the dialogic sense of truth that it achieves in this way to represent the diversity of the city's inhabitants and to do justice to the neurodiversity and divergent spatial practices that this broad range of identities encompasses. Nonetheless, in doing so it succumbs to literary tropes that perpetuate the same gender stereotypes, power imbalances, and ableist tendencies that it tries to eradicate as part of its ambitious political intention.

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## Productive Bodyminds in Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*



Leigha McReynolds

*Author's Note: This is a cleaned-up transcript of a presentation that represents my initial foray into this project.*

### Introduction: Delany and Disability

The goal of this paper is to discuss how Samuel R. Delany's 1966 science fiction novel *Babel-17* disrupts traditional categories of mind and body to offer us a vision of how human variation and bodily interdependence can promote cooperation and excellence. If you were to do a straightforward, as much as that's possible, summary of *Babel-17*, you would probably focus on the protagonist Rydra Wong and her search to discover the secret of Babel-17: the eponymous language of the novel. However, much of the novel, alongside that quest, focuses on her search for a spaceship crew and the technical and social interactions between the crew members. One of the key things that Delany does here, along with giving us a variety of bodies and minds functioning together as part of a connected unit, is encourages us to think about how we might redefine productivity and labor if we allow different kinds of bodyminds<sup>1</sup> to access productive spaces and labor in new ways that might not be available to "normal" humans. Today, I'll be presenting you with my initial thoughts on the text, shaped by my readings in disability studies.

The conversation around Delany, at least in terms of his presence in science fiction scholarship, is perhaps not as robust as we might expect given his stature in the field. What we do see is a lot of consideration of Delany in the context of queerness and race, which should not be surprising given those are major identity categories that he represents in science fiction that are generally underrepresented, and there are some discussions of his work in terms of utopia. There is also significant scholarship on Delany in the intersecting disciplines of queer and disability studies, but those scholars often do not address his science fiction. *Babel-17* is a text where we can bring those conversations together.

Most scholarly discussions of *Babel-17* focus on language, not surprisingly: it is named after the secret language that moves the plot of the book forward. But there are other things going on that we can tune into. I want to acknowledge the work of Joanne Woiak and Hioni Karamanos in their chapter "Tools to Help You Think" in the collection *Disability and Science Fiction* for their help in grounding my analysis. They've done what I think is the only disability reading formally published of Delany's science fiction work where they looked at *The Einstein Intersection*.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, they offer a disability studies reading of *The Einstein Intersection*. If you've read *The Einstein Intersection* and *Babel-17* you'll note that the role of bodily difference is much

more pronounced in the former, which was published in 1967. However, in 1966, when Delany published *Babel-17*, I think we can still see a lot of the things that he will develop more explicitly in *The Einstein Intersection*, but instead of being the explicit focus of the text, they're implicit and underline the larger action.

One of the concepts that I took from the Woiak and Karamanos chapter is their identification of *The Einstein Intersection* as “thematically inclusive of disability” (19), which is helpful because there are not traditionally disabled characters in either *The Einstein Intersection* or *Babel-17*. Woiak and Karamanos explain, “The story examines notions of bodies that are ‘different,’ but it does not signal that difference according to any single, familiar category” (20). And by filling the text with these different bodies, *The Einstein Intersection* “examines, models, and invites the reader to participate in the process of generating new cultural scripts about the lived experience of difference” (20). So, when I talk about the variety of bodyminds in *Babel-17*, it's not that I'm identifying a character and saying they have this disability or that they manifest neurodivergence in this way, but rather that the way the characters' bodies and minds in *Babel-17* disrupt key categories and key assumptions that we make about complete or autonomous bodies is “thematic of disability” and allows us to productively look at the text in that way. While *The Einstein Intersection* engages with this thematic of disability in an explicit way, working through scripts of bodily difference is central to that narrative; in *Babel-17*, on the other hand, this thematic is omnipresent in the background, and can be teased out through a consideration of the spaceship crew.

Moving into the novel itself, one reason to focus on disability in terms of productivity and labor is that the world-building that Delany offers us underneath the surface of the larger story is a labor-based world. We're in a far future scenario where there's been a war going on for a long time, and it appears that the key way people identify themselves is by their jobs, whether they are what's called “Customs” or “Transport” or military. This is not something that's explicated in the novel, but it shows up in key moments. For example, we meet a character at the beginning, “Danil D. Appleby, who seldom thought of himself by his name—he was a Customs Officer” (27) — note that he thinks in the capital letters — who comments when he has to go out with Rydra, “I don't walk around Transport Town at night” (27). So, we have these mental and physical separations between Customs people and Transport people that draw our attention to the role of labor and the way people interact in this text and the way that they define themselves.

### **The Spaceship Crew: Productive Bodyminds**

Continuing with these ideas of labor and productivity, one effective way to think through the thematic disability in this text is to look at the characters and the crew that Rydra builds to work on her spaceship. First, I'll look at the role of the spaceship pilot. It is necessary to note that one of the things that we learn early on in the novel is that there is a wide prevalence of what is called cosmetisurgery, particularly among the Transport. And this is a theme that we see throughout Delany's work: for example, there is a lot of this in *Triton* and some in *Stars in My Pocket Like*

*Grains of Sand*. Delany consistently imagines a future with significant, universal, practical, and aesthetic body modification. In *Babel-17* one of the ways this manifests is that spaceship pilots are heavily modified to the point that, for example, the Pilot of Rydra's ship, Brass, looks like a tiger: "ivory saber teeth glistening with spittle, muscles humped on shoulders and arms; brass claws unsheathed six inches from yellow plush paws. Bunched bands on his belly bent above them. The barbed tail beat on the globe's wall. His mane, sheared to prevent handholds, ran like water" (35). So he's been modified to the point where he's now more tiger than he is human; although it's very clear from context that he started out as a human. On the one hand there is an aesthetic component to this—people are modifying their bodies in order to own them and control the way that their bodies look—but there's also a sense in which this is absolutely required because a spaceship pilot has to be heavily modified in order to pilot the spaceship. We see this in a scene where Rydra watches Brass wrestle before hiring him:

You can really judge a pilot by watching him wrestle?" the officer inquired of Rydra.

She nodded. "In the ship, the pilot's nervous system is connected directly with the controls. The whole hyperstasis transit consists of him literally wrestling the stasis shifts. You judge by his reflexes, his ability to control his artificial body. An experienced transporter can tell exactly how he'll work with hyperstasis currents." (40)

We have this dynamic where someone is required to become different from a "normal" human in order to do this job. Our character in the novel happens to be a tiger. There's one who is a dragon, so there's a lot of different options, but characters have to take on an extreme animalistic embodiment in order to be a pilot. And so if you want a captain for your spaceship you have to go find someone who has been appropriately modified.

One of the other roles in the spaceship is Navigator, and of course all of us who are familiar with science fiction tropes are used to seeing a Navigator on the board of the spaceship. But in *Babel-17*, Navigator is a role that is taken up by three people, and these people are not just linked professionally, they're linked personally and sexually through the relationship they call the "triple." In this, we see that conventional notions of bodily boundaries are complicated by the fact that first there is a job that three people have to do together—they have to enmesh in such a way that they can complete this labor—and second, this requires a queer, polyamorous relationship. Triples don't only exist as part of the Navigator relationship; it turns out that the protagonist Rydra Wong was also in a triple at one point, but it's a necessary component of the Navigator role. The relationship is defined in the novel as "a triple, a close, precarious, emotional, and sexual relationship with two other people" (43), and then it's justified by one of the three Navigators explaining, "There're some jobs . . . you just can't give to two people alone. The jobs are too complicated" (43). And that's not really explicated for us anywhere, as that's not the focus of the novel—Delany doesn't walk us through how the Navigators work—but we get this sense that there's a way in which autonomous bodies are not helpful, and there needs to be some level of interdependence and connection in order to achieve this key spaceship function.

It is important to note that Delany is not proposing an unproblematic queer utopia in this novel. With the introduction of the triple, we see the division between Transport and Customs surfacing again, when one of the Navigators reacts to the Custom Officer's judgment: "Perverts," [Ron] said. "That's what you Customs all really think . . . can't understand why you would want more than one lover" (93).

We get another tripartite relationship with the Eye, Ear, and Nose. I will try to explain this clearly to the best of my ability, but one of the key ways in which Delany in *Babel-17* disrupts our fundamental categories is that we have both discorporate persons and bodily persons. Bodily persons are all of us people walking around just like we might expect every day, and discorporate people are people who have chosen to leave their bodies. They've chosen not to go through with a "normal" death. They've chosen to discorporate from their body, and they live in their own sector.<sup>3</sup> When you need to fly a spaceship, you need three discorporate people to be your Eye, your Ear, and your Nose, respectively. This results in some interesting synesthetic writing, which is not the point of this paper, but I do recommend it for the language. The key concept is that these discorporate people can do jobs that "normal" people can't. And the explanation echoes what we hear about the triple: "There're some jobs . . . you just can't give to a live human being . . . Like the Eye, Ear, and Nose. A live human scanning all that goes on in those hyperstasis frequencies would— well, die first and go crazy second" (42). So not only do we need different types of physical bodies, but we need different types of people in ways that don't even fit our fundamental categories of alive and dead.

As I wrap up this paper, I want to be sure to mention the protagonist of the novel, Rydra Wong. She is the glue that brings all of these people together, and she's also a linguist: hence her role in this story about revealing a secret language. In addition to the above-discussed representation of bodies and relationships, the novel's preoccupation with language, and the way that changed speech results in minds that function in different ways,<sup>4</sup> suggests that varied ways of thinking are just as ubiquitous and necessary as varied ways of being. But one of the key roles that Rydra plays in this novel is not just that she's the star linguist that's going to decipher this language, but that she is a spaceship captain, and not everyone can be a spaceship captain. As someone talking to Rydra describes it: "You're not the most stable person in the world. Managing a spaceship crew takes a special sort of psychology which—you have" (24). So there's this sense in which the way her mind works is not "normal," she's psychologically different in some way, but that is actually the required thing in order for success to happen at this job. She's also got some markers of traditional neurodivergence and disability: she has some savant-like qualities, such as total verbal recall and perfect pitch, and at one point in the novel she's actually called "near-autistic" (9), which is the closest Delany ever gets to a traditional recognition of disability or neurodivergence in this story. But there's definitely a sense in which the way her mind works is what makes her special.

## Conclusion

As a preliminary conclusion, I offer that, ultimately, Delany imagines the spaceship as a kind of communal, workplace “criptopia”<sup>5</sup> where specialized bodies and minds working together can accomplish feats beyond normal humans. As I continue working on this project, I hope to flesh out my argument and really bring forward this interesting representation of different bodyminds that occurs before the disability rights movement. It may not be something that we always consider bringing into the conversation, but Delany’s use of thematic disability throughout his work offers a valuable and innovative way for us to think about how bodyminds might function differently.

## Notes

1. I came to the term “bodyminds” through Sami Schalk’s book *Bodyminds Reimagined*. Schalk takes the term from Margaret Price (5). Although I do not use the term often in this version of the piece, the broader concept encourages us to resist a body/mind duality in thinking about disability and difference.
2. It’s a fabulous chapter; I really recommend that you check it out if you can, especially if you’d like an introduction to the work that disability studies can do for science fiction scholars.
3. There’s an interesting thing going on with geographic divisions of people alongside labor in this book.
4. In writing *Babel-17*, Delany was inspired by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which suggests that language determines the ideas we can have. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/linguistics/whorfianism.html>)
5. A space where accessibility is the norm, enabling full participation of different bodyminds in society. (<https://newmobility.com/criptopia/>)

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# NON-FICTION REVIEWS



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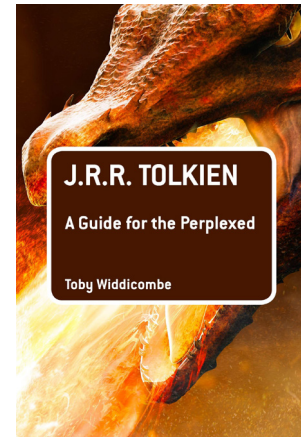
### *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed*, by Toby Widdicombe



Audrey Isabel Taylor

Toby Widdicombe. *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Guides for the Perplexed. Paperback. 208 pg. \$24.95. ISBN 9781350092143. Ebook ISBN 9781350092150.

Toby Widdicombe's *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed* does what it says it will: it answers questions about Tolkien and his work from a hypothetical (perplexed) reader. The book examines a range of themes and content across Tolkien's work and life and brings them together in a tidy package. Widdicombe has done a fine job across the book as a whole.



*J.R.R. Tolkien* consists of a foreword, introduction, and six chapters, followed by an afterword largely devoted to *The Fall of Gondolin* (2018), which was published when Widdicombe's book was nearly ready for print. There are also three useful appendices. The first lists Tolkien's sources, including names, dates, languages/sources, as well as brief notes on significance. To those who are teaching Tolkien, this information is particularly valuable. The other two appendices cover the Films of the Legendarium, and, more briefly, Scholarship on Tolkien. There is also a helpful reference list and an index. Widdicombe comments in chapter five that "I will focus on the major works (*The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*), but my portrait will be fleshed out by my understanding of other, less-well-known Tolkien works" (107-8), but this could be said for all his chapters.

Chapter One: Tolkien's Life and Art, provides a quick overview of the basic biography of Tolkien and how his life influenced his work. Chapter Two, Tolkien's Legendarium, showcases one of Widdicombe's strengths, making a complex topic clear. He lays out the complicated history of Tolkien's legendarium in a straightforward way (or as straightforward as could be done). In Chapter Three, Tolkien and His Languages, Widdicombe points out how Elvish, in its incompleteness, intentionally parallels natural languages (47). This chapter gives a good overview while also making clear the complex, recursive nature of Tolkien's work on and with languages, leaving plenty of room for further scholarship or interest.

Chapter Four looks at Tolkien on Time. This chapter presents a series of interesting points, for instance, that Tolkien "suggests the events have a reality beyond his ability to control them" (97), as

well as how time is “less about the broad strokes of history [and more about how] friendship lasts even until the inevitable end” (102). There is also a useful timeline included with some comments about what events being in which place on the timeline might mean (98-101). Widdicombe notes in comments on Year 2 of the Third Age, for example, that “If the Second Age began with a burst of creation...so does the Third Age, for it is in this year that Isildur ‘plants a seedling of the White Tree in Minas Anor’” (98). These facts combined with editorial comments provide the reader insight into both events and their significance in time.

Chapter Five is Tolkien on Peoples, which examines the peoples and creatures of Tolkien’s work. Widdicombe also has a good approach to a big chapter like Chapter Six, Tolkien’s Themes. In Chapter Six he discusses themes he and his students found important, but also those put forward by other scholars, and points out that “Any discussion of themes is just a means to an end: to stimulate discussion of the meaning and relevance of Tolkien’s legendarium” (129). This includes a beautifully concise summary of Tolkien’s take on death: “In the same section of *The Silmarillion* as that in which Ilúvatar talks of elvish immortality as a sorrow, Tolkien contrasts that quality with the brevity of human life and considers this brevity to be akin to a sort of freedom ‘to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world’” (111-112). My only quibble with this chapter is that although thorough, a list of themes at the beginning of the chapter might have been useful, particularly as there does not really seem to be an order to the themes, or not one I saw explained.

Although Widdicombe’s focus is largely on “bigger picture” items, he does include fascinating tidbits of close reading—a discussion of the “queer sign” on Bilbo’s door from *The Hobbit* for example (48), or the thought-provoking point in Chapter Three about how Tolkien is rarely praised for “his attention to role and context, and his humorous extension of the fiction of the epic’s frame story,” demonstrated for instance when he frames his own work as only that of an editor or translator (61). Widdicombe reads beyond the surface, and is able to make connections within not only Tolkien’s work, but his life as well.

There are elements that do not quite work. Widdicombe does not always manage to be as clear as one would like—the section on writing for example (pp. 59-60) left me confused rather than less-perplexed. Nor does he quite round out his point in the themes chapter about technology. He ends with a “good” use of technology after a long discussion of instances of its misuse, but unlike other cases he does not speculate about why, or how, this changes other readings (156-7). And though he looks at the lack of women with agency in Tolkien, he does not tackle the racism inherent in the Southrons (black men) (113), which is presumably something a modern audience of students might react strongly to.

Who the hypothetical reader of this book might be is a slightly thornier question than its general value to Tolkien studies. Widdicombe explains, “It is not my intent to be exhaustive; it is my intent to provide enough information to make engaging with Tolkien’s world as rich an experience as I can for the enthusiast” (107), thus indicating that this is for someone already

an enthusiast on Tolkien. Widdicombe comments a great deal about what readers think or feel about Tolkien and his work based on his own experience with his students, but this seems rather limited. Further, to understand Widdicombe's text, a good knowledge of Tolkien prior to reading Widdicombe is helpful, perhaps even necessary. Widdicombe obviously loves Tolkien's work, but this does not occlude the critical, or interfere with *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed's* principal mission: to elucidate Tolkien.

**Audrey Isabel Taylor** is Assistant Professor of English at Sul Ross State University, Rio Grande College. Her first book, *Patricia A. McKillip and the Art of Fantasy World-Building*, came out in 2017, and she is at work on a second on science fiction author Anne McCaffrey.

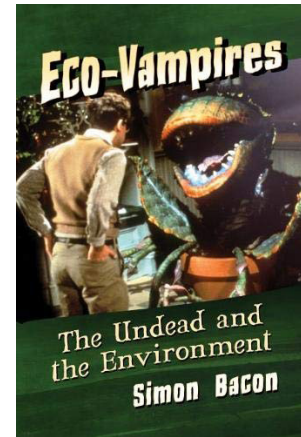
### *Eco-Vampires: The Undead and the Environment,* by Simon Bacon



Mihaela Stoica

Simon Bacon. *Eco-Vampires: The Undead and the Environment*. McFarland, 2020. Paperback. 215 pg. \$45.00. ISBN 9781476676227. EBook ISBN 9781476639604.

Vampires of cinema, literature, and folklore have generally populated narratives of doom as malignant forces of destruction driven by a singular need for survival and jeopardizing the very existence of humanity. Traditional representations of the vampire have reflected our own fears and anxieties. Whether these fears were basic reactions to death as a misunderstood natural process of life, or reactions to an overwhelming and fast developing industrial world, stories have positioned the vampire as the quintessential immortal evil force. But depending on the medium vampires inhabit, images of them have also shifted to reflect an ambivalent enemy on the cusp of adapting to the anxieties of a humanity faced with an increasingly complex and everchanging lifestyle spurred on by industrial and technological discoveries.



Simon Bacon's *Eco-Vampires* harnesses the ambivalence to differentiate between the many images of the vampire by looking at ways in which narratives and films “express the eco-friendly credentials of the undead” (1). Bacon's angle on the eco-vampiric version of Dracula is tantalizing as it surprisingly positions the everlasting bloodsucker at the intersection of contemporary eco-studies and the politics of consumerism to suggest that the vampire is an essential part of a global system which does not tolerate globalization and consumerism. Thus, the vampire's reaction to the increasing climate crisis, he suggests, despite the vampire being seen as a plague on humankind, is expressed as being that of a potential savior and eco-warrior of a desperate planet Earth in need of saving.

The image of Dracula, or any other vampiric character in literature or cinema, going green for the sake of the planet may be challenging for the skeptics to accept. But a closer look at the argument Bacon undertakes reveals the connection between nature and the undead as part of a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem. In his attempt to overthrow the popular image of the vampire as a demonic force bent on destruction, Bacon points to the European tradition as a source for his green-fanged version. Indeed, the many case studies and field collected texts of Eastern European vampirism catalogued by Jan Louis Perkowski and Agnes Murgoci (see

Perkowski's "The Romanian Folkloric Vampire" and Murgoci's "The Vampire in Roumania" in *The Vampire. A Casebook*, edited by Alan Dundes, WI UP, 1998) are a rich ground from which the creature can transmogrify into the eco-warrior Bacon professes it represents. As these early testimonials depict the vampire's close connection to nature, the environment, and its elements, it is not far-fetched to imagine the jump to ecocritical studies as a base for Bacon's argument. Ecocriticism emerged in the 1980s as an environmental movement that not only brought into focus the relationship between literature and the physical world but also emphasized the interdisciplinary aspect of the new field. Furthermore, Bacon's eco-vampire concept makes use of intersectionality to bring forth a new type of marginalized, fallen hero in need of redemption. As an analytical framework, intersectionality looks at all aspects that relate to an individual in combination rather than in isolation. In this case, it emphasizes the vampire as "doppelganger of humankind, representing both a dark mirror image of humanity's own vampiric characteristics, and actively trying to destroy/neutralize the forces of consumerism/technological progress" (8), which can further substantiate Bacon's argument. Such redemption, it seems, is not sought out by the creature itself but by our own need to redefine what it means to be the eco-warrior our planet needs and deserves in our current crisis.

Bacon succinctly summarizes the vampiric history of European tradition to argue towards the connection with nature as he points out early correlations between vampires and other creatures such as, dogs, cats, and bats. These early examples see the vampire as an integral part of the environment. Whether because of climate, landscape, societal, or political environments, the vampire becomes a way of understanding, as being part of the land, of the cosmology that explains the environment, and a part that also remembers the past in a changing world (2). This underpins the transition from "real" vampire bats to literary ones and the ongoing synergy between the undead and the ecosystem (2). The first admittedly documented jump from the folkloric vampire to the literary version is Polidori's 1819 *The Vampyre*, whose protagonist exhibits a deep connection to the moon, which paves the way to facilitating the identity formation of Bacon's eco-vampire. The proliferation of novels with vampiric subjects during this period, such as LeFanu's *Carmilla* (1874), Florence Marryat's *Blood of the Vampire* (1897), H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1897), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), establishes the connection and the bond between the undead, the animals, and the land to which they belong. The vampire, especially *Dracula*, the author argues, becomes a manifestation of an environment trying to protect itself from humanity and the increasing industrialization and destruction of the ecosystem (4). Bacon articulately establishes the connection between vampires, environment, and eco-activism with a quick nod to the relatively new fields of Ecogothic and Ecohorror, or plant-horror. This short detour into ecophobia turns out to be essential in expanding the field of inquiry. By looking at how ideas in the ecogothic and ecohorror literature and cinema work, he shows how vampires are the expression of an ecosystem at war using its own biological weaponry: the vampire plague (8).

The book is divided into five chapters, and each chapter analyzes five pairings of films or texts reflective of the section's topic. What follows is a compendium of mainly cinematic sources

exploring images of the eco-vampire. While many films are familiar to the fans of the genre, others are less so. Several examples, Bacon warns, are purposely provocative. Even though some of the films do not have vampires as protagonists, the vampiric influence and performativity is an underlying aspect of the narrative to give credence to the reading of the vampire as eco-warrior. The examples do not follow chronologically the order of the films' releases, but they are chosen to represent thematically each chapter's topic. In Chapter 1, "Dracula the Environmentalist: The Land Beyond the Forest," Bacon explores the strong connection between the vampire and its natural environment, going as far as showcasing the creature as untamable nature, master of weather and animal life, and as "biological weapon released by the ecosystem to destroy the growing forces of technology" (9). Except for Stoker's novel, Bacon's celluloid choices range from the earliest and admittedly most faithful to the novel, such as Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*, to Garland's 2018 *Annihilation*. The types of environment rising to battle humanity are also varied: the American desert, the snow-covered lands of Alaska and Northern Europe, the woodlands, and rural locations.

Chapter 2, "Vampiric Sustainability: The Undead Planet," focuses on how parts of the ecosystem take on vampiric qualities to protect themselves and the wider environment from human incursion (9). The discussion centers on the vampire's interconnectedness with its environment to the point where it takes on forms of its fauna, or it brings forth manifestations of the fauna. The most obvious case is the connection between vampire and vampire bats. Thus, the undying ecosystems depicted in this chapter manifest themselves as various types of lifeforms as a means to defend themselves against the human invaders that have entered or threatened their domain. The examples reflect ways by which the ecosystem attempts to protect itself and maintain its balance by unleashing vampiric forces upon human incursion and enacting a battle between past and present to recreate a time when humanity had a more respectful and symbiotic relationship with its environment (82).

Chapter 3, "Undead Eco-Warrior. The End of the World as We Know It," looks at apocalypse and those moments when the planet unleashes vampiric plagues against humanity in an effort to restore the ecosystem. Without dwelling on present-day pandemics, this chapter explores similar circumstances of doom, despair, and cataclysmic scenarios portraying vampires as planetary pest-controllers and humanity as the plague of which nature rids itself in the end to restore an ecological balance. Chapter 4, "The End of the End. Consumerism will Eat Itself," explores how consumerism and industrialization become sources of their own demise while the vampires they inadvertently create ultimately assist in restoring the ecosystem they were trying to exploit. Scholarship about vampires after the 19<sup>th</sup> century reveals them as obvious manifestations of consumerism, namely the voracious consumer that must possess and consume until there is nothing left. But it also gives shape to the idea of never-ending consumption as a form of immortality. The films analyzed in this chapter reveal how a world governed by laws of consumerism will literally eat itself to extinction. Finally, Chapter 5, "Vampire Ecosystems. It Came from Outer Space," looks at how narratives about vampiric invasions from outer space often

work as a metaphor illustrating the self-protective qualities of the ecosystem or as a galactic idea of self-protection. Among the protagonists are transient vampires roaming outer space looking for sources of sustenance and acting as cosmic ecological regulators.

I appreciated each chapter's prefatory opening sentence which facilitates the reader's immediate immersion with the material. The book is very explicit and clear in its organization and is a must-have for any scholar or student interested in vampire and gothic studies, ecocriticism, and the many ramifications that these fields combine. The many examples used to explore each chapter's main theme make this book a rich addition to the library of cinematic vampire lore and a robust resource for any media or film studies course.

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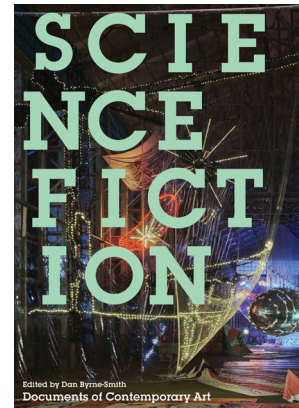
### *Science Fiction*, edited by Dan Byrne-Smith



Jack Durant

Dan Byrne-Smith, ed. *Science Fiction*. MIT Press, 2020. Documents of Contemporary Art. Paperback, 240 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-262-53885-5.

This odd and eclectic anthology is part of a series called “Documents of Contemporary Art” co-published, since 2006, by MIT Press and London’s Whitechapel Gallery; aside from a volume on *The Gothic*, it is the only entry devoted to an aesthetic—mainly literary—genre, as opposed to a concept (*Time, Memory, Sexuality*), a practice (Craft, Translation, Exhibition), or an institution (*The Studio, The Market, The Archive*). The format is simple: a brief introduction laying out the terrain is followed by a handful of thematic sections (here, four, called “chapters” by the editor) that sort several dozen individual pieces (here, 48). Given the brevity of the volumes, these pieces are necessarily short, usually abridged from longer works (the shortest entry here is half a page, the longest 12 pages); these works take a variety of forms—theoretical essays, critical reviews, interviews, and manifestoes—and cover some substantial temporal span (the earliest piece here is from 1962, though the vast majority, 42, hail from the past two decades). The goal of the series is to provide, in each volume, a “source book” to “a specific body of writing that has been of key influence in contemporary art generally,” featuring “a plurality of voices and perspectives defining a significant theme or tendency” (5).



It’s a peculiar remit but of a piece with a number of recent series, such as Reaktion Books’ “Focus on Contemporary Issues” and Columbia UP’s “No Limits”, that pursue selected issues or concepts. The difference here is the purported “source book” function: rather than wandering topical essays that cohere around a central idea, the MIT/Whitechapel volumes propose to gather cohesive “bod[ies] of writing” tracing “key influence[s] in contemporary art”—which presumably means representative samplings of material that make some pretense to comprehensiveness. But that is not exactly what *Science Fiction* is either, since the temporal span, as noted, is rather too constrained: only three items from the ’60s and ’70s, a period when New Wave SF was engaged in potent dialogue with avant-garde trends in the arts. The problem isn’t that editor Dan Byrne-Smith, a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art Theory at Chelsea College of Arts in London, doesn’t know this history, since he summarizes it efficiently in his introduction: the aesthetic appeal of Surrealism and Pop Art for J.G. Ballard and Brian Aldiss, and their reciprocal influence on major conceptual artists like Robert Smithson (12-13). Yet that important moment is represented here

solely by a three-page excerpt from a 1971 interview in *Studio International* magazine featuring Ballard and Italian Surrealist Eduardo Paolozzi. The dialogue is fascinating, like most of the public utterances of those charming provocateurs, but it's so clipped and condensed that it barely captures the excitement of the genre's conversation with contemporary art in the New Wave era.

Perhaps the problem is with my use of the terms "genre" and "contemporary." As Byrne-Smith says in his introduction, "science fiction" can be conceived as much more than an aesthetic genre. Rather, the term can refer, variously, to "forms of practice, complex networks, or a set of sensibilities"; to a certain "field, a space of metaphor, or a methodology"; or to the dominance of specific ideas, such as technological and social change (12). The reader gets the sense that the volume purports to cover all this ground in differing measure, though Byrne-Smith never says this precisely. What *is* clear is that he wants to abandon the limitations of a genre conspectus, especially the knotty issues of definition such overviews entail.

Though he inevitably includes a brief excerpt from Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) postulating the genre as a mode of cognitive estrangement, he ultimately plumps for Sherryl Vint's later (2014) revisionist view that SF refers not to "an inherent or fixed set of properties" but rather a "network of linked elements" (14). Such an anti-essentialist "definition" potentially frees the editor up from the constraints of a standard overview since what "science fiction" means shifts depending on its use within specific historical, social, and institutional contexts. A focus on the broader artistic influences exerted by the SF genre is, then, only one of many possible configurations, and there is certainly some, but not much, of that sort of coverage here: e.g., a Ted Chiang story that was produced as the textual accompaniment to a 2014 video installation; a text written for a 2018 London exhibition that riffed on the dystopian future E.M. Forster envisioned in his 1909 story "The Machine Stops."

The term "contemporary" may also be up for grabs, given the volume's chronological bias towards work produced since the turn of the millennium. The editor himself says as much: "This volume responds to intensifications in engagement between art and science fiction in the early decades of the twenty-first century," as SF has emerged as a global form capable of confronting pressing issues (12). From such a viewpoint, previous engagements, such as the New Wave's with Pop Art and Surrealism, count as "historical precedents" (12) rather than currently vital debates. This is fair enough, I suppose; certainly, the issues the volume canvasses have emerged, over the past two decades, as compelling multidisciplinary points of focus for writers and artists. While the third and fourth sections, on "Posthumanism" and "Ecologies," begin with brief excerpts from important "precursors" (e.g., Donna Haraway, Rachel Carson), they are dominated by more recent voices (addressing, e.g., body modification, climate change). Even the earlier, seemingly more traditional sections, on "Cognitive Estrangement" and "Futures," are driven by postmillennial interests and concerns, especially the supersession of white Western models of futurity by "a broader range of perspectives, struggles and traditions," such as Afrofuturism (15-16).

Within its self-imposed constraints of subject matter and chronology, I do think this is a provocative and potentially useful volume, especially in undergraduate classes (e.g., on SF and visual culture), where the bite-sized chunks of theory can be washed down with audiovisual supplements (the book, alas, has no images). Given how very small these chunks are, however, I don't think it's reasonable to call this an anthology; a mosaic of fragments is more apt, or, better yet, a critical montage. The individual pieces tend to blur together: it's hard to meaningfully discriminate among so many different voices (more than 50 overall, since several items are coauthored) when they all are speaking so briefly on the same set of subjects. This isn't helped by the fact that the introduction, itself so short (barely eight pages), is the only editorial apparatus to speak of: there are no section headers, much less headnotes to the individual pieces. It thus really helps if one has some prior acquaintance with the relevant issues and debates, which of course rather vitiates the book's utility as a survey for undergrads, unless instructors can provide the missing context via lectures. But more serious researchers in the field (whether SF studies or art history) would likely prefer to access the arguments in undiluted form.

**Jack Durant** is a long-time reviewer of SF literature and criticism. He was a stalwart of the late *Fantasy Review* magazine and published a number of reviews in *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Annual*.

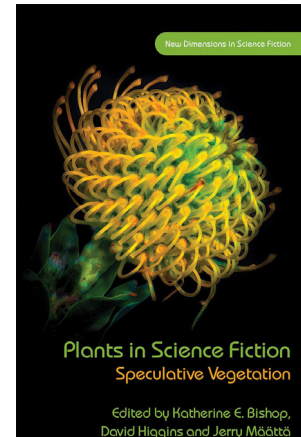
*Plants in Science Fiction*, edited by Katherine E. Bishop,  
David Higgins, and Jerry Määttä



Nora Castle

Katherine E. Bishop, David Higgins, and Jerry Määttä, eds. *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation*. University of Wales Press, 2020. New Dimensions in Science Fiction. Hardback. 272 pg. \$82.00. ISBN 9781786835598.

As Heather Sullivan warns us, “if the vegetal fails, we fail” (7). Not only do plants produce the air we breathe and the crops we eat, but they also form the basis of a variety of objects (clothing, medicine, fuel, etc.) that have allowed for the development of human culture. The biological and cultural evolution of humans has always been deeply intertwined with that of plants; as Atul Bhargava and Shilpi Srivastava attest, the development of agriculture through the domestication of plants was “a major turning point in both the environmental and cultural history of human beings” (6), one that “is marked by changes on both sides of the mutualistic relationship, as both partner populations, over time, become increasingly interdependent” (11). Plants are also much more “alive” than previously thought, as has been demonstrated by a number of advances in plant biology. Yet, despite our interdependence, “Plants seem to inhabit a time-sense, a life cycle, a desire-structure, and a morphology,” explains Randy Laist, “that is so utterly alien that it is easy and even tempting to deny their status as animate organisms” (12). How can this gap be bridged, between the vital importance of plant life on the one hand, and the inability of humans to “see” (both literally and metaphorically) plants—a phenomenon that James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler call “plant blindness” (3)—on the other?



Following on the heels of the so-called “animal turn” (Ritvo 119), a “vegetal turn” (Hall x) in the Humanities has emerged which attempts to address this very question. While, as Catriona Sandiland notes, “the vegetal has been ‘turning’ for a long time” (Cielemęcka and Szczygielska 4), particularly in Indigenous and feminist contexts, there has certainly been an uptick in the type of plant-focused scholarship now referred to as Critical Plant Studies. This field, which “challenges the privileged place of the human in relation to plant life” (Stark 180), coalesced in the early 2010s primarily in the field of philosophy (with a major assist from the work of philosopher Michael Marder), but a series of literary-focused works have since emerged which expand its purview. Perhaps the most well-known of these is Randy Laist’s edited collection, *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013), through which Laist argues for sustained inquiry by literary

theorists into the ontological status of plants. Other examples include *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (2016), ed. by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (2017) by John C. Ryan, and *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (2019) by Elizabeth Hope Chang.

*Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation* (2020), edited by Katherine E. Bishop, David Higgins, and Jerry Määttä, is the latest in this lineage of works, and one of the first to turn its vegetal gaze toward science fiction. Slightly pre-empted by Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari's *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*, which lists 2020 as its publication year but in fact was available in December 2019, *Plants in Science Fiction* nevertheless remains the first edited collection on the topic. The rationale for its consideration of plants in science fiction, argued for convincingly by Katherine E. Bishop in the introduction, is simple: "One of the greatest boons of sf is the way it allows us to confront that which is alien to us – worlds, thoughts, experiences, desires and lives that are not our own. [...] And what alive is more alien to humans than plants?" (3). Not only is there a similarity between human consideration of plants and SF tropes of literal aliens, but also plants sometimes become the "alien" threat in these works, depicted as more disruptive and more alive than they appear in everyday life. The cognitive estrangement of SF is an effective method of combating plant blindness, forcing plants and their unwieldy, overgrowing, unknowable otherness directly into view.

*Plants in Science Fiction* consists of an introduction followed by ten chapters divided into thematic streams. These chapters address the alterity of plants as well as the "commonalities, hybridities, and mutual forms of growth" (5) between plants and humans in a range of sf narratives from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They take a variety of theoretical tacks, from new materialism to postcolonialism to queer theory to posthumanism. All engage in some way with Critical Plant Theory, with some—like T.S. Miller's, which references Elaine P. Miller's *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (2002)—even working to recontextualize it. While the volume is uneven in places, with a few chapters which don't quite come together, it is overall an important and exciting addition to both SF and critical plant scholarship. Its common themes include boundary slippages, hybridization, and the ability of animate plants to illuminate other fears, such as those connected to colonial violence or the transgression of sexual boundaries.

The book's alliterated streams, Abjection, Affinity, and Accord, each address a different theoretical aspect of plant-human encounters. The first, Abjection, focuses on narratives that interrogate notions of human superiority through the invocation of the monstrous vegetal. This section includes Jessica George's "Weird Flora: Plant Life in the Classic Weird Tale," Jerry Määttä's "'Bloody unnatural brutes': Anthropomorphism, Colonialism and the Return of the Repressed in John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*," and Shelley Saguaro's "Botanical Tentacles and the Chthulucene." George's chapter uses a mixture of thing theory and historical evolutionary theory to argue that plants in short stories by Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and H. P. Lovecraft epitomize the resistance of objects and entities in the "weird tale" to being fully known

by humans. Through its invocation of the vegetal, the weird tale ultimately gestures towards a non-anthropocentric worldview but can never quite achieve it. The chapter seems to take a more rhizomatic approach to analysis, branching out in a number of directions, which at times undermines its argument. George's is one of a number of chapters that address the Weird and New Weird, including Saguaró's and Alison Sperlíng's.

Määttä's chapter, one of the shining stars of the collection, conducts a compelling investigation of Wyndham's well-known work, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). Määttä draws on extensive archival and comparative research, examining the author's intertextual influences as well as various iterations of the text, including a holographic manuscript and differences across UK and US versions, while simultaneously situating the work within Wyndham's contemporary colonial context. Määttä argues that the novel depicts "a political fear masked as an evolutionary one" (48); the triffids stand in for Britain's colonized subjects, who are enacting their revenge on the British mainland. Simultaneously, the text highlights "the connection between colonialism and vegetation" (44), such as that on plantations, by "conflating the exploitation of plants and people" (44). This "dual oppression" (44) is part of the reasoning for the usefulness of the concept of the Plantationocene—though the author does not use this term—as an alternative to the now-ubiquitous Anthropocene (see Mittman 6). Saguaró's chapter, drawing on Donna Haraway and China Miéville, likewise focuses on *The Day of the Triffids*, alongside H. P. Lovecraft's *At The Mountains of Madness* (1936) (also mentioned in George's chapter) and John Boyd's *The Pollinators of Eden* (1969) (also discussed in T.S. Miller's chapter). She describes the monstrous hybridity of the tentacular plants in these works, arguing that the properties of these creatures which invoke such horror for authors like Lovecraft are precisely the ones most generative for the "multi-species efflorescence" (75) for which critics like Haraway advocate. The reference to monstrous hybridity calls back to George's chapter, and in fact resonates throughout much of the volume.

The second stream in the volume, Affinity, includes Brittany Roberts's "Between the Living and the Dead: Vegetal Afterlives in Evgenii Iufit and Vladimir Maslov's *Silver Heads*," T.S. Miller's "Vegetable Love: Desire, Feeling and Sexuality in Botanical Fiction," and Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook's "Alternative Reproduction: Plant-time and Human/Arboreal Assemblages in Holdstock and Han." This section focuses on narratives that explore "qualities often thought of as solely human from a vegetal perspective" (6). Perhaps the offering with the most unique theoretical focus, Roberts's chapter starts off this section by exploring the connections between Necrorealism and vegetal life through a close reading of the Russian language film *Silver Heads* (1998). She argues that Necrorealism, which developed in the 1970s in opposition to the Soviet state, is intertwined with plants not only because of its origins in forest fistfights, but also because the ideology's embrace of "bare life" was, in a way, an embrace of "becoming-plant." Necrorealists reject rationality, opting instead for irrationality and "living death" (83) as "non-corpses," making it more difficult for them to be interpellated as political subjects of the state. Roberts finds parallels between this "living death" and plant life, both in that they occupy a similar ontology and that

they both “make death visible” (89), and traces these connections, among others, through a close reading of the film.

The next chapter in this section is Miller’s, which focuses on vegetal-sexual politics in *The Pollinators of Eden*, Pat Murphy’s short story “His Vegetable Wife” (1986), and Ronald Fraser’s novel *Flower Phantoms* (1926). Extending Michael Marder’s call to consider plant-thinking, Miller argues for a consideration of plant-desiring, and his chosen texts are all ones in which human sexuality encounters and intertwines with that of plants. Miller’s masterful chapter is supported by his extensive background researching botanical fiction – and in fact, his “Lives of the Monster Plants: The Revenge of the Vegetable in the Age of Animal Studies” (2012) is referenced numerous times elsewhere in the volume. Importantly, he connects his discussion to feminist theory, arguing that “a teeming site of resistance to the subordination of plants lies in recent feminist discourses” (116). Similarly to Määttä’s argument regarding the dual subjugation of colonized bodies and plants, Miller reads in texts like Murphy’s, “not merely a metaphor for a woman under patriarchy, rape culture, capitalism and/or colonialism, but also of plants under the hierarchies of being that have historically subordinated them as insensate, disposable, beneath ethical consideration of any kind” (116). Rounding off this section is Cook’s chapter on human/arboreal assemblages and temporality. She focuses on readings of Robert Holdstock’s *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region* (1988) and Han Kang’s “The Fruit of My Woman” (1997) and *The Vegetarian* (2007), incorporating Lee Edelman’s concept of “reproductive futurism.” Each work “plays with plant-time” (132), a temporality that operates differently from human timescales. Cook reads the works as proposing “new hybridized ways of being and becoming human” (129). The chapter perhaps over-ambitiously incorporates discussions of reproduction, sexuality, gender, and sexual violence alongside its discussion of temporality, hybridity, and becoming-plant. Ultimately, it turns to new materialism to argue that human/arboreal assemblages such as those in Han and Holdstock’s work can for the basis for a new type of ethics.

The final stream of the book, Accord, incorporates chapters that “trac[e] the hyphen in human-plant relations” (6). It includes Yogi Hale Hendlin’s “Sunlight as a Photosynthetic Information Technology: Becoming Plant in Tom Robbins’s *Jitterbug Perfume*,” Graham J. Murphy’s “The Question of the Vegetal, the Animal, the Archive in Kathleen Ann Goonan’s *Queen City Jazz*,” Alison Sperling’s “Queer Ingestions: Weird and Sporous Bodies in Jeff VanderMeer’s Fiction,” and Katherine E. Bishop’s “The Botanical Ekphrastic and Ecological Relocation.” Hendlin’s chapter focuses on the connection between plants and scent in *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984). Scent, Hendlin argues through a reading of the novel, is central to plant communication but is “the least attended to of the senses for the contemporary human organism” (151). With more attention paid to this sense, humans can access their “plant aspect” (153), thereby giving greater value to this form of plant-knowing. The strands of analysis in this chapter tend to diverge, and its invocation of magical realism is not contextualized within the volume’s focus on science fiction.

Graham J. Murphy’s chapter, which focuses on *Queen City Jazz* (1994), will be of particular interest to those wishing to bridge the gap between animal and plant studies, as he argues that

the novel “reinforces the question of the vegetal and the question of the animal as fundamentally the same question because *vegetal* and *animal* are part of a larger organic network that relies upon species reciprocity, an inter-dependency central to the natural world” (180). Murphy deftly weaves together these questions of the vegetal and the animal with an analysis of the archive, particularly in the shadow of techno-utopic infrastructure as registered in the novel’s Flower City. He argues that the novel critiques the politics of the archive, which informs cultural frameworks and categories, instead advocating for a kind of posthuman thinking that moves beyond merely categorizing the non-human world in a way parallel to “dead information” (186).

Sperling’s chapter focuses on Jeff VanderMeer’s “This World is Full of Monsters” (2017), “Corpse Mouth and Spore Nose” (2004), and *The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014). Circling back to the (New) Weird, she explores the agential nature of spores as they intersect with and change concepts of human embodiment through Mel Y. Chen’s concept of “queer ingestion.” The queerness of plants articulated here was hinted at in both Cook’s and Miller’s chapters. Likewise, Sperling’s observation that “many plants’ rooted networks of inter-species dependence and communication provide models of living communally and entangled with others” (198) resonates throughout the volume. The collection ends on a high note, with Bishop’s chapter on botanical ekphrasis in Algernon Blackwood’s “The Man Whom the Trees Loved” (1912), Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014), Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Diary of the Rose” (1974) and William Gibson’s “Fragments of a Hologram Rose” (1977). Of all the chapters, Bishop’s is the one that refers most frequently to other chapters in the volume, which is fitting considering her status as editor. She argues, through a series of excellent close readings, that ekphrasis is “a pedagogical moment in which the reader is informed how to see in step with the dominant ideologies surrounding them” (228-229) but which also allows “the viewer to reject self-perpetuating systems of power by refracting the quotidian” (229). The use of this literary device in speculative fiction, particularly when its gaze is turned on plants, can reveal unexpectedly animated and agential vegetal life.

*Plants in Science Fiction*, as a whole, argues that “plant life in sf transforms our attitudes towards morality, politics, economics, and cultural life at large, questioning and shifting many traditional parameters” (4-5). Its chapters span numerous themes, countries, and (sub)generic boundaries, making significant strides in addressing the plant blindness that can characterize SF scholarship. In her authoritative introduction, Bishop also articulates the volume’s omissions, issuing a call to action for additional explorations of plants in non-Western texts and a variety of other genres (poetry, video games, etc.), as well as of terraforming, plants in space, and plant technology. Nevertheless, the volume as it stands is a much-needed intervention uniting Critical Plant Studies and science fiction studies. As one of the first to stake a claim for the importance of plants in science fiction, it will undoubtedly serve as a touchstone for the exciting work on the topic that is yet to come.



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### *Ms. Marvel's America: No Normal*, edited by Jessica Baldanzi and Hussein Rashid



Michael Dittman

Jessica Baldanzi and Hussein Rashid, editors. *Ms. Marvel's America: No Normal*. UP of Mississippi, 2020. Paperback. 280 pg. \$30.00. ISBN 9781496827012.

In the late 1970s, American comic book company Marvel introduced the Ms. Marvel character: the alter-ego of Carol Danvers, who was first a United States Air Force officer and then an editor at *Women Magazine*. Although seen as a progressive and feminist character at the time, Danvers had the form of a traditional female superhero caught in the male gaze. She was tall, blonde, and possessed of a Barbie doll figure shrink-wrapped in a revealing costume.

Danvers would go on to be treated shamefully in storylines in the 1980s and 1990s. Her rape and addiction were treated as throwaway plot points. However, by 2012, the character's treatment had improved with her assumption of the mantle of Captain Marvel. Meanwhile, in 2013, the title of Ms. Marvel passed on to Kamala Khan, a second-generation immigrant born to Pakistani-American parents. Khan is a young, female, Muslim superhero who fits into the Peter Parker/Spider-Man trope of a teenaged hero struggling to balance the pulls of responsibility and youth. While Muslim superheroes existed before Kamala Khan, Khan is the first Muslim superhero to headline her own title and, notably, the first hero created and written by two Muslim-American women. *Ms. Marvel* would go on to win Eisner and Hugo awards in 2015.

*Ms. Marvel's America: No Normal*, edited by Jessica Baldanzi and Hussein Rashid, is the first collection of criticism to take on, in an interdisciplinary way, the success and impact of *Ms. Marvel*. The book effectively makes the point that Kamala Khan and Ms. Marvel provide a rich ground for interpretation of America's relationship with Islam, gender, race, and diversity in mainstream comics.

While including dense literary theory, the book also includes approachable articles for a general audience (especially Aaron Kashtan's "Wow, Many Hero, Much Super, Such Girl: Kamala Khan and Female Comics Fandom," which addresses the fan community and its interaction with Khan and her status as a fan-fic writing superfan of other heroes within the world of her comic). The interdisciplinary nature of the collection is one of its strengths. The collection has



an encompassing breadth including chapters from literature, religious studies, pedagogy, and communications scholars including José Alaniz, Jessica Baldanzi, Eric Berlatsky, Peter E. Carlson, Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, Antero Garcia, Aaron Kashtan, Winona Landis, A. David Lewis, Martin Lund, Shabana Mir, Kristin M. Peterson, Nicholas Pumphrey, Hussein Rashid, and J. Richard Stevens.

The book is divided into an introduction and five sections. The introduction focuses on *Ms. Marvel's* challenging of character tropes. The introduction also raises a point to which other authors in the collection will return: Khan's place and symbolism (limited to the first 19 issues of *Ms. Marvel*) within the continued anti-Muslim American rhetoric especially evident during the Trump administration. The first section focuses on precursors to Khan's *Ms. Marvel* character including Dust, another notable Marvel Muslim character. Whereas Khan is seen as a step towards a more realistic attempt at depicting an Islamic superhero, Dust's presentation is much more problematic and tends to fulfill more Orientalist tropes. The second section, "Nation and Religion, Identity and Community," is the longest section in the text and deals extensively with the iconography of the Khan character and the friction against stereotypes both religious, gender-based, and fan-based. The third section is called "Pedagogy and Resistance" and asks how Khan fits into classrooms and conventions. The fourth section, "Fangirls, Fanboys and the Culture of Fandom," deals with *Ms. Marvel's* disruption of the traditional fan and creator communities.

The collection concludes with a wide-ranging interview between gender studies scholar Shabana Mir and *Ms. Marvel* author and cocreator G. Willow Wilson. This choice of including an interview with the creator is a strong one. Wilson, from her insider's perspective, makes points such as that the suppositions of what will sell (white cisgender male heroes) and what won't sell (solo comics with women or minority characters) have more to do with the economics of comics and their antiquated exclusionary distribution system rather than with what people want to read. A point such as this one (and the idea that there is a limit to what can be done progressively with a character owned by a mega-corporation such as Disney and written by a revolving cadre of artists and writers) is more likely to be made by someone involved in the business and is an idea which, by itself, is worth the inclusion of the interview. Mir also encourages Wilson to comment directly on some of the theses of the included critical chapters which leads to a valuable dialogue between subject and critic.

Additional standout essays include "Mentoring *Ms. Marvel*: Marvel's Kamala Khan and the Reconstitution of Carol Danvers" wherein J. Richard Stevens, while analyzing the poor treatment of the Danvers character over the years, stresses the point that while the presentation of Khan's religion is new in the comics, she is an old type of Marvel Character: "The People With Problems" that Stan Lee popularized in the 1960s. These are heroes who struggle with personal problems to make the character seem to be relatable. Stevens leaves room for further thinking about this point, especially as part of Khan's "problem" is presented as her religion and her struggle with it.

Several of the essays address that the locus of Khan's character is symbolized by her superhero power. Khan is a polymorph: "Her very body represents her conception of being American", writes Hussein Rashid (also one of the editors of the collection) in his "Ms. Marvel Is An Immigrant" (47). While she can control the size and shape of her appearance while fighting evil, she also struggles with comparing herself to her peers like blonde popular schoolmate Zoe (like Carol Danvers, another tall, willowy blonde in Khan's life with whom she has a difficult relationship). Khan's ability to morph, combined with her wish to adapt to be the "right" person, Rashid suggests, reflects a desire of many immigrants who feel left out or conflicted in their identity and its place in the older culture.

Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins and Eric Berlatsky continue to delve into the symbolism between Khan's polymorphism and the fluidity of the immigrant existence in "The Only Nerdy Pakistani-American Slash Inhuman in the Entire Universe – Post Racialism and Politics in the New Ms. Marvel." These authors continue to make the argument that Ms. Marvel doesn't acknowledge the discrimination and surveillance of both federal forces and "concerned citizens" that colored the American Muslim experience post 9/11 (occurring when Khan would have been three years old). American drone strikes in Pakistan, for instance, are never mentioned. Police are seen as uniformly helpful. All of these ideas make the argument that the comic, overall, is "politically deracialized" while Ms. Marvel is racialized through familiar and comfortable tropes (75). To read Khan as a Muslim superhero instead of a superhero who is Muslim, Rashid reminds us, "flattens her character and misunderstands the way that she does important work" (61).

That important work of understanding Khan's place in the mediation of self and culture is typified in "Hope and the Sa'a of Ms. Marvel," by A. David Lewis. As a female teen Muslim superhero, she is a marginalized person who, in the comic event Secret Wars, is on the margins of the apocalypse. Lewis shows how Islamic eschatology (Lewis defines *sa'a* as "the appointed hour of the eschaton leading to resurrection") is explained through Khan's decision to spend the possible last moments of Earth 616 in Jersey City rather than heading off with other heroes to defend the world against an encroaching alternate universe (128). In doing so, Khan occupies a familiar space with the readers. Her important work becomes protecting her friends and families and providing them with a symbol of hope even as the world comes to end.

Although the collection casts a wide net, historical grounding of Muslim comic characters and Khan's place in that pantheon starting with someone like Elliot Publishing's Golden Age hero, Kismet, Man of Fate, to show the stereotypical and sometimes buffoonish way that Muslims characters have been (and in many cases continue to be) portrayed would help to ground the discussion of Khan's evolutionary portrayal even more. This desire may be nit-picking, however. This collection is an opening, not a final word. Since the book covers only the first 19 issues of *Ms. Marvel*, it plows the ground for a fertile new field of scholarship and opens up lanes of discourse for the continued discussion of the character and the reader's response to her. After all, comics, Rashid writes in the collection, can act as an agent of social change by participating in the

parasocial contrary hypothesis and creating a dialogic dissonance between what the comic reader expects and what the comic reader finds. This interaction can create an environment wherein the reader and the critic are more accepting of exploring new visions of American immigration in old mediums.

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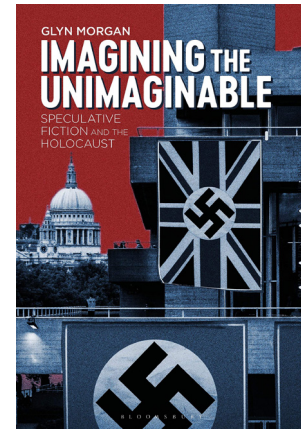
### *Imagining the Unimaginable: Speculative Fiction and the Holocaust*, by Glyn Morgan



Jeremy Brett

Glyn Morgan. *Imagining the Unimaginable: Speculative Fiction and the Holocaust*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Hardcover. 214 pg. \$120.00. ISBN 9781501350542.

In a world much brighter than our own, the Nazi Holocaust would have occurred only within the fevered dreams (or Iron Dreams, to get Spinradian) of science fiction authors who sought to create the darkest, most dystopian alternate histories of which the mind could conceive. Unfortunately, we reside in **this** world, where millions of innocent people were murdered between 1933-1945 through the unholy combination of virulent hatred, pseudoscience, and the processes of modern industrial society. As a result, the Holocaust for us is an undoubted, unwelcome fact, one with which we grapple in many realms, including the literary.



Literary analysis of the Holocaust is a tricky business. As Glyn Morgan notes, “[m]any representations of the Holocaust in fiction draw upon the implicit assumption that the traumatic experience cannot, and perhaps should not, be conveyed through art” (1). Theodore W. Adorno famously said in 1949 that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric”—forever misquoted as “it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz.” Whether impossible, or merely barbaric, the Holocaust has had the invocation of silence laid upon it since 1945, and although discussion of it has actually been vast, its legacy has been the convention that the Holocaust is an ultimately inexplicable, unknowable, and unimaginable event, beyond literature (certainly beyond genre literature). With this book, Morgan convincingly makes the case that, in fact, speculative fiction is ideal for expressing the inexpressible — “[w]e are routinely confronted by language which tells us that the Holocaust is Other as an environment of death, survivors and victims are Other in their suffering, and perpetrators are Other in their evil. What is called for, therefore, is a literature intimately associated with describing the Other.” (11). Morgan argues that “the ultimate achievement of SF Holocaust fiction is to allow us to learn something about the Holocaust, to come closer to understanding it, while maintaining the Otherness (estrangement) which the topic insists upon” (13). He gives particular focus in this study to the SF subgenres of alternate history and dystopia as vehicles for carrying out SF’s traditional role of examining the dark and difficult aspects of the human condition through futuristic or fantastical lenses.

Although Morgan references a library's worth of titles, he focuses on a small group of works (his "key texts") in particular to explore the various ways that the genre has chosen to confront the Holocaust. He begins with precursor texts, early works that predate both the actual occurrence of the Holocaust and its "rediscovery" in the popular mind brought on by the 1960 trial of Adolf Eichmann. The most significant (even prescient) of these was the 1937 feminist novel *Swastika Night* (by Katherine Burdekin, under the pseudonym 'Murray Constantine'), an alternate future history set 700 years in the future. Nazi Germany (with Imperial Japan) has long since conquered the world; its empire is a feudal society in which women have been stripped of all rights and been intensely Othered by the misogynistic Nazi regime. History has been doctored into a legend of a knightly and heroic Hitler and his knights; all records to the contrary were long ago destroyed. The novel is striking for its premonitions about the dehumanization of victims of Nazi terror and, as Morgan notes, "more than any other Anglo-German war novel its imagery and narrative can be found reverberating through post-1945 literature in the works of a wide range of authors of dystopian fiction and alternate history" (24). And a novel that features a government that succeeds by making use of a cultlike reverence for a Leader, the widespread use of ruthless violence, resurgent nationalist feelings, and the deliberate elimination of truth... well, it would be hard to argue that Burdekin's work lacks contemporary relevance.

Three alternate histories are highlighted by Morgan to show how SF Holocaust fiction has been used to counter the predominant cultural notion that the Holocaust was, and is, "the ultimate manifestation of humanity's potential for evil, and thus its designers and instigators were the ultimate agents of that evil" (41). That idea renders the Holocaust as close to unapproachable as a subject of comparative history, and history itself something that reaches some kind of final nadir with the Nazi genocide. Morgan, however, notes three works that, in postulating different outcomes to the Holocaust and World War II, problematize this fixed notion of history. In doing so, they "undermine faith in the notion of an absolute evil and call into question issues of historicity, morality, and a hierarchy of suffering" (42). Philip K. Dick's classic *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) is no doubt the most famous of all the works Morgan examines in his entire book—set in a conquered United States divided between Germany and Japan, *High Castle* involves, as do many of Dick's works, the questioning and perception of our reality and what we believe to be true. Multiple realities exist, suggests Dick, and in every one is the potential, indeed the likelihood, for fascism to triumph: this puts paid to the idea that the Holocaust was a one-time expression of humanity's capacity for limitless evil. The reality Dick describes in *High Castle* is one where the Holocaust was not only ultimately successful but committed on an even more terrible scale: not only Jews and Roma have been eliminated but the genocide has spread to Africa, where the continent has been emptied of its natives by a triumphant Germany. History is problematized by Dick's contention that *things could have actually been even worse* (a common thread in the alternative history subgenre).

In Robert Harris' alternative history thriller *Fatherland* (1992), the Holocaust has occurred but been hidden from history by a victorious Germany, assisted by the willful ignorance of

the people of the Reich and the normalization of German fascism in a conservative American government (led here in 1964 by President Joseph P. Kennedy). Based around the work of a Berlin police detective to uncover a murder conspiracy tied to the Holocaust, *Fatherland* is a work of SF Holocaust fiction that, like *High Castle*, calls our understanding of received history into question, by “challenging our expectations about the truth and validity of our own historical narrative” and by placing the Holocaust and its perpetrators onto a “relative scale of morality” (53) that, again, questions the Holocaust as the far and unapproachable end of history. Morgan also discusses Stephen Fry’s 1996 novel *Making History* in this vein: a time travel story gone wrong, Fry’s work depicts a world where an attempt to stop Hitler from being born results in a new timeline wherein a man named Rudolf Gloder arose to replace Hitler. The historical circumstances that produced Hitler remained, and removing him from the equation did not remove the Germany that Hitler made his own, nor the Germans that would follow him. The Holocaust under the smarter and more stable Gloder was perhaps less brutal, but even more horribly complete: mass sterilization wiped out the entire European Jewish community in a single generation. Again, Morgan demonstrates how SF Holocaust fiction not only presents worlds worse than our own, but in doing so forces us to ask whether Hitler is truly the Ultimate Evil of History or our Holocaust the worst possible outcome, shocking as either case might be to consider.

Morgan takes another group of novels as the centerpiece for discussing how SF Holocaust fiction has viewed the Holocaust through alternatives to the historically saved and the destroyed. *The Boys from Brazil* (Ira Levin, 1976) and *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (George Steiner, 1981) look, in very different ways, at worlds where Hitler escaped the justice of history—literally, in Steiner’s case, with an aging Hitler being captured by an Israeli commando team after having escaped to South America; and figuratively by Levin, where a refugee Dr. Mengele is genetically engineering clones of Hitler that can one day take up his mantle and secure his legacy. Both these works problematize the idea of justice and deserved culpability, just as Dick, etc. did so for the very notion of received history. Morgan also talks about Michael Chabon’s 2007 alternate history *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, set in an Alaska where Jews fleeing Europe before World War II were allowed by the US government to settle. In this world, the Allies won the war (in part thanks to a nuclear bombing of Berlin) and the Holocaust was what Morgan terms “a diminished catastrophe” (89). Chabon uses this alternative situation to compare and contrast the treatment of the Jews to that of the real-world Palestinians and Native Americans and to “place the Holocaust among the realms of other atrocities, and so highlights the extent to which the promotion of the Holocaust’s exceptionalism influences the world” (96).

In his last chapter, Morgan considers several texts that use the Holocaust and alternative histories to shine lights on contemporary fears, and to show that the horrors of Nazi Germany might easily be enabled or copied by allies, bystanders, and hypocritical politicians. Philip Roth’s 2002 *The Plot Against America* deals not explicitly with the Holocaust but, as so often in Roth’s work, the American Jewish experience. In this case, Roth dramatizes the growth and danger of domestic American right-wing politics by giving the reader a 1940 where Charles Lindbergh



defeats Franklin D. Roosevelt for the Presidency. Lindbergh, in addition to instituting a neutral policy in Europe, launches an effort to uproot urban Jews and resettle them in rural locations across America, ostensibly to make them more “American.” Conflicts lead to a brief but tyrannical police state in the US, though the book ends happily (clumsily so, both Morgan and I would argue). In Jo Walton’s murder mystery *Farthing* (2006), the British (thanks to Rudolf Hess) negotiate a 1941 peace with Nazi Germany, and by 1949 the UK is a soft fascist state governed by the pro-Nazi British establishment and infected with quiet, “acceptable” anti-Semitism. Walton wrote *Farthing* (and its two sequels) in emotional response to the eruption of the Iraq War and the US/UK aggression in the Middle East. Lavie Tidhar’s beautifully clever *A Man Lies Dreaming* (2014) gives us an alternate Hitler, working as a private detective in London after fleeing there following a Nazi loss to the Communists in the 1936 German elections. Hitler’s London is one in which he and the reader hear echoes of the anti-Semitism and nationalism of his lost Germany and which are growing worrisomely louder in our own time. (That potential for renewed racist and nationalist feeling is reinforced in Howard Jacobson’s 2014 *J.*) Bringing attention to the dangers of our own age through examinations of our fictional or alternative pasts is, as Morgan notes, a key achievement of these works.

Morgan’s remarkable achievement with *Imagining the Unimaginable* has been to show that SF Holocaust fiction is not only a real possibility, but a rich subgenre of speculative literature that escapes the paradox of a historical event so vast that it “cannot be spoken of” yet is written about in countless literary works. What this kind of fiction, as Morgan frames it, does is “demonstrate that speculative fiction in its alternative approach to the Holocaust, less burdened by the critical discourses associated with realism, brings a much-needed diversity to the literature of trauma and genocide” (159). That is a valuable project indeed: the Holocaust is an event that demands repeated evaluation and attempts to make sense of it. Science fiction through its history has been invaluable for helping us to understand the mind and the life of the Other—let that legacy continue here, and be directed towards granting us a better understanding, however incomplete, of this event, its perpetrators, and the millions of innocents destroyed by it.

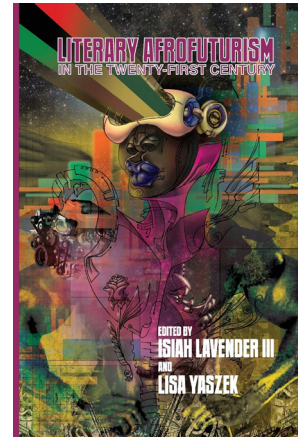
**Jeremy Brett** is an Associate Professor at Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, where he is both Processing Archivist and the Curator of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection. He has also worked at the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the National Archives and Records Administration-Pacific Region, and the Wisconsin Historical Society. He received his MLS and his MA in History from the University of Maryland – College Park in 1999. His professional interests include science fiction, fan studies, and the intersection of libraries and social justice.

### *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek



Michael Pitts

Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, editors. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*. The Ohio State UP, 2020. New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Speculative. Hardcover. 248 pg. \$99.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1445-9.



*Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* is designed, as explained by editors Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, “to introduce readers to Afrofuturism as an aesthetic practice that enables artists to communicate the experience of science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures” (2). Made up of contributions from fourteen influential scholars, the collection is divided into four key “conversations” concerning contemporary aesthetics, literary history, cultural history, and the relationship of Afrofuturism to Africa. The first section is made up of conversations with creators of Afrofuturist works, beginning with a roundtable discussion with Bill Campbell, Minister Faust, Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemisin, Chinelo Onwualu, Nisi Shawl, and Nick Wood. Including alongside this roundtable discussion an analysis by Sheree R. Thomas, editor of the revolutionary and influential Afrofuturist anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), of the past, present, and future of this aesthetic movement, this first segment of the collection makes “space for the voices of artists who explore the intersection of science, technology, and race in their own work” (23). Made up of analyses of disparate speculative works gathered under the intersecting categories of SF and black Atlantic authors, the second section of this collection, Afrofuturism in Literary History, illustrates “how Afrofuturism produced by” such writers “enriches our understanding of contemporary science fiction” (11). The third segment of the anthology, Afrofuturism in Cultural History, applies the cultural studies lens to this genre, and considers how Afrofuturist texts provide insight to black culture and history. Lisa Dowdall’s “Black Futures Matter: Afrofuturism and Geontology in N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* Trilogy,” for example, highlights the experiences of black, female SF writers within fandom by considering the reception and interpretation of N.K. Jemisin’s novels, which Dowdall shows are grounded in geology, as scientifically unsophisticated and overly focused upon social justice. The text concludes with a final collection of essays, Afrofuturism and Africa, that considers “the complex relations of Afrofuturism as literary practice and Africa as both a source of artistic inspiration and a space for the production of black SF itself” (14). The analyses making up this final section disrupt narratives of technological development as uniquely

Eurowestern, demonstrate how black SF writers use narratives “set in Africa to expose the colonial and postcolonial assumptions that have long driven environmental SF written from globally Northern perspectives” and add nuance to representations of Africa, and considers the importance of including African SF writers in a new iteration of the Afrofuturist genre (14). This anthology is a valuable resource due to its close examinations of the ways black speculative works impact the SF genre, shape and are shaped by the culture in which they are produced, and draw upon the African continent as a source of inspiration and a site for producing these narratives. It is additionally pivotal because of the questions it raises about the future of Afrofuturism as a global genre that will continue to link the creative works of pan-African, contemporary black Atlantic, and historic African American in fascinating ways.

This edited collection continues the work of scholars interested in Afrofuturism as a powerful aesthetic mode that emphasizes the intersection of race, science, and technology. Like Adilifu Nama’s *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008), Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman’s *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative* (2011), Ytasha L. Womack’s *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), and Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones’s *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (2015), *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* examines the history of this aesthetic mode and traces its generic boundaries. Unique to this collection—in addition to its interest in new and overlooked artists, its exploration of how a burgeoning pan-African literary tradition possibly connects with Afrofuturism, and its opening with a roundtable discussion that centers the thoughts and considerations of black speculative writers—is its specific focus upon the literary output of this aesthetic practice. This emphasis upon the manifestation of Afrofuturism specifically in speculative literature differentiates this collection from the aforementioned texts, which include analyses of this artistic style in other media such as music, visual art, architecture, and film. Like André Carrington’s *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016), *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* illuminates the impact of genre conventions upon popular conceptions of blackness but focuses specifically upon literary Afrofuturism. It is a significant resource for scholars due to its comprehensive examinations of Afrofuturist literature and its impact upon SF and cultural studies.

Emphasizing the far-reaching nature of the Afrofuturist genre, this collection is ideally suited for researchers desiring a guiding resource through this cultural terrain or scholars seeking a helpful companion for undergraduate or graduate courses focused on this topic. Moving beyond a simple overview of key Afrofuturist literature, the scholars in this anthology utilize diverse critical perspectives to interrogate the nature and boundaries of the genre. Importantly, these scholars also make crucial connections between Afrofuturist narratives and social and political activism. The collection makes “conscious the utility of Afrofuturism as a critical term in the battle to stake claims for people of color—and people of all colors—in the future imaginary,” a battle growing in intensity due to the resurgence of white supremacist political action (231). *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* additionally offers young scholars and students theoretical tools for

applying Afrofuturist concepts to their own readings and analyses of speculative fiction. This anthology therefore enables young scholars and students seeking an entry point into discussions surrounding this reimagining of the future through a black lens and its commentary on identity in 21<sup>st</sup>-century societies. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* is a valuable collection for the undergraduate and graduate classroom as well as for developing scholars seeking a broad understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

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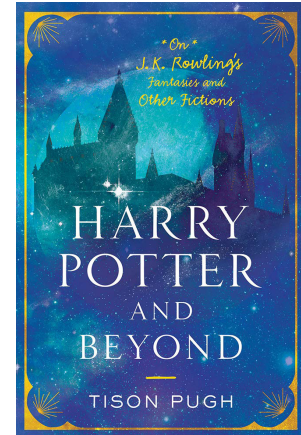
### *Harry Potter and Beyond: On J.K. Rowling's Fantasies and Other Fictions*, by Tison Pugh



Kristin Noone

Tison Pugh. *Harry Potter and Beyond: On J. K. Rowling's Fantasies and Other Fictions*. University of South Carolina Press, 2020. Paperback. 168 pg. \$19.99. ISBN 9781643360874. EBook ISBN 9781643360881.

Tison Pugh's *Harry Potter and Beyond* explores not only J.K. Rowling's worldwide phenomenon of the Harry Potter series, but extends the discussion of Rowling's influence by engaging with her non-Potter works such as the Cormoran Strike detective series and the literary fiction *The Casual Vacancy* (2012). Pugh argues that Rowling's work transcends any single category such as children's fiction, and reveals both an engagement with and reformulation of the established genres of fantasy, the school story, bildungsroman, mystery, and allegory to ultimately create "a fresh hybrid form of literature" (19). These genres provide the structure for Pugh's chapters, which offer an expansive and accessible discussion of Rowling's literary works, genre definitions and critical responses, the role of the author, reader and fan responses, multimedia adaptation, and the role of literature in exploring human mortality, morality, and community.



*Harry Potter and Beyond* opens by considering the relationship of author to text in the persona of "J.K. Rowling" and the popular if not entirely accurate rags-to-riches narrative arc of her story, providing a detailed biographical overview and noting connections and references found in her writing. Pugh notes Rowling's literary influences, history of charity work, and support of multiculturalism as well as the ways in which "many readers have found Rowling's treatment of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other related issues sharply limited" (7), especially in light of her recently revealed views on the rights of trans people; this context is useful for acknowledging the complicated impact of Rowling's influence, and the complexity of audience responses to her work and to her authorial persona. Pugh's introduction thus also examines questions of literary theory, critical approaches, and popular culture engagement, providing larger scope and scholarly breadth. Finally, Pugh examines existing critical responses to Rowling, as well as the growing genre of YA literature and the difficulties inherent in defining such, and the ways in which the lines between literary and genre fiction have always been blurry. This final discussion

sets up the central chapters of *Harry Potter and Beyond*, each of which reads Rowling's work in the context of an established literary genre.

Each of Pugh's chapters provides a succinct overview of the genre in question, while examining Rowling's work as both an example of and a reformulation of established generic tropes. Chapter One uses the work of influential theorists of fantasy, myth, and fairytale (e.g. Jackson, Jameson, Mendlesohn, Campbell) to discuss the ways in which the Harry Potter series embraces and experiments with the tropes of fantasy, including the relationship of the mundane to the fantastic, the quest, the traditionally male mythic hero and gendered assumptions, and British identity, particularly in terms of chivalry and Arthuriana. Chapter Two continues this exploration of identity, especially British identity, in the school story tradition, which centers the protagonist's maturation throughout the challenging experiences of the boarding school; Pugh again provides a useful overview of the history and major theorists of the genre, as well as an extended commentary on Rowling's work as relying on and playing with genre convention: if the school story genre traditionally helps readers develop an ethical code, then "Rowling's Hogwarts encourages students to aspire to more radical forms of knowledge based on the contingencies of experience" (43), and Pugh's discussion of ethnicity and social class distinctions in Rowling's work opens up fertile ground for future exploration.

Building on the themes of maturation in the school story, Chapter Three explores Rowling's novels as bildungsroman, first establishing genre definitions (e.g. those by Alden and Buckley) and expectations, emphasizing the ways young protagonists learn to confront the social norms of their world, and productively applying this concept of identity formation to examine Rowling's Wizarding World through a postcolonial lens, highlighting ethical sensibilities and ethical lapses.

Chapter Four shifts modes to the mystery novel genre, which, as Pugh points out, is often dismissed as "genre fiction" yet has a history of extensive overlap with many other genres, such as the bildungsroman in children's and YA detective stories. As in previous chapters, Pugh provides an easy-to-follow overview of the history and major scholarship in the mystery novel genre, as well as emphasizing Rowling's influences in and affection for the genre, and the interconnected nature of these fuzzily separated genres, grounded in a detailed close reading of the ways in which Rowling both employs and ignores key tropes thought to define the genre, such as the role of the hero as active investigator and "fair play" with reader expectations.

Chapter Five also considers Rowling's expectations of readers and (sometimes versus) reader expectations, as Pugh explores the role of allegory and the genre of allegorical writing in Rowling's work. Allegorical texts, as Pugh suggests here, "demand perceptive interpretations of that which they do not clearly state" (73) and thus invite multiple and potentially contradictory readings; Pugh focuses here on two particular allegorical readings, that of Christian sacrifice and salvation, and historical commentary on World War Two. Both of these allegories deal with themes of violence, Otherness, and communities under threat; Pugh offers a compelling reading of Rowling's

work as concerned with ways that escapist literature can productively open up discussions of morality and mortality, consequently arguing for the importance of genre fiction overall.

Chapter Six turns to the ever-evolving Potter canon, given the previous context of evolution and growth and genre interconnectedness; Pugh situates this discussion in the scholarly contexts of canonicity, collaboration, fanfiction and transformative works, adaptation (films, theater, fan productions) and paratexts (Rowling's personal website, Twitter, Pottermore), and queerness (especially in the responses of queer fans and readers to canonical representation or lack thereof), considering this version of distributed authorship through the lens of Henry Jenkins' concept of convergence culture and an increasingly participatory world.

Finally, Chapter Seven expands these themes beyond the Wizarding World, exploring how Rowling "seeks to dismantle artificial boundaries between genre fiction and literary fiction" (107) in *The Casual Vacancy* and the Cormoran Strike mysteries (the latter written under her Robert Galbraith pen name). In these novels, Pugh argues, Rowling "demonstrates her fluency with a wide range of literary genres and historical traditions, thus further testifying to her ecumenical influences and her reformulations of the British literary legacy" (108), but the more mixed critical and fan reception to these works also demonstrates the difficulties and "limitations" of her approach to genre. As in the Harry Potter novels, Pugh concludes, Rowling undermines simple distinctions of genre and "high" or "low" culture in order to emphasize themes of identity, family, community, morality, mortality, and resilience; thus, Rowling's body of work overall reflects her desire to both acknowledge and move beyond established distinct categorizations.

*Harry Potter and Beyond* includes a well-organized multi-section bibliography, which will be useful for scholars working in any of the genres discussed, as well as scholars of more general literary criticism, narrative structure, and canonicity; the writing is both expert and approachable, accessible for established scholars and newer students embarking on research into these fields. Pugh provides a concise, informed, and compelling reading of Rowling's body of work as both engaged in and demonstrative of inter-generic connections and influences, and ultimately emphasizes the appeal, hopefulness, and possibilities of playing with genre.

**Kristin Noone** is an English instructor and Writing Center faculty at Irvine Valley College; her research explores medievalism, adaptation, heterotemporalities, fantasy, and romance. In 2018 and 2019 she received the National Popular Culture Association's Two-Year College Faculty Award, as well as the Kathleen Gilles Seidel Award, administered by the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, for travel and research support in Australia. She is the editor of the essay collections *Terry Pratchett's Ethical Worlds* (2020) and *Welsh Mythology and Folklore in Popular Culture* (2011), and has published on subjects from Neil Gaiman's many Beowulfs to depictions of witchcraft in Terry Pratchett's Discworld to Arthurian references in *World of Warcraft*. She is currently working on a book-length study of Star Trek tie-in novels as sites of cross-media and cross-genre contact.

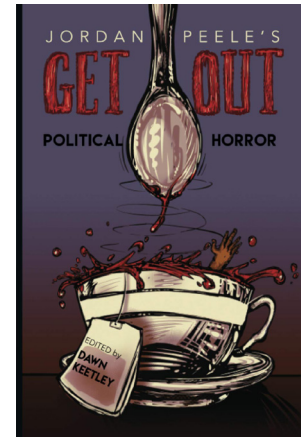
### *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror,* edited by Dawn Keetley



Rebecca Hankins

Dawn Keetley, ed. *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*. The Ohio State UP, 2020. New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Speculative. Paperback. 254 pg. \$29.95. ISBN 9780814255803.

Dawn Keetley's edited volume *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror* is the best advertisement for the blockbuster debut film. The book provides viewers with a manual to investigate all of the film's nuances, not only the overt but especially the hidden meanings elucidated throughout the sixteen essays. Keetley introduces the reader to the film's storyline that centers on Chris Washington, a young Black man who encounters the family of his white girlfriend Rose Armitage. This encounter is the catalyst for the horror or, as Peele designates it, "social thriller" about race, racism, and society that inevitably leads to violence. Peele notes that those who wield power in society are often the purveyors of terror and horror, especially to those without power. As Stokely Carmichael notes, "If a white man wants to lynch me, that's his problem. If he's got the power to lynch me, that's my problem."<sup>1</sup> Peele's *Get Out* represents an archetype of humans wielding power represented in the Armitage family and the Coagula Society, which becomes the horror for those without power, Black people generally and Chris Washington specifically.



Keetley situates the film in the long tradition of horror films in which humans are the monsters, e.g. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *American Psycho* (2000), *Hostel* (2005), the *Purge* franchise (2013-18), and many others. The debate over whether human monsters depicted in political horror films, as opposed to a nonhuman monster, can be called horror continues. Keetley and Peele argue forcefully that his work is an extension of the social and political commentary that adds a layer of racial critique to this genre of horror. Following in the footsteps of social, political, and racial horror are the three films that Peele acknowledges were influences for *Get Out*, specifically *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and *The Stepford Wives* (1975), each a critique of "societal structures-whether it be patriarchy or racism...-as the monster." (4)

The themes of the essays include those that influenced Peele's film, e.g. zombies, body snatching, and a new Black gothic tradition that recognizes that "violence remains a part of everyday Black life" (120). Sarah Ilott's "Racism that Grins: African American Gothic Realism and



Systemic Critique” (Chapter 8) is reflective of those themes that allude to Georgina, Walter, and Logan’s “mask that grins” (Paul Lawrence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” qtd on page 169). Each of these characters has already endured the Coagula brain transformation, their bodies already *snatched*, but conversely, they continue to retain a fading recognition of their former selves.

There are also connections to contemporary themes such as gentrification, rural v. urban, and neighborhoods as place. The Armitage home represents the gothic plantation of the South, but Peele turns this notion on its head by locating the home in the liberal bastion of Upstate New York. There are a number of essays that discuss what Robin Means Coleman and Novotny Lawrence describe in their essay “A Peaceful Place Denied: Horror Film’s “Whitopias” (Chapter 3) as places where Black people feel conspicuously out of place. Andre Hayworth succinctly labels the setting as a “creepy ass suburb” (56) before he is snatched. These essays are particularly prescient for our current times with Trump’s recent tweet to those “living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream” that they will no longer have to be bothered by low income housing intruding in their neighborhoods as he rolls back another President Obama-era program designed to reduce racial segregation in American suburbs. For Trump it is the Whitopia that is “often prized for its segregation and homogeneity” (47).

Another group of chapters discuss *Get Out*’s connection to other historical and contemporary figures that include Othello, W. E. B. DuBois, Ira Levin (author of both *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*), and James Baldwin. Particularly noteworthy is Robert Larue’s “Holding onto Hulk Hogan: Contending with the Rape of the Black Male Psyche” (Chapter 12), which compares Missy Armitage’s hypnotizing Chris to police officer Darren Wilson’s explanation of his fatal 2014 encounter with teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. For Missy and Wilson, Black men are never children, they are always scary and in need of subduing. This chapter adds to our understanding of the Black male as vulnerable and targeted. We see that vulnerability as the camera focuses on Chris’s eyes as he is rendered into the Sunken Place, unable to move and awash in tears.

Another group of chapters, under the heading “The Horror of Politics,” includes Todd K. Platts’s and David L. Brunsma’s “Reviewing *Get Out*’s Reviews: What Critics Said and How Their Race Mattered” (Chapter 9), a chapter that offers some revelatory contrasts between how white reviews and reviews by people of color focus on very different elements of the film. Other essays speak of scientific racism in how Coagula Society members poke, feel, and prod Chris, rarely discussing his intelligence or accomplishments. Their only interest is as it relates to his abilities, his stamina, his athleticism, and physical characteristics, their ultimate motive to learn his body’s suitability for the brain transplant.

The other essay that stands out is Kyle Brett’s “The Horror of the Photographic Eye” (Chapter 13),” which discusses “the eyes of horror” (188), both physical eyes and the white gaze that sees Chris as a vessel. The other “eyes of horror” are represented by the mechanical through the use of Chris’s camera phone. Brett discusses the white gaze of the Coagula Society’s Jim Hudson

who covets Chris's eyes to replace his blindness. Chris uses his camera at the Armitages' party to hide his uneasiness with the attention he receives. It is through his lens that he recognizes the Coagulated Logan and attempts to communicate their shared Blackness, but it is only after his camera accidentally flashes Logan that he screams at Chris to "Get Out." It is also his camera phone that saves him after he flashes Walter, who shoots Rose and then commits suicide. This essay has relevance to our current state of police killings of Black men and women, e.g. George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Botham Jean, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown, and many more. It is this "horror" that is now captured on anyone's cell phone and shareable worldwide that too often represents an exploitation of their deaths, but also an awareness that has resulted in investigations that would not have been possible in the past.

Keetley has compiled an excellent collection of essays on Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. The book captures all of Peele's influences and nuances; from his choice of music to his use of camera angles, every aspect has been theorized, imagined, speculated, and critiqued as horror, social horror and/or thriller, from its opening scene through to its conclusion. This book is an excellent text for graduate level film studies students. Scholars and students of Africana, Women's and Gender Studies will be discussing the meaning, the methodology, the comparisons, and the film's influence on new films that explore social horror or social thrillers for years to come. Can't wait for the critique of Peele's recent film *US*!

**Rebecca Hankins** is the Wendler Endowed Professor and certified archivist/librarian at Texas A&M University. United States President Barack Obama (2008-2016) appointed Hankins to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), where she served from 2016-2020. She is an affiliated faculty and liaison in the Africana Studies, Women's & Gender Studies, and Religious Studies programs. She has published widely in journals and book chapters and has presented all over the world. Her most recent work is titled "Reel Bad African Americans Muslims," published in *Muslim American Hyphenations*, edited by Dr. Mahwash Shoab, 2021.

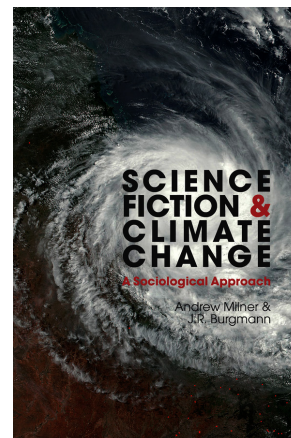
### *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach*, edited by Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgmann



Jerome Winter

Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgmann. *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach*. Liverpool UP, 2020. Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies 63. Hardcover. 248 pg. \$120.00. ISBN 9781789621723.

Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgmann's *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach* adds some vitally needed critical rigor to the burgeoning subgenre of SF literature and media Daniel Bloom has labelled "cli-fi," that is, climate fiction. Some of the crucial distinctions the book contributes to scholarship include the distinction between theogenic (god-caused), geogenic (geology-caused), and anthropogenic (human-caused) climate fiction, the lattermost being only of recent vintage. Another useful categorization that Milner and Burgmann neatly add to the critical cli-fi conversation is the taxonomizing of works into ones that variously anticipate the fertile biosphere into the barren landscapes of a frozen world, a burning world, or a drowned world. Likewise, Burgmann and Milner divide their fourth and fifth chapters, on "classical" and "critical" dystopias (in Tom Moylan's influential terminology), into cogent analyses of specific climate-fiction novels as exponents of a spectrum of ideological positions: namely, denial, mitigation, negative adaption, positive adaptation, and Gaia. There are also separate chapters on base reality climate fiction, fatalism in dystopian climate fiction, and a chapter on climate fiction as conjured in popular sonic and visual media.



A signal contribution of this timely book is its inclusion of a well-researched and globally oriented (if still primarily Western and European in origin) archive of climate fiction to illustrate this essential schema. Hence denialist climate fiction, i.e. fiction that avows skepticism about climate science, is exemplified through Sven Böttcher *Prophezeiung* (2011) as much as Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010). Mitigation climate fiction, or fiction that espouses techno-fixes and geo-engineering to address climate change, discusses Arthur Herzog's *Heat* (1977) as well as Dirk Fleck's *MAEVA!* (2011). Negative adaptation, that is, the minimizing of the deleterious consequences of climate change, is shown through Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* (2005) and Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006). Positive adaptation, fiction that exploits opportunities afforded by climate change, is explored through Bernard Besson's *Groenland* (2011) as much as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015). Gaian climate fiction, i.e. fiction that depicts

the planet as operating according to a self-regulating balance, as theorized famously by James Lovelock, is typified via Jean-Marc Ligny's climate trilogy of *Exodes* (2012), *Semences* (2015), and *AquaTM* (2006) as much as Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-1985). Burgmann and Milner discuss fatalistic cli-fi novels through the close reading of test cases of Antti Tuomainen's *Parantaja* (2010) as well as Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007). In addition to a rich panoply of close readings of other miscellaneous climate fiction, this book also includes a long chapter that is labelled "Theoretical Interlude," and which seeks to classify climate fiction broadly, according to excurses on Raymond Williams's cultural materialism, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture, and Franco Moretti's world-system theory.

There are three primary ways the theoretical interlude that underwrites the whole conceptual framework of this otherwise fascinatingly researched and critically valuable book are less than satisfying. Firstly, the blanket attacks on ecocriticism as damningly postmodern, ethereally post-structuralist, or covertly neoliberal seem rather skeletal and unconvincing, especially since the loose term "ecocriticism" has been so variably construed in literary scholarship over the last quarter of a century as to be rendered almost meaningless. The book could have benefited, for instance, from less tilting at these windmills and more direct and sustained engagement with the recent proliferation of literary criticism and ecocritical theory, loosely labelled, that does indeed engage with climate change as an environmental phenomenon, both in terms of science fiction and literary fiction and cultural politics more broadly.

For instance, Timothy Morton's theory of climate change as a baffling, contradictory "hyperobject," even if rejected as flawed theorizing, might have added some more supple dimensions to the perhaps overly uncomplicated ideal typologies discussed in this book. Indeed, the absence of any sustained discussions of ecocriticism at all seems like a glaring critical gap given that the proliferation of discussions of climate change have been a bone of contention of much literary, cultural, and philosophical scholarship on the so-called Anthropocene. Secondly, some of the specific readings of climate fiction seem tendentious on a more basic interpretative level: taxonomizing Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* (2004) as denialist is only fitting and well-marshalled; however, reading Cixin Liu's hard-SF *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (2008-2010) trilogy as "denialist" and symptomatic of a defunct communist Chinese ideological opposition to climate science jarringly stands out as an ungainly leap. Perhaps Cixin Liu in this trilogy does indeed cryptically and unreflectively endorse an anti-environmentalist message of hysterical crackdown, reinforcing a presumptive repression directed at radical deep ecology; however, not enough cogent evidence is provided to induce assent to this unconventional historicist reading of texts that never explicitly suggest this ideology, especially given that the passages in question found early in Cixin Liu's trilogy seem on a surface level to be a stirring elegy of ecological dissent and even subversion, especially given the draconian publishing context.

Lastly, and perhaps more substantively, the deeper theoretical assumption here is that literary fictional entertainment in general must conspicuously wear on its sleeves all its social and political positions, not to mention offer readers plausible predictions, explicit extrapolations, and realizable

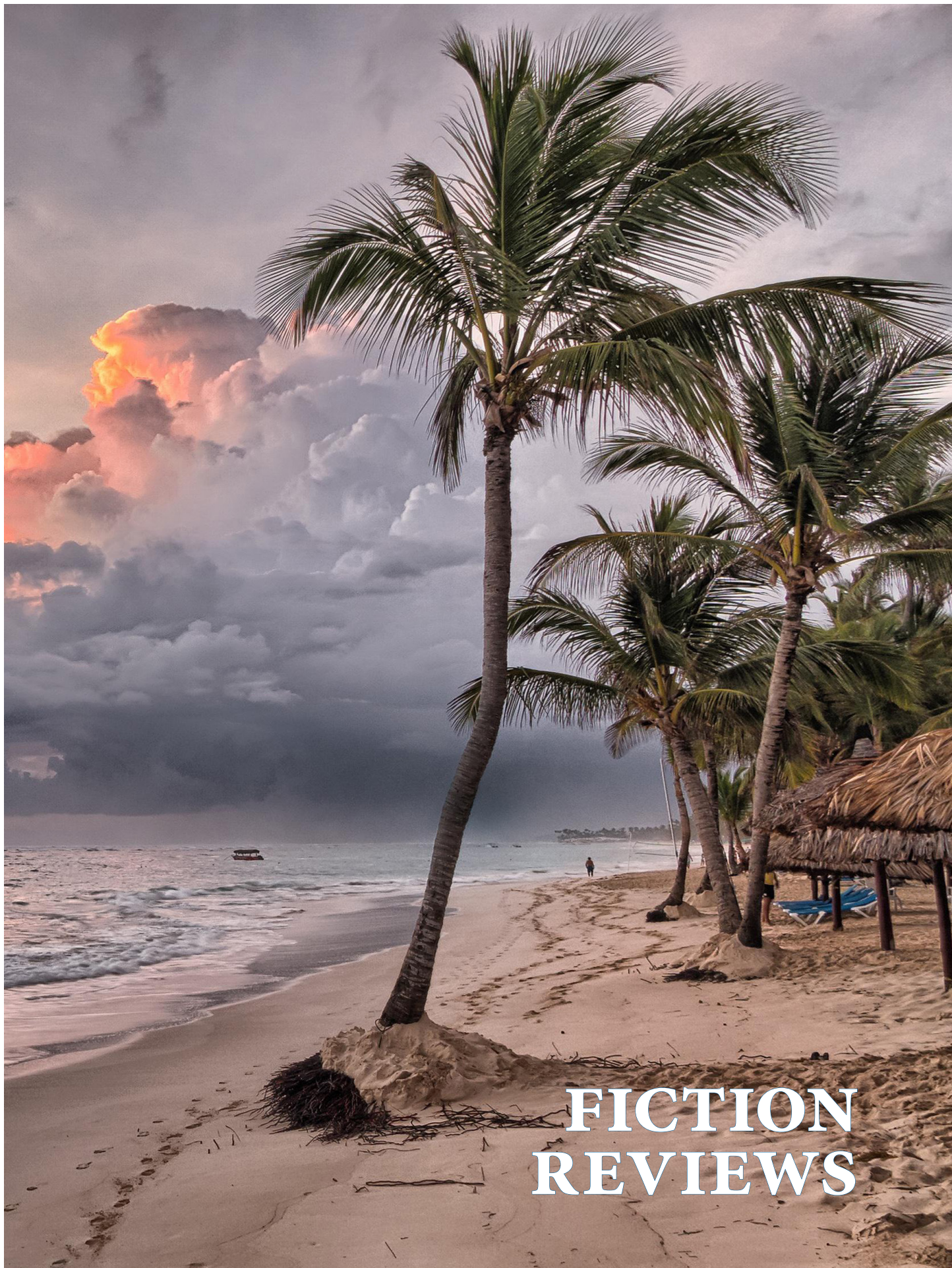
speculations to be ranked as serious or legitimate in its addressing of climate issues. Likewise, the assumption that it is the reductively didactic agenda of a work of fictional entertainment to provide a plausible template of pragmatic solutions to climate change saddles on often subtle literary texts outrageous expectations of literal forthrightness that can never be adequately met by even the most socially progressive writer or politically activist of audiences. Hence the critiques of works like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Earth* (2015), *2312* (2012), *Aurora* (2015), or *New York 2140* (2017) as absurdly unrealistic, or “utopian in the pejorative sense of hopelessly impractical” (165), deliberately overlook more granular allegorical interpretations of the novels as germinating an inchoate utopian impulse or unfulfilled fictive yearning for ecological change manifested in the complex problematics of the fictional scenarios. Such utopian allegory does not need to be taken as straightforward mimetic blueprint or programmatic recipe for lasting revolution to function effectively as an aesthetically and conceptually satisfying experience of counterhegemonic dissent and speculative-fantastic resistance.

To be fair, and not to put too fine a point on this minor criticism, Milner and Burgmann do admit that this charge of “impracticality is a purely textual matter” (168), arguing that an otherwise sophisticated writer like Robinson, in these specifically discussed texts, as opposed to the more authentically turbulent changes depicted, for instance, in Margaret Atwood's eco-dystopian *Maddaddam* trilogy (2003-2013), simply fail at representing a genuinely green revolution coherently and compellingly in the delimited space of the novels themselves. This line of analysis may be lucid and reasonable from its own particular sociological premises and critical perspectives, not to mention subjective reading experiences, and certainly represents some important scholarly responses to these climate-change fictions. The provocative critique only lacks enough theoretical insight and precise textual evidence to be persuasive for the larger argument that Milner and Burgmann are making about the intractability of either the nebulously nihilistic sentiments or the inanely sanguine tendencies of climate fiction. Milner and Burgmann themselves devoutly desire the publication of a deeply pessimistic climate-fiction equivalent of what Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) was for anti-proliferation nuclear activists and that would have “practical effects on both elite leaderships and oppositional activists across the world” (191). Challenging the rote dismissal of uncritical dystopian fiction as unhelpful in galvanizing social movements, they earnestly conclude perhaps climate fiction will reach a critical mass of bleak and pessimistic representations of the ongoing climate apocalypse, and no singular landmark book is needed.

Milner and Burgmann therefore suggest that mitigation and adaptation novels, as much as Gaian, base-reality, or denialist climate fiction, are more or less uniformly prone to ingrained ideological blinkers in representing climate-change solutions, with Robinson's utopian blindness being repeatedly invoked as exemplary in its refusal to depict “the organized working class as a social force most likely to prevent anthropogenic global warming” (192). However, even the test case for such a large and unwieldy generalization (Robinson's own individual output is prolific) remains at best resistant to such sweeping interpretations, given the writer's consistently nuanced

depictions of splintering revolutionary factions of socialist-affiliated, labor-identified, and anti-capitalist organizations and the bewildering proliferation of micropolitical rivalries depicted in his densely ecopolitical novels. One idly wonders what Milner and Burgmann would make of Robinson's more recent *Ministry of the Future* (2020), for instance, which depicts a perhaps more working-class radical and sociologically messier green revolution in response to climate change than his also clearly socialist earlier books. Regardless, Milner and Burgmann's more evaluative, less taxonomizing views are not without their own merit or substance; Robinson's science fiction, and perhaps mitigation and geoengineering novels in general, do indeed rely on carefully curated techniques of extrapolation (and perhaps as well the corresponding acts of reifying "world-reduction," in Jameson's famous phrase), and his critical utopian impulses certainly lay themselves open to complaints from skeptical readers who challenge such science-based speculations as naive and overoptimistic. To counter such irrational exuberance, a clarion call of relentlessly dystopian climate fiction may indeed be called for as a political-cultural bulwark against the equally dystopian rising tide of the world's oceans.

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# FICTION REVIEWS

*Image by MustangJoe*

### Review of *Hunting by Stars*

Jeremy Carnes



Dimaline, Cherie. *Hunting by Stars*. Abrams, 2021.

*Content Warning: This novel and review discuss Residential Schools in Canada, which may be distressing or triggering for some readers. It also contains some spoilers for The Marrow Thieves by Cherie Dimaline.*

*Hunting by Stars* is the highly anticipated follow up to Cherie Dimaline's (Métis) 2017 novel *The Marrow Thieves*. Both novels tell the story of a dystopian Canada after people lose the ability to dream. A lack of dreams eventually leads to a lack of sleep and, by extension, a fundamentally changed society. However, in the midst of collapse, settlers in Canada learn that Indigenous people are still actively dreaming; in an effort to determine why Indigenous peoples still have access to their dreams, the Canadian government develops centers to imprison, study, and experiment on Indigenous individuals. The system is based on the residential schools common in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, where Indigenous youth were separated from their communities and cultures, had their hair cut, and were violently "educated" according to Western cultural standards. In fact, the Native characters throughout both books refer to each of these centers as schools; some of them were built atop the bones of the old residential schools, themselves covering the bones of Indigenous youths. Settler society and systems of power repeat themselves again.



While *The Marrow Thieves* introduces its readers to a cadre of characters that comprise a found family as they run from recruiters, soldiers sent to capture Indigenous people to take them to the schools, *Hunting by Stars* focuses more on the violent settler system itself. In many ways, this is a book about the ways settler colonial education extends tendrils into young Indigenous minds in an effort to drive out their communities and cultural ontologies. Of course, it is equally about the violence enacted upon Indigenous peoples in general to extract seemingly necessary resources, in this case dreams.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, readers follow Frenchie, a Métis teenager, as he watches his brother get kidnapped by recruiters. That same brother, Mitch, returns in *Hunting by Stars* as a brainwashed worker for the settlers in the schools. As Frenchie continues to resist the violent invasions into his mind and body, Mitch continually reminds him of the ways that the school's program helped him and how it will help Frenchie and others. After all, as Mitch admits, it's better to be working for the schools than to be killed in them. Throughout the novel, Frenchie must toe the line between working for the schools as an act and becoming conditioned to believe the worst in his



communities because of the school's violent indoctrination, a balancing act made poignant by his found family outside the school and his brother inside urging him toward assimilation.

The school, the stand-in for the systemic oppression of Indigenous communities, doles out violence again and again as the program works to keep “residents” calm and obedient. In some of the most difficult passages from either book, *Hunting by Stars* describes torture designed to claw into the psyche of “residents” and consume them from the inside out. As Frenchie undergoes much of this torture, his hopes and dreams, fears and desires are laid bare as he confronts the traumas he's faced and the utter loneliness he is made to feel through complete isolation. The system and the individuals who design and run it understand that a central goal of the program must be driving a wedge between “residents” and their families and communities. Many of Frenchie's strengths in *The Marrow Thieves* are found in his family; his weaknesses are exploited in *Hunting by Stars* when he is separated from them.

While Frenchie's perspective was the sole one in *The Marrow Thieves*, *Hunting by Stars* cycles through the perspectives of various characters, many of whom readers already know. Miigwans (Miig), the stand-in father figure for Frenchie and his partner Isaac take the found family away from the recruiters to protect the others while Rose, Frenchie's love interest, begins the journey to the nearest school to try to rescue Frenchie. For tension's sake, she is accompanied by Derrick, another boy around her age who is also vying for her affections.

Thus, much like its predecessor, *Hunting by Stars* is a book about communal connection. It examines the search for connection against the power of huge systems: settler colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism. It explores the fallout of violently forced disconnection. In all of this, it never forgets that systems are maintained by people and people are blinded by systems. In as much as systems are maintained, they are often done so through a process of blinding: a skewing of knowledge or understanding, a cloaking of truth, a redirection of desire. Oppressed communities then come to serve the larger system that continually keeps them oppressed; this is most clear in the character of Mitch.

Throughout these broad conversations that examine the social systems dictating our lives, *Hunting by Stars* considers local levels of relationality and oppression. From alliances found in the most unexpected of places to the appropriation of Indigenous cultures by New Agism in the time of dreamlessness, Dimaline takes particular care to show that love and demoralization both come in the closest of spaces. She also makes sure that we continually remember that loss happens here as well--marking it as personal, bodily as much as it is communal and collective.

While this particular novel, and its predecessor, might see most use in Indigenous literature or science fiction courses, there is applicability broadly through the analogous ways this novel gestures toward the historical backdrop of settler colonialism in Canada and the United States. One of the best pedagogical applications lies in the central metaphor of the novel itself—residential schools in Canada. Both *The Marrow Thieves* and *Hunting by Stars* are young adult novels that circle around the generational trauma caused by the residential school system and the

ways by which Western education has had deleterious effects on Indigenous communities broadly. From the specifics of the residential school system to the broader connections across settler colonial policies, Indigenous language revitalization, and communal ceremony and connection, *Hunting by Stars* could play a pivotal role in many different cultural or historical studies courses.

At its very foundation, then, *Hunting by Stars* is a book about resistance and remembering. As Miig notes, "They never win when we remember." The act of remembering and connecting is both about resisting and building a world that looks better than the one that Frenchie, Rose, and the others are living in now. Centrally, the book returns to the responsibility of ancestors—those that came before and will come after. Dimaline returns to the central mantra: "Sometimes you risk everything for a life worth living, even if you're not the one who'll be alive to live it." In the end, community, language, and land are what matter fundamentally.

**Jeremy M. Carnes** is a recent graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Central Florida. He is working on his first book on comics by Indigenous creators and the affordances of comics as a visual medium for considering land-based practices by Indigenous communities. He is also co-editing a collection titled *The Futures of Cartoons Past: The Cultural Politics of X-Men: The Animated Series* with Nicholas E. Miller and Margaret Galvan. He is reviews editor for *Studies in American Indian Literature*.

# **MEDIA REVIEWS**



*Image by Jill Wellington*

## MEDIA REVIEWS

### *The Witcher, season 2*

Cait Coker



*The Witcher* (Season 2). Created for television by Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, based on the novels by Andrzej Sapkowski. Sean Daniel Company, 2021.

The Netflix television series *The Witcher* is primarily based on the novels by Andrzej Sapkowski (published in Poland from 1994 to 1999, and translated to English from 2007 to 2017), though the second season abruptly introduces elements from the popular video games created by CD Projekt Red from 2007 to 2015. The books are a political parable of Eastern European history; they utilize the language of eastern European genocide and the Holocaust—pogroms, concentration camps, political putsches, etc.—to discuss genocide, totalitarian and fascist governments, and political resistance bluntly and unsparingly. The



games keep certain plot elements but scale back the political context significantly while greatly expanding character stories and arcs, thus making the television series its own unique hybrid creation. (Incidentally, and with Sapkowski's participation, Netflix has also created a prequel anime film, *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021), and a forthcoming prequel miniseries, *The Witcher: Blood Origin* (2022) to expand further on the world of the franchise.)

The second season of *The Witcher* picks up shortly after the first season concluded, with the dual protagonists Geralt of Rivia and Ciri finally meeting. Geralt is a Witcher, a genetically modified and mutated (and sterile) human trained to hunt and slay monsters, with an extended lifespan and enhanced healing, strength, and agility. Ciri is a refugee princess in hiding after the violent invasion of her kingdom by the Nilfgaardians, an expanding imperial force, and the murder of her family, as well as a cursed figure of prophecy. The first season of the television show revolved around the question of monstrosity: what indeed, is a monster, and when must it be killed? The eight episodes return to this question repeatedly, and often with the answer that humans are worse monsters to one another than creatures of magic ever can be. Season two returns to this question by digging into the political parables of the novels, with plots touching on revisionist histories, genocides historical and contemporary, and modes of political resistance. The character of Jaskier, for instance, Geralt's troubadour friend and a figure of comic relief in both books and games, becomes a tortured political prisoner after running an underground operation to spirit people to safety from the violent rule of the Nilfgaardians. His role of the poet speaking truth with popular songs that put him in prison speaks to a long tradition of Polish poetry specifically as well as to the ways that art makes its own records of war and abuses. Geralt rescues him from prison, putting Geralt himself—who, as a Witcher, is ostensibly nonpolitical—into the fray as well. This is an interesting shift from the books, where Jaskier's popular prestige usually

lands him in safe space; both texts emphasize that it is the bard's own choice to put himself in danger for his friends and their cause.

A frequent criticism of the first season was the confusing narrative structure: its eight episodes were narrated using nonlinear storytelling (effectively foreshadowing much later events in the books, should Netflix choose to renew the series for enough seasons), a trait which is alluded to in a joke about Jaskier's singing storytelling in episode four. This second season is much less episodic as it adapts much of the material of *Blood of Elves*, the first novel in the series pentology (the first season being primarily drawn from the short stories collected in *The Last Wish*), which details Geralt's training of Ciri and their eventual reunion with the sorceress Yennefer, sometime lover of Geralt and eventual mentor to Ciri. It also introduces the characters of the Voleth Meir, a Baba Yaga-esque demon original to the show, and the Wild Hunt, spectral figures from the games. The "Conjunction of the Spheres" that is often referenced in all franchise texts is not elaborated on in the novels, but explicated here as the specific traveling of beings across multiple worlds via interdimensional portals. Humans, then, are not just invaders of a new continent as a metaphor for real world colonization and conflicts, but they are invaders of a whole new world.

Geralt is always presented as other, as is Ciri, despite their able white bodies. In the second episode of the season, Ciri and Geralt discuss the history of the Witchers; she asks, anxiously, if he was attacked because he was "different." Difference lies at multiple intersections here: the genetics that set them apart—Geralt being genetically-engineered while Ciri carries "the blood of Elves" that makes her both magically powerful and socially persecuted—and the social structures that endorse hierarchies of social and cultural value with nonhumans (whether Elves or Dwarves) at the bottom. Elves are coded both as indigenous peoples native to lands that are being encroached upon by human invaders and as Jewish, with scenes that invoke Passover, including a city filled with the anguished cries of families finding their magically murdered babies. Ciri is also structured as sexually different with her imitations of the sorceress Triss, foreshadowing the queer relationships that appear in the novels. The sorceress Yennefer, too, is coded as monstrous through her own sterility and the often selfish choices that she makes. All three characters are socially punished for their differences, but consistently prove themselves to be better people than the humans who choose to torment them.

It is worth noting that Andrzej Sapkowski is the second most-translated SFF author after Stanisław Lem. If Lem's work is preoccupied with failures of communication, memory, and trauma, then Sapkowski's work finds itself in found families amid immense geopolitical unrest. Geralt, Ciri, Yennefer, and Jaskier are a chosen family trying to survive a world that is evocative of the worst parts of the Holocaust, World War II, and the Cold War. Airing only weeks before the uproar over the censorship and book banning of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in Tennessee as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, *The Witcher* presents its viewers with stories that grapple with these newly hot-button issues, showing that history not only repeats itself but is only as fantastical as the next retelling.

MEDIA REVIEWS  
The Witcher, *season 2*

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## MEDIA REVIEWS

### *Don't Look Up*

Steven Holmes



McKay, Adam, director. *Don't Look Up*. Netflix, 2021.

“Dr. Mindy, I hear you. I hear you,” President Orlean (Meryl Streep) says after Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) emphasizes that a comet racing toward earth will be an apocalyptic event. This scene is a critical point in both the film and audience reception of the film, as Streep’s Orlean seems indebted to the trappings of the Trump presidency, even though this specific line seems to more evoke the Bush presidency. The line echoes Bush’s “I hear you” line during the Bullhorn Speech at ground zero after 9/11. In such a moment, the film clashes between *Saturday Night Live*-style direct political commentary, and the attempts of the film to push its critique and satire into a broader reflection on 21<sup>st</sup> century political norms and discourse.



Adam McKay’s apocalyptic black comedy set records for streaming on Netflix. Apocalyptic black comedy has become its own sub-genre, with iterations going back at least to *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Don't Look Up* acts as a comment on capitalism, complacency, and the power of denial and indifference. But the closest tonal analogue may be 2013’s *This is the End*, an apocalyptic black comedy that used as its chief form of irony the discord between celebrity personas and actual personality. *Don't Look Up* is particularly focused on the interplay between celebrity persona and personal politics both in the dramatic narrative and in the production of the film. The individual conflict and character arcs for the film protagonists—DiCaprio’s Dr. Mindy and PhD candidate Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence)—centers around these scientists suddenly being thrust into the limelight, and the differing ways they respond to their newfound celebrity. This is contrasted with bit parts, such as the arc of celebrity Riley Bina (Ariana Grande) who goes from overshadowing the comet in the news with her personal life to encouraging people to “look up” through her songs. Behind the scenes, lead actor Leonardo DiCaprio had significant control over the script of the film; DiCaprio, who produced and promoted the film *Before the Flood* (2016), a documentary on climate change, has used his celebrity status to actively advocate on behalf of the issue of climate change. *Don't Look Up* is a meditation on the role of celebrity in shaping political issues, starring an actor who uses their celebrity to shape political issues.

This is not the first narrative to use a comet or celestial body as a foil for political reflection. In H. G. Wells’ “The Star” (1896), the near-miss of a comet forges a new brotherhood among

men. In W. E. B. Du Bois' "The Comet" (1920) the cataclysm of New York serves as a pretext to explore race relations. The narrative overtones of these stories seem in line with many apocalyptic narratives, where dramatic disturbances in organized human life allow for the re-examination or re-organization of human society. But the narrative that *Don't Look Up* most directly evokes is the 1998 film *Armageddon*, with its celebration of heroic blue-collar oil drillers who absurdly end up more fitted for saving the world than astronauts. *Don't Look Up* is not a direct parody of *Armageddon* (indeed, it also is drawing heavily from *Deep Impact* [1998]), but it does have a brief arc where it telegraphs the *Armageddon* plot structure. Orlean brings in Benedict Drask (Ron Perlman), a casually racist parody of Bruce Willis's hero of *Armageddon*, to pilot a spaceship and use nukes to blow up the comet. That is, until the plot is foiled by Peter Isherwell (Mark Rylance), an amalgam of Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, who in trying to profit off the comet dooms earth to annihilation.

Despite its viewpoint characters both being scientists, *Don't Look Up* is not interested in the science behind astronomy or astrophysics. The locus of its exploration of technology is less on the exigence of the comet, spaceships, and nukes, and more on the capacity to exchange in rational-critical debate and the functionality of the state. Unlike *Deep Impact*, where nukes are detonated but fail to completely offset the comet (only for a spaceship to fly in and use even more nukes to save the day), it seems like in *Don't Look Up* the original plan to offset the comet would have succeeded had the plan not been undermined by Isherwell and his desire to profit off the comet. In turn, President Orlean's capitulation to Isherwell highlights the extent that greed and corruption can lead to the full-scale agency capture of the state by privatized interests. In essence, the film suggests that the mechanical technology to solve largescale problems may exist, but it is the social technologies of democratic government and public discourse that are failing.

Although the comet is a metaphor for climate change, the discourse surrounding it has clear parallels in the Covid-19 pandemic. In a historical survey, *Don't Look Up* could be positioned as one of the most direct comments on the Covid-19 pandemic (and state responses to the pandemic) that was written, produced, and released during the pandemic itself. It is probable that in creating literary histories both of science fiction and apocalyptic narrative, *Don't Look Up* serves as a compelling touchstone piece indicating at least some of the concerns of the post-pandemic era: collective denial in populism, the capacity of institutions to handle emergent issues, the agency capture of state institutions by privatized interests, and the totality of the warping of popular discourse around celebrity. Likewise, the strength of the film is encapsulated in the conceit of its title, where the president begins to advocate the public "don't look up" (don't acknowledge the comet) in a way that evokes how conspiratorial ideas can be intermixed and interwoven with both political and financial interests. Furthermore, in its interplay with *Armageddon*, *Don't Look Up* emphasizes the cynicism and hopelessness of contemporary mass media entertainment in one of the sharpest possible contrasts to the optimism of the 1990s. To that extent, *Don't Look Up* is a film that is highly productive when considered in relief to historical and literary histories.



**Dr. Steven Holmes** is a lecturer at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where he is currently finishing a book project entitled *Exploding Empire: Imagining the Future of Nationalism and Capitalism*. His publications include articles in *Studies in the Fantastic*, *The Written Dead: The Zombie as a Literary Phenomenon*, *War Gothic in Literature and Culture*, and *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy*. He teaches classes on argumentative writing, science fiction, fantasy literature, digital art, and Shakespeare.

### *Final Fantasy VII Remake*

Lúcio Reis-Filho



*Final Fantasy VII Remake*. Square Enix, 2020.

Fifteen years after first being announced at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) and twenty-three years after the original game's debut, the long awaited *Final Fantasy VII Remake* was released. The classic FFVII is considered groundbreaking as it paved the way for other JRPGs outside of Japan, and it was responsible, along with anime, for making local pop culture take off in the global market. According to Matt Alt, FFVII injected “a megadose of Japanese sensibilities” into the American mainstream, including the characters with big eyes and spiky hair, the manga-style melodrama, the androgynous heroes, and the very idea that games could be profound in so many ways.



FFVII was remarkably innovative in the late 1990s, as Pablo González Taboada's book on the franchise and the Vol. 2 of Dark Horse's *Final Fantasy Ultimania Archive* both recall. The game's basic concept, drawn from the cyberpunk subgenre, presents an industrial world of highly advanced technology in contrast to deep inequality and humanity in decline. With high-tech vehicles, garments, locales and other cyberpunk motifs, the city of Midgar lays its roots in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and later futuristic urban landscapes as depicted in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Akira* (1988). An exponent of cyberpunk storytelling, FFVII addresses late capitalism, existential dilemmas, psychological disorders, identity crisis, climate change, and class struggle. There are also nods to steampunk retrofuturism from previous games in the franchise, all reshaped for a more dieselpunk version. Biopunk themes are also relevant, such as the plot of the genetic modification that Shinra's soldiers undergo.

Since its debut, FFVII has inspired countless other games, spin-offs, animated shorts, and a CGI film. What fans wanted most, however, was a remake, which was finally released in 2020. Far beyond introducing FFVII to new generations, the main goal of the project was to create a “new and nostalgic” experience for longtime fans. Thus, the *Remake* captures a broader sense of nostalgia in a context where a range of disparate cultural texts return to be explored for their intrinsic nostalgic value; at the same time, it rebuilds game systems to fit contemporary tastes.

Being the first installment in a series focused on recreating the classic game, the *Remake* only covers FFVII's first act. The premise is the same: a group of heroes tries to save the world from capitalist exploitation. Players control the mercenary Cloud Strife, who joins the eco-terrorist group AVALANCHE in its resistance against Shinra, a megacorporation that is harvesting the

planet's energy to feed an industrial society and generate cutting-edge technology. However, the *Remake* deepens characters' development, recreating them with updated visuals. The new model for Cloud has more nuance, with the handsome, androgynous, sensitive hero reframing and deconstructing the heteronormative masculinity archetype. Cloud's effeminate features echo the archetypal images of androgynous male beauty, which Yumiko Iida relates to the visually attractive male idols of contemporary Japanese youth culture. This topic invites scholarly discussion on the "feminization of masculinity" and the androgynous male ideal of JRPG (and anime) heroes, especially in the *Final Fantasy* franchise.

Social criticism converges with climate justice in both FFVII and the *Remake*. According to Stephen K. Hirst, the classic game has inspired an entire generation of climate activists, including members of Greenpeace. It harshly denounces the savage jaw of capitalism, the power and monopoly of megacorporations, environmental degradation, and social inequality. More than two decades after FFVII's debut, the criticism has not lost its relevance and is gaining momentum as a driving force in the environmentalism agenda in times of global warming. The *Comic Book Resources* noted how the social issues raised by the game are even more relevant today than they were in 1997. Following this argument, Dani Di Placido has drawn parallels between the game's events – Shinra as a predatory force and the meteor's approaching – and contemporary issues such as climate change, environmental catastrophes, economic collapse, and the COVID-19 pandemic. As a critique of the Anthropocene, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* could be of scholarly interest to environmental fiction and climate fiction scholars, since they often intersect in speculative fiction studies.

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