

Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East



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Anindita Banerjee and Sonja Fritzsche, editors. *Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East*. Peter Lang, 2018. World Science Fiction Studies 2. Paperback. 258 pp. \$67.95. ISBN 9781787075931.

SITUATING this project in the trajectories and “dizzying arcs of migration” (2) that have co-constituted the vast constellation of science fiction produced across the world—as numerous as stars in the sky and much of it equally unexplored—*Science Fiction Circuits of the South and East* opens with a beautiful personal account of the trajectories that brought the editors to their respective orientations to and within science fiction. As Banerjee points out, within her real lived experience, much of science fiction was more familiar to her, more comprehensible and close, than stories from the English canon. Using the daffodil as an image of alienation, for example, ties this collection to many other notable authors—Chinua Achebe, Jamaica Kincaid, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—who have similarly staked their work in a recognition of the inapplicability of writing imposed from outside their lived experiences. Despite its radical recontextualizing of translation and transmission, however, this collection does not strike an essentialist argument; rather, it recognizes that the intertextuality of much “semi-peripher[al] and peripher[al]” (6) SF has been shaped by and often in response to stories already received as deeply alien. At the same time, it recognizes that the dual impulses at work in much contemporary SF theorizing—to historicize traditions outside of the historical centers of Western power while simultaneously seeking to deconstruct the center/periphery binary—tend to not be in dialogue with each other. This anthology, then, offers a unique contribution to contemporary SF studies by focusing on circulation, through which literature transforms and is transformed.

The collection traces the circulations of socialist and postsocialist SF in Europe and Asia alongside examinations of the materio-cultural productions of the global South in Asia and the Americas, a shift in contextual perspective that is mirrored in the collection’s layout. Shifting the impetus from space and location to movement and adaptation allows for fascinating juxtapositions, such as the association in the first section, “An Other Transatlantic,” of Transatlantic writings and their receptions and adaptations across socialist Russia, 1919 Mexico, and through the Soviet-Cuban imaginary of the Cold War period. Race and socialist revolution are the hallmarks of these essays, which uniformly offer unorthodox and exciting new ways of reading. The very first chapter, for example,

analyzes Zemyatin's seminal *We* (1924) as a radical Afrofuturist text—an unconventional reading that is meticulously researched, elegantly argued, and works specifically because of its unique perspective.

Part two, “Transnationalism behind the Iron Curtain,” focuses on East-East circulations between the Soviet Union and associated satellite states. The focus here is on the shared ethos of communist science pedagogy and humanistic grappling with what it means to confront the Other and, in doing so, how we establish our place in the universe. These essays, too, tackle who “we” are, primarily in the context of displaced contemporary anxieties mapped onto a future that has become largely homogeneous under socialism. While all the essays contained herein are geographically situated in Eastern Europe, the content they address is very different—from the dialectical materialism of Carl Gelderloos' approach to Eastern European science fiction texts to Sonja Fritzsche's East German cinema to Sibelan Forrester's “elite literary science fiction” (165) and its translations.

The final section, “Asymptotic Easts and Subterranean Souths,” deals with East-South and East-East circulations. Unlike the first two sections, which each contained three essays, this segment includes only two—a real pity, given the potential richness of the umbrella topic. As it stands, it's perhaps not surprising that for a collection so focused on the workings of comparative literary studies outside of the imperialist center, a member of the Warwick Research Collective, Pablo Mukherjee, would be included here with an essay on race, science, and the spirit of Bandung. A wonderful distinction about this essay in particular is that it privileges the role of science in science fiction and what that means when “science” is removed from its Western epistemological dialectics and considered in a specific and localized spatio-temporal register for assessing lived, material conditions, rather than as a “mere” narrative device. This discussion of “non-aligned science” (193) and local adaptation leads seamlessly to the next essay, which focuses on the reception of a Russian writer in China and the impact his work had on reassessing the memory of revolution through non-state-sanctioned mediations.

This collection offers a meticulously-researched, compelling approach to an aspect of global science fiction that is at once constantly mutable and yet tied to specific sites of production. Both Fritzsche and Banerjee are renowned scholars in their own areas of expertise, and together they make a formidable pair of editors. The essays collected here are significantly more polished and subtle than many similar attempts at anthologies, in no small part—as many of the authors explicitly acknowledge—thanks to the incisive eye for detail Banerjee and Fritzsche have brought as editors.

Not only are the essays excellent taken individually—each one deserves its own response essay—but the collection as a whole works beautifully to illustrate its overall theme of

transmission and adaptation. The rhizomatic scaling of topics contained in this collection illustrates the complexity of working with multiple sites of production as located in specific geographic milieus while simultaneously connecting and branching to numerous other material productions; there is no one canon of “world SF” in much the same way that we cannot speak of one internet. This rhizomatic internet analogy is made explicitly at the conclusion of the introduction and finds a fascinating mirror complement in the final essay by Jinyi Chu, which touches on unofficial internet translations and their role in shaping and disseminating information. So, then, even in layout and flow the collection serves to illustrate its own theme. Ultimately, while this groundbreaking anthology might be most warmly received by those working outside the Western Anglophone canon, its unique approach to the assessment of literature in circulation makes it a critical addition to any SF scholar’s library.