

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



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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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