Mutating the Margins: A Disability Studies Reading of the Undertheorized in/Human in SF

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Thanks to a history of disease, injury, and immolation, my body has been scrutinized using all sorts of technology: x-rays, magnets, ultrasounds, even swallowing highly reactive alkali metals. In all of this internal reflection, I've come to learn that mine is a mutant body. My mutations are not detrimental or life threatening; they're barely even apparent without the aforementioned medical scrutiny. I have supernumerary floating ribs, os peroneum (extra foot bones), and a circulatory system that can spontaneously cause tiny, needle-like crystals of acid to form in my joints.

Thinking about this body I have, I often slip into the language and sensationalism of science fiction. This process reflects historic treatments of the genre by Darko Suvin, Samuel Delaney, and others. Science fiction provides an aesthetic and logical framework for transforming my understanding about the world and my place in it. One qualifying metric for being a human adult is having 206 bones. With my extra ribs and foot bones, I have 210. Am I a human, and if not, what am I?

By the logics of the society I exist in, I am, of course, human. In Western logics of humanity, I am quickly identifiable by characteristics around which the category of human was formed. White. Masculine. Seemingly able-bodied. Educated. These boundaries which position me within the category of man are used, consciously and unconsciously, to exclude people. The work I do in sf follows the genre through a particularly mutagenic window to track the ways in which it reified and altered the boundaries of "Man" through repeated questioning of the category. I do so by focusing on an undertheorized, dismissed, and yet ultra-present archetype—the mutant—as a means to test and shift these boundaries.

Testing the boundaries of humanity causes discomfort in presumed-to-be-human readers by threatening the assumed stability of their identity. When the boundaries are tested, the reader faces a conceptual threat: either they find themselves outside of what it means conventionally to be human, or they must extend their care and understanding to beings they didn't previously recognize as human.

In contrast to extensively documented and categorized encounters with alien others in sf, the category of the mutant is largely absent from the large sf histories that shape the field such as Adam Roberts's *The History of Science Fiction*, Brian Alidss's *The Trillion Year Spree*, and Alexi and Cory Panshin's *The World Beyond the Hill*. In Aldiss's seven-hundred-page text, the term "mutant" appears nine times; in Roberts's five hundred and thirty-seven pages, it appears ten; and in the Panshin brothers' work, a whopping twenty-one. While sf of the first half of the twentieth century,

as well as all of the twentieth century's sf production, utilizes mutants frequently, they are an under-discussed and under-theorized figure within sf.

Using disability studies and the aesthetics of science fiction, it is possible to mobilize a reading of the figure of the mutant as a category that is striking and under-theorized precisely because it denies or otherwise defies resolutions that the alien offers. I use Ato Quayson's work on aesthetic nervousness and Tobin Siebers's theories of disability aesthetics to question how disabled characters and narratives shape readers' understanding of mutation over time. Quayson's work on aesthetic nervousness focuses on the ways in which disability short-circuits readers' perception of a narrative while charging the experience affectively. Such oscillation of shock and mis/recognition opens the texts up to new readings of presumptions about how bodies ought to be displayed, read, and rendered as symbols. Tobin Siebers' work on Disability Aesthetics (in the book of the same name), argues that variety—and to that end disability (which is defined by variance, deviance, variety, difference, and other positively and negatively charged terms)—is central to the appreciation of aesthetic elements. I carry this further to argue that disability is central to science fiction which relies on a variety of bodyminds to stimulate and otherwise shock readers. Mutation is the recognition and acceptance of variance among humanity—anathema to practices of separating and isolating which sf enacts. The figure of the mutant cannot be made binary from the human precisely because it is born of humanity. The mutant resists resolution precisely because it is unpredictable; it stumbles into the narrative weighed down by centuries of ableist assumption, tripping over the one-way narrative of Western progress, and twitching through its performance of the eugenic bogeyman.

The threat of the alien bears resolution: it can be triumphed over, succumbed to, rendered knowable, or returned to the box as utterly arcane. The mutant lingers. The mutant is the unseen and unknowable variable that arises through the countless repetitions the pulp genre offers. The mutant is the only means to creating the superman while simultaneously carrying the risk of species-wide contagion. Indeed, it is the mutability and uncertainty of the mutant as a category that grants it both broad aesthetic appeal and limited resolution.

The 1950 short story "Born of Man and Woman" by Richard Matheson is introduced by the Robert Mills, the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, as featuring a "protagonist who tells it with a mind such as you have never met, housed in a body you have never imagined" (Mills 108). This story, which is told in the first-person perspective of a mutant, ungendered child narrates the abuse visited upon them by their parents for not looking "like mother and father. Mother says all right people look like they do" (Matheson 109). Mutants, here and wherever they appear in science fiction media, highlight key twentieth-century anxieties about supposedly "non-normative" and "wrong" human reproduction, and feature a dissonant aesthetics that quickly excites, stimulates, and discomforts readers. Matheson's story concludes with the mutant plotting retribution against their abusive parents: "I will screech and laugh loud. I will run on the walls. Last I will hang head down by all my legs and laugh and drip green all over until they are sorry" (110). In this climax, the body "never imagined" by the editor—and presumably never imagined

by the audience—becomes a threatening spectacle. It is fearsome, it is grotesque, and it is far more complicated than is first apparent. In the concluding paragraphs, the reader is asked to choose sides again given new information: Should the reader embrace a gender-defying, multi-limbed, green-spewing mutant, or the horrified suburban parents who violently punish non-normativity? In this way the story's surprise ending becomes an affective shock and reversal: How can the audience find kinship or connection with a mind like they have never met and a body that they have never imagined?

Yet, this excitement and thrill of experiencing the unimaged and unimaginable is a core element of the aesthetic experience of science fiction. As a genre, science fiction has been utilized as a way to perceive and theorize the unknown and to make it knowable and understandable. Darko Suvin, in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, defines science fiction as "an interaction of estrangement and cognition" facilitated by a novum, or a new thing (37). Mutants insist and provide evidence that variation is not a new thing—even when not apparent to empirical observers. As such, the mutant defies cognitive separation between the now and the new. It insists that the audience is a responsible party (much like a parent) in shaping speculative futures. This responsibility is the driving force behind the affective impact of the mutant. While other figures are marked by alterity, isolation, and otherness, the mutant insists on an immediate relationality to the audience. Mutants and mutation are often defined by their connection to and deviation from the norm.

This discomforting engagement with mutation is evident in Matheson's work. The child of the story is at first at least somewhat recognizable as some form of "human." They have language that they use with some proficiency. They have relationships with their parents who provide some care and comforts in the form of a bed and a magazine. Their parents, however, are also abusive and cruel. All of these traits make for an empathetic and caring connection. In the conclusion of the story this extension of care is troubled when it is revealed to the reader that they have offered human-care to a mutant with too many legs and that drips green goo. It is in this moment that the reader must reconcile their empathy and care with a figure who is beyond their definition of humanity.

It is in this shuddering revelation that I hope to better understand what mutants do to the boundaries of humanity, how mutants trouble the category of the human, and how their presence in science fiction changes aesthetic and cultural assumptions about humanity. I also work to draw out the connections between literary mutants and the self-aware mutative practices of science fiction authors and publishers. Campbell himself discussed his editorial mutations in 1938 to better align sf with human perception. Disabled editor of *Amazing* Ray Palmer frequently leaned toward stories of psi, freakishness, and mutation. Mutation is frequently a marker taken on by disparate authors of SF, as comes up in *The Proceedings of the Institute for Twenty-First Century Studies*. In a rhetorical condemnation of conservatism among writers of science fiction, Phil Farmer remarks: "Strange, isn't it, that a field supposedly dedicated to the future, to mutation, has so many conservatives, die-hards, and fossils in it" (139).

Thinking across the mutants of the page, mutants on the silver screen, mutants bound in comic panels, and their mutated creators, I follow the ways disability studies informs understandings of mutation, and how mutation provides practices for shifting the boundaries of who and what qualify as human.

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