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

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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 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
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 emotionally 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
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.

**Works Cited**


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