

**53/3**  
Summer 2023

  
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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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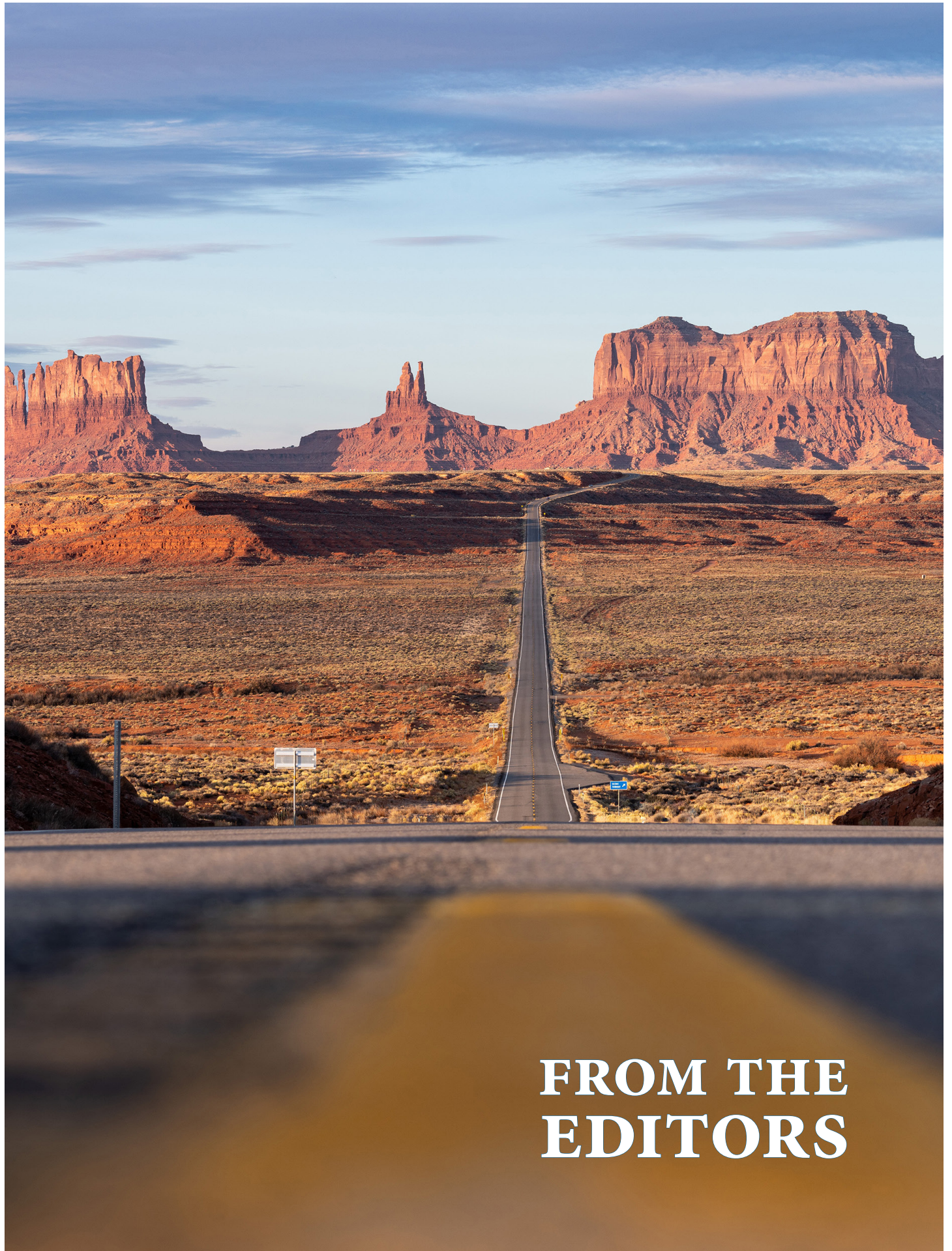
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# FROM THE EDITORS

## FROM THE EDITORS

Summer 2023

Ian Campbell



Welcome to the coolest summer of the rest of our lives. As I write this, doctors in Phoenix, Arizona, have announced new protocols for how to treat burn injuries that result from people falling or lying on the sidewalk; the ocean temperature off the Florida coast is now warmer than a typical hot tub; the Mediterranean is now at its warmest temperature ever; signs have emerged that the thermohaline cycle in the North Atlantic is on the verge of collapse; the Republican Party has called for more fossil fuel burning.

One purpose of SF is to use the future to estrange the present, but the future's already here, and in no way is it evenly distributed. There are many works of SF that pose future environmental changes as the catalyst for societal changes, but comparatively little that deal directly with our most pressing problem: the vast and powerful oligarchy-controlled media machine that's still trying to persuade us that this is all just some natural climactic cycle. Nothing to worry about here: get back to pumping up the economy. What's going to astonish most of us is how quickly the whole thing turns on a dime from "climate change is a hoax" to "climate change is god's punishment upon us for letting queer people exist". If you're sleeping too much and want to give yourself a reason to stay up at night worrying, go look up "effective altruism", the new philosophical darling of cryptocurrency and tech bros.

Subsequent issues of *SFRA Review* will likely address the sheer inhumanity of the post-catastrophe future: for now, however, we have the usual palette of reviews and feature articles. But keep in mind that SF is only literature, and the power of literature accrues to the reader, not the writer. There's only so much we can do about ideas and critique being stolen and repurposed, usually for the benefit of the oligarchy, other than to create more ways to estrange what's being done to us.



Alex Blechman  
@AlexBlechman



Sci-Fi Author: In my book I invented the Torment Nexus as a cautionary tale

Tech Company: At long last, we have created the Torment Nexus from classic sci-fi novel Don't Create The Torment Nexus

5:49 PM · Nov 8, 2021 · Twitter Web App

### The *SFRA Review* Seeks a Social Media Manager



#### The Editorial Collective

The *SFRA Review* seeks a dedicated Social Media Manager to develop and grow the journal's social media presence and connect more effectively with contemporary scholars and audiences. This is a new position that will work closely with the Managing Editor and Fiction and Nonfiction Editors. Prior social media experience is not essential, but it is desirable. 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.

The Social Media Manager will primarily be responsible for:

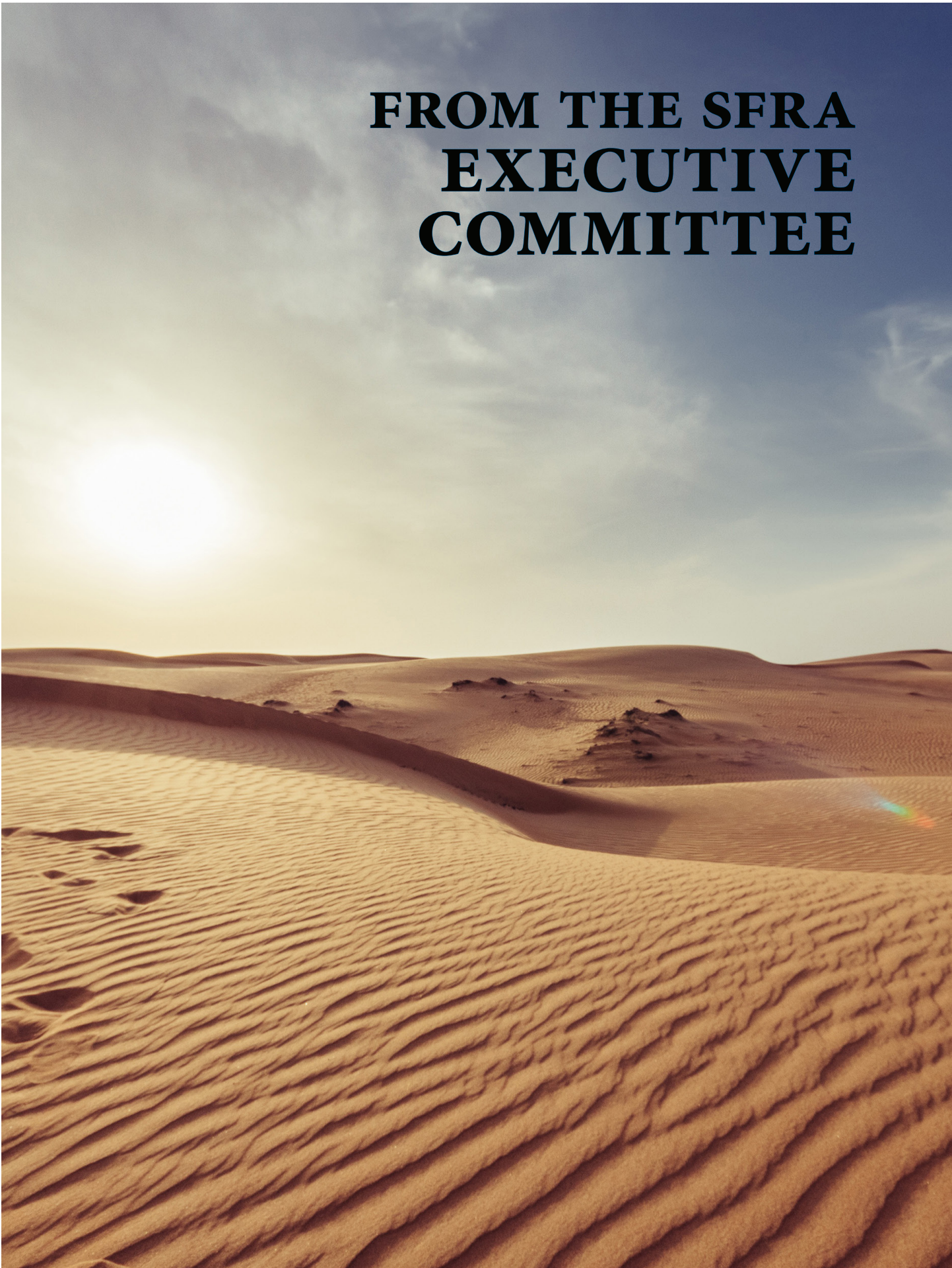
- regularly circulating the *SFRA Review*'s CFPs (both across social media and in SF-specific listservs)
- updating social media platforms in the leadup to new issues and after these issues have been published
- spotlighting individual feature articles
- engaging with readers and followers
- developing a more robust and interconnected online community across various platforms and organizations.
- reporting on user engagement regularly to the *SFRA Review* editorial team

The ideal Social Media Manager will post at least several times (3+) a week across Twitter, Facebook, Bluesky, Mastodon, and other social media platforms. Qualified applicants may also create and maintain a Discord server.

The *SFRA Review* is an open-access journal, published four times a year by the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA). It is devoted to surveying the contemporary field of speculative fiction, media, and scholarship as it develops, bringing in-depth reviews with each issue, as well as longer critical articles highlighting key conversations in sf studies, regular retrospectives on recently passed authors and scholars, and reports from members of the SFRA Executive Committee. The Social Media Manager will be joining an interdisciplinary volunteer team dedicated to science fiction and speculative scholarship and should, as a result, have a long-standing interest in the field, as well as making speculative scholarship freely available.

To apply for the position of Social Media Manager, interested applicants should send a short statement (~100-200 words) that covers why they are interested in the position and their qualifications, as well as their CV, to the *SFRA Review* Managing Editor, Virginia L. Conn, by August 31st, 2023, at [yconn@stevens.edu](mailto:yconn@stevens.edu).

# FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE



## From the President

Hugh O'Connell



The dreaded date of August 1<sup>st</sup> looms heavy. That period when time compression kicks in, and all those research projects and new syllabi that we had “all summer” to work on will now be crammed into the final waning weeks and days of summer break. However, amongst the scramble to finish that work we swore that we wouldn’t put off—again—this year, we can look forward to the upcoming combined SFRA/GFF “Disruptive Imaginations” conference at TU-Dresden. Along with all of the research presentations and special events organized by the fantastic team of Julia Gatermann and Moritz Ingwersen, everyone should check out Vice President Ida Yoshinaga’s column in this issue for a rundown of the special panels and events sponsored by the SFRA Executive Committee (including programming that specifically addresses early career scholars and Equity/Diversity/Inclusion).

And perhaps this is a good time to offer some other calendrical reminders. Typically, at this point in August, I’d be using this President’s column to reflect on the end of the conference. However, following the theme of this year’s conference in Dresden, “disruption” is working its way through the usual SFRA calendar. The SFRA’s annual conference traditionally takes place in mid-to-late June, after many of us have turned in final grades and projects and are looking for a well-deserved break and chance to catch up with our friends and colleagues. However, this is a reminder that not only this year’s but also next year’s conferences are bucking this tradition as we continue to partner with some of our European colleagues. So, while it may feel odd since we haven’t had our 2023 conference yet, we should however also be planning for a quick turnaround, as the 2024 conference has been penciled in for the second week of May. This may be a difficult time for some of us in the US to get away (a quick look reveals that it coincides with my last



FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

*From the President*

week of spring classes), but it will certainly be worth it. While we will hopefully be presenting more details about this timing at the Dresden conference, part of the reason for this earlier 2024 conference date is to coincide with the “Futures Better and Worse” literary festival, which features a number of events and writers that will be of interest to the SFRA membership. So, please be on the lookout for more information at the conference and then through the usual lists and social media sites!

Speaking of events that are of interest to SFRA members, if you have an event that you'd like the SFRA to distribute through its email lists or social media sites, or you have other ideas or concerns about the work the organization is doing, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at [hugh.oconnell@umb.edu](mailto:hugh.oconnell@umb.edu). I'd love to hear from you.

# FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

## From the Vice President

Ida Yoshinaga



Dear fellow Science Fiction Research Association members:

With your hearty responses to our call for papers and our registration deadline—adding up to 300+ participants!—“Disruptive Imaginations” looks to be one of the largest academic meetings of our organization ever [thanks also to our co-sponsor, German fantasy-studies research group GFF (<https://fantastikforschung.de/en>), which agreed to share our two conferences’ venues and content].

In addition to the current themes covered by conference paper sessions as well as by the splendid German cultural studies events put together by dedicated TU Dresden organizers Julia Gatermann and Moritz Ingwersen (and team), several **Executive Committee-sponsored events** on speculative-fiction studies, can be attended by registrants virtually or in person (the following is all in Central European Time):

Wed. 8/16, 9:30-11 a.m. (Panel 7, ABS/E11 Auditorium & online): “**Early Career Scholar Event: Diffrakt on Nourishing Imaginative SF/F Thought-Making, Artistry, Community**” featuring members of the German speculative-arts collective “*diffrakt: centre for theoretical periphery*” (<http://diffrakt.space/en>) Moritz Gansen and Hannah Wallenfels share how Diffrakt combines inventive pedagogy with sf theory and other intellectual discourses, to create a community-engaged arts practice. Thanks to SFU’s Ali Sperling for helping make the contact with this group and for suggesting their session in the first place!

Wed. 8/16, 16:30-18:00 (p.m.) (ABS/E11 Auditorium & online): “SFRA Business Meeting.”

Thur. 8/17, 15:30-17:00 (p.m.) (Panel 44, ABS/E08 & online): “**SFRA: Equity/Diversity/Inclusion Event: Indigenous Futurism in Latin America—The Case Study of the Aymara in El Alto, Bolivia**” featuring Aymara Ph.D. student Ruben Darío Chambi Mayta of LMU Munich’s Indigeneities in the 21st Century Project, who’ll share his research on how a Native Bolivian group has responded to settler colonialism including the state’s “Buen Vivir” (“Living Well”) campaign which extracts culture from Aymara protest history and struggles (<https://www.indigen.eu/projects/core-projects/indigeneity-beyond-buen-vivir-the-aymara-case-in-bolivia>). Thanks to UFL’s Libby Ginway for serving as discussant!

Fri. 8/18, 09:30-11:00 a.m. (Panel 46, ABS/E11 Auditorium & online): “[**SFRA Early Career Scholars Roundtable**] **SF on the Market: Advice from Early Career Researchers in Pursuing an SF Studies Career**” will feature global Ph.D. students and postdocs participating in a vibrant conversation & audience Q&A about concerns, strategies, and issues about being on the academic job market, including Patrick Brock Nora Castle, Reem Mansour, Yilun Fan, Candice Thornton,

FROM THE SFRA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

*From the VP*

Andrew Erickson, Rose Moreno, and Uchechi Anomachi. Their expertise collectively spans the breadth of today's sf/fantasy studies, from Afrofuturism, to film and visual studies, to translation and literary studies, to ethnic and cultural speculative works (and so on!). Thanks to SFRA Secretary Sarah Lohmann for chairing and organizing!

These events evolved from feedback received from participants during last year's Oslo (2022) EC-sponsored Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion session. We'll similarly survey those who attend this year's EC sessions; please provide feedback then to that instrument, or directly to Hugh ([hugh.oconnell@umb.edu](mailto:hugh.oconnell@umb.edu)) or me ([ida@hawaii.edu](mailto:ida@hawaii.edu)), on what you'd like to see in the future as well as how the sessions went.

Questions about the TU Dresden conference?: Please contact Moritz and Julia at [disruptiveimagination@tu-dresden.de](mailto:disruptiveimagination@tu-dresden.de).

# CALLS FOR PAPERS



# CALLS FOR PAPERS

## Call for Papers: AI, Inhumanity and Posthumanity

### The Editorial Collective

If you're faculty or administration at any level of the educational system, you've almost certainly been dragged into a meeting sometime in the last few months on the impact of AI, notably ChatGPT and its competitors, on student learning. The advent of AI and what it can do make it easy to forget that none of what's presented to us as AI today is in fact intelligent at all. It's just pattern-matching all the way down, which makes all the more incredible how good it is at certain tasks that seem to require intelligence. Certain sectors of the workforce have already seen layoffs as human workers are replaced by AI that, within the limited context of the jobs in question, is as good or better than humans. The benefits of AI, from a financial standpoint, have accrued entirely to the oligarchy and contributed to the impoverishment of the working class—a feature of technological development that goes at least as far back as the Jacquard loom.

SF has a long history of critiquing technological development, especially when it comes to the consequences of that development upon humanity. Although often perceived as a genre of foresight and forewarning because of its usage of future settings, the strength of SF lies in estrangement of and commentary on the present. Characterizations of AI in SF have ranged from the thinly veiled metaphor (*R.U.R.*'s robot-slaves) to the theoretical and semi-reality bound Asimov robots, to the damning “our unearned intelligence created the monster” (HAL), to the absurd (Deep Thought), all more self-reflective, ultimately, then predictive. Now, however, we do stand closer to AI than we've ever been before; it's no longer simply a metaphor. How might SF aid us in navigating the landscape of generative language models, the human reactions to these seeming-artificial intelligences, and the potentials for benefit and misuse? In addition, how might SF be itself changed by the near-advent of a technology so ubiquitous to the genre as to be one of its common tropes? As the Industrial Revolution spurred the golden age of SF, how will the AI revolution push the genre further?

The *SFRA Review* is requesting papers that address one or more of the following subjects:

- depictions of AI in SF and the changes wrought by AI on humanity
- what a post-AI humanity might look like
- the rhetorical strategies used by the oligarchy or their spokespeople to justify the disruptions to be caused by AI, such as “effective altruism”
- the economic effect of AI
- the effect of AI on written literature: how does AI affect the *writing* of SF?
- the well-established cultural biases of AI due to biases within the substrate it was trained on, and the real or potential consequences of these biases in AI

CALLS FOR PAPERS  
*AI, Inhumanity and Posthumanity*

We would also be very interested in papers *written by* AI. Such papers must be bracketed by critical analysis of the AI-written paper: its use of language, its logical structure, its cultural biases, etc. How is AI going to affect intellectual discourse?

# FEATURES



*Image by photo-graphe*

## FEATURES

### The SF in Translation Universe #17



Rachel Cordasco

Welcome back to the SF in Translation Universe! This summer promises a fascinating and diverse line-up of SFT from Japan to Sweden and everywhere in-between. Here you'll find mythical creatures, people turning into trees, space elevators, and much more, so read on.

June brings us SFT from Japan (New Directions) and Korea (Restless Books). In Ryunosuke Akutagawa's *Kappa* (tr. Lisa Hofmann-Kuroda and Allison Markin Powell), the eponymous folklore monster (who drags toddlers to their deaths in rivers) is spotted by Patient No. 23, who pursues it to its lair. There, 23 finds a whole world of Kappas, whose culture and society mirror that of Japan in terms of morals, the law, economics, and romantic relationships. His return to the human world is difficult and he finds himself irritated by humanity (leading to his confinement in an asylum, thus "Patient No.23"). With parallels to *Alice in Wonderland* and *Gulliver's Travels*, *Kappa* is a fascinating modern-day morality tale. Korean author Jeong-Hwa Choi's *The White City Tale* (tr. Janet Hong) also explores society and social hierarchies, only this time the protagonist is a man fighting against inequalities in a quarantined city.

The three works of SFT out in July are all by women- one Russian, the other two Korean and Japanese. *Counterweight* (tr. from the Korean by Anton Hur) is the latest text in English by Djuna (of which little is known). A story about corporate intrigue, politics, and one company's destructive attempts to build the first space elevator, this promises to be yet another excellent work in the growing canon of modern Korean science fiction.

Unlike *Counterweight*, Darya Bobyleva's *Village at the Edge of Noon* and Maru Ayase's *The Forest Brims Over* fall into the surrealist camp. *Village* (tr. from the Russian by Ilona Chavasse) is about a settlement that suddenly finds itself cut off from the world. Voices call from the river, people start thinking strange thoughts, and the forest seems to be moving closer. Only one woman seems to realize what's going on. Meanwhile *Ayase's Forest* (tr. from the Japanese by Haydn Trowell) also takes up this theme of humans in close relation to the natural world, only here it is a woman literally turning herself into a force of nature. When a woman becomes resentful of her husband, who uses her as the subject of his novels, she eats a bowl of seeds and starts sprouting buds and roots. Her husband tries to keep her in an aquaterrarium, but she breaks out, turns into a forest, and begins to take over the city.

I'm especially excited about August because it means a new John Ajvide Lindqvist novel! Having read his "Places" horror trilogy, I know that whatever else he's written will be high quality. *The Kindness* (tr. Marla Delargy?) forces us to consider just how little it would take for people to turn against one another. A mysterious shipping container is dumped near a Swedish port town,



FEATURES  
*SF in Translation #17*

and along with its horrifying cargo of twenty-eight dead refugees, there's a strange black sludge that seeps into the water. This sludge somehow imbues the inhabitants of the town with dread, after which they start acting out violently against one another.

Staying in Scandinavia a bit longer, we can look forward to Juhani Karila's *Fishing for the Little Pike* (tr. Lola Rogers). Winner of the Jarkko Laine Literature Prize, *Fishing* tells the story of one woman's annual trip to her home in Lapland to catch a pike. Pretty soon, we meet mythical creatures, a murder detective, and a deadly curse.

Finally, we have Polish author Rafal Kosik's *Cyberpunk 2077: No Coincidence* (tr. by ?), the latest in a video-game-to-print series that started with Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* books. CD Projekt Red was also behind the *Witcher* computer games, and here they've partnered with Kosik to tell a story about a group of people who "discover that the dangers of Night City are all too real" as they pull off a heist for a mysterious boss.

I'm sure I'm missing some SFT, so please let me know what else should be on this list. Thanks for reading, and I'd love to hear what you're reading now and what you're looking forward to: [rachel@sfintranslation.com](mailto:rachel@sfintranslation.com). Until next time in the SFT Universe!

# Brazilian Afrofuturism, Heuristic Function, and the Mass Cultural Genre System



Patrick Brock

Some people ask why Afrofuturism is so big in Brazil, but a better inquiry would peer into what made the country so receptive to this peculiar intersection of science fictionality and social movement. Perhaps it's because Afrofuturism, while being big enough to become its own genre, can operate within but also well beyond such boundaries as genres and borders. Isiah Lavender III calls it “a narrative practice that enables users to communicate the interconnection between science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures” (Lavender III 2). Either way, as we cast our two cents into this discussion by the very act of naming it out, Brazilian Afrofuturism continues generating a treasure trove of cultural objects and political-aesthetic ecologies that hint of a deeper history.

This essay<sup>1</sup> engages the movement's emergence in the country through its precursors and contributing factors, including the multigenerational efforts of cultures of resistance and affirmative action policies. We will discuss the strategies at play in Afrofuturist practices and why they feed on the mass cultural genre system's own affordances. The intersection of affordances and activism exercises what we call the heuristic function of science fiction (SF) by making it a potentially generative site of problem-solving and innovation.

### Competing Myth-Makings

The myth of racial democracy was used by the Brazilian state to discourage any problematization of racism and to foster conformity. There's even a “Monument to the three races” in Goiás' state capital, Goiânia, representing the myth put to use for the purposes of nation building. A more faithful portrait is the 1895 painting *A Redenção de Cam* [*The Redemption of Cam*] by Modesto Brocos,<sup>2</sup> where three generations strive toward the goal of whitening the nation-state: the Black grandmother, the lighter-skinned daughter, and the even lighter-skinned grandchild. The myth encouraged national unity even as government policy fostered the immigration of Europeans and today, despite some recent advances, TV programming remains dominated by white actors. In Mozambique<sup>3</sup> in early 2015, for instance, a local subsidiary of a Brazilian media group broadcast the country's racially skewed soap operas interspersed by ads that reflected the overwhelmingly Black ethnicity of the country, showing how racism can be exported as supposedly harmless entertainment.

But in the Brazilian Afrofuturist case, what was also being imported was the activist stance that produced the Civil Rights movement in the USA, thanks to intercultural dialogue between activists and academics in both countries. The movement also expanded to Brazil in the last

## FEATURES

### *Brazilian Afrofuturism*

decade thanks to affirmative action policies that increased university enrollment of Black students (Vieira and Arends-Kuenning), broadening the potential audience for SF works, as well as declines in the marginal cost of communication and computing, all of which made it easier to organize, debate issues, and disseminate. The mainstreaming of Afrofuturism played an important role: several activists say the release of the movie *Black Panther* (2018) was an inspirational turning point. Also, much activism went into getting affirmative action laws passed in Congress, priming an entire generation to call out social hypocrisies but also understand there can be a different relationship with technology and knowledge.



*The Redemption of Cam*, Modesto Brocos, 1895.  
Museu Brasileiro de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro.

Afrofuturism today is clearly helping improve the self-esteem of Black Brazilians through the instrumentalization of temporal and utopian thinking at the service of decolonial goals (Brock 2023) that encourage resistance and survival. On the 8th and 9th of April, 2021, as the death toll from the Covid-19 pandemic approached 4,000 a day in Brazil, cultural association Ilê Aiyê (which, since 1974, has been empowering Black culture in the street carnival of Salvador, the Brazilian city at the heart of African culture in the country), held an Afrofuturist online event with experts and scholars focused on how to use this powerful, global cultural movement, as well as the musical heritage of Afro-Brazilians, to build a better future for their community.<sup>4</sup> Local activists are also using this same toolkit of creativity and optimism to foster technological inclusion, socially sensitive entrepreneurship, and self-education, holding annual events including a large edition<sup>5</sup> on November 18-19, 2022.

Afrofuturism prospered in Brazil because it found an already vigorous and decades-long base of activism through art and education that was in strong dialogue with American social

FEATURES  
*Brazilian Afrofuturism*

movements and academia. The most prominent of these foundational activists was Abdias do Nascimento (1914-2011), a writer, poet, and legislator who started contesting Brazil's myth of a racial democracy as early as the 1940s. Abdias fought back by focusing on writing and staging plays, as well as educating the members of his movement, called quilombismo after the communities of escaped slaves. After Brazil's return to democracy, Abdias was elected for Congress and helped push for affirmative action laws. Two of his paintings<sup>6</sup> insert Afro-Brazilian religious icons into both the Brazilian and US flags, anticipating the later techniques of Afrofuturism, of appropriating the tropes, techniques, and imaginaries of SF to challenge Eurocentric representations. The paintings were made while Abdias was exiled by the Brazilian dictatorship, working as visiting professor in several American universities and engaged with the Pan-African movement. By juxtaposing Afro-Brazilian religious icons—the bow of *Oxóssi*, the deity of hunting and nature, and the axe of *Xangô*, the deity of fire and justice—with two tools of nationalist imaginaries, Abdias reverse engineers them to show his awareness of the power of these tools and his preoccupation with upholding a place for Black Brazilians in them. Today the Brazilian Afrofuturist offshoot has a host of writers, composers, theorists and filmmakers laying deep roots unparalleled by any other country in Latin America: a group of Central Americans and Caribbeans have gone with Prietopunk (Medina) to describe their efforts and complain about excessive Americanization in Afrofuturism, perhaps due to having suffered even more acutely from American interventionism while lacking the same dialogue.



*Okê Oxóssi* (1970),  
Museu de Arte de São Paulo.



*Xangô sobre* (1970),  
Acervo Ipeafro, Rio de Janeiro.

## FEATURES

### *Brazilian Afrofuturism*

Inspired by the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) in the USA, Zaika dos Santos and her collaborators have formed a Brazilian chapter with over 150 members all over the country, grouped under such themes as visual arts, literature, music, research, technology, and fashion (Moniz). The collective promotes meetings, courses, livestreams, workshops, and other activities. In 2022, as a part of Carnegie Hall's Afrofuturist Festival, BSAM Brasil released nearly eight hours of presentations by its members,<sup>7</sup> offering a good measure of the movement's popularity in the country.

The eminently musical side of Afrofuturism would also have to find its expression in the strongly musical culture of Brazil. In the later stages of her career, samba star Elza Soares (1930-2022) connected to the movement by working with young composers and creators to give the classics of Brazil's musical genre an Afrofuturist reading, like *Juízo Final* [Final Judgement] by Nelson Cavaquinho.<sup>8</sup> Nelson was part of an earlier generation of popular composers of sambas from humble origins and this song, released at the height of the repressive Brazilian military dictatorship in 1973, speaks of hope and justice defeating evil. With a video clip inspired by technoculture but which argues for the same integration between nature and humankind backed by other works of Brazilian Afrofuturism and SF, Elza repurposes the powerful idea of Nelson as the threat of repressive authoritarianism again starts looming large over Brazil (Pearson).

This essay offers only a glimpse at the hundreds of Afrofuturist books published in Brazil since the 1970s. An earlier example is *A Mulher de Aleduma* [*The Woman of Aleduma*, 1985] by Aline França, which explores the interplanetary creation myth of the residents of an isolated island in a developing country. The descendants of the alien race are disturbed by the appearance of a "big-town" man who embodies the predatory nature of colonialism and white modernity, with his plans to build a resort and factory on the island. He later rapes and impregnates the novel's female protagonist. The collapse of telepathic connection to their home planet further plagues the community, which will have to regenerate and resist following a long period of blissful isolation. The most popular author of the new generation is Alê Santos, whose work is being turned into a movie and game. Meanwhile, Sandra Menezes, with her *Céu entre Mundos* [*The Sky Between Worlds*, 2021], which depicts a Black civilization starting over in a new planet, was a finalist for Brazil's most prestigious literary award, the Jabuti.

Also of note are the three novels so far of Fabio Kabral's Ketu Três universe, all of them fast-paced and emotionally dense narratives dealing with trauma and reconnecting with ancestors and ancestral knowledge, while serving up a fair share of intrigue. Kabral de-centers knowledge by emphasizing African culture. His worldbuilding depicts a technology that does not stand in opposition to nature but complements and respects it; where science and magic aren't mutually exclusive but coeval; and the fluidity of gender identities is normalized. At one point he decided to break<sup>9</sup> with the Afrofuturist label, revealing a keen awareness of the downside of such collective boundaries on creative expression. He then turned to the creation of a new conceptual genre called macumbapunk<sup>10</sup>—*macumba* is the informal name of the Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil—combining fantasy, SF, and African cultural elements. This process of genre genesis (Brock 2022)

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is part of the political ecology of boundary negotiations involved in the creation of collective meaning within the mass-cultural genre.

Lu Ain-Zaila, an educator from the Baixada Fluminense suburb of Rio de Janeiro, is another important writer of the movement. She works on using Afrofuturism as an educational tool and illustrates and self-publishes her books on platform sites like Amazon, but also through small publishers like São Paulo-based Kitembo Edições Literárias do Futuro, Magh, and Monomito Editorial. As with Abdias, her ideas indicate a preoccupation with nation-building and centering Afro-Brazilians and their culture in the process. Her duology *Brasil 2408 – (In) Verdades and (R) Evolução* (2016 and 2017), uses a multifaceted patchwork of imaginary news reports, didactic materials from the future, first-person points of view, SF, political thriller, and police procedural to propose social technologies aimed at dealing with the destruction caused by a climate catastrophe in the 23rd century, constituting a vibrant example of an organically creative mind exploring the narrative possibilities of the movement. Like Kabral, she too has ventured into genre genesis territory by calling her work “cyberfunk.”

The short film *Abian* (2021, 32’), produced and released in Salvador by a younger generation of creators, showcases the increasingly sophisticated artistry of Brazilian Afrofuturism. Created by Mayara Ferrão, Diego Alcantara, and Filipe Mimoso with 360-degree video technology,<sup>11</sup> it works almost like an art installation, combining well produced imagery, special effects, and monologue into a *bildungsroman* of one apprentice of Candomblé. It opens with an astronaut floating through space after being ejected from a brilliant portal that closes after him, deploying major signposts of SF’s phenomenological wonder, while the competing videos within the screen create a sense of dislocation but also of multiplicity of viewpoints.



*Abian* (2021). YouTube screenshot.

Three other Afrofuturist films from the last decade, meanwhile, propose collective action and real-world mobilization in order to counter authoritarianism, alongside community solidarity to

oppose oppression. First, there's *Branco sai, Preto fica* ([*White out, Black in*] 1h33', 2014), which has charmed global audiences with its remarkable fusion of reality, fiction, and community action. During local meetings to discuss cinema, culture, and local problems, residents of the impoverished Federal District village of Ceilândia decided to portray a real-life police massacre in the late 1980s. Using two survivors and blending their testimony with a science-fictional narrative about a future Brazil sending a time travelling agent to investigate the massacre, Adirley and the community employed the Afrofuturist kit of genre infrastructure, speculation, and temporality to expose Brasília's failed utopia (Beal 113). *Negrum3* ([*Blackn3ss*], 22', 2018), directed by Diego Paulino and produced by Victor Casé, takes a somewhat similar approach with a short documentary about the lives of queer and trans Afro-Brazilians in the megalopolis of São Paulo. It focuses on their traumas but also their strategies of survival and shows a clear inspiration from the Afrofuturism of Sun Ra (1914-1993), closing with a detailed scene where a trans performer descends from a stylized flying saucer.

Also of note is *Medida Provisória* ([*Executive Order*], 1h43', 2021), directed by Lázaro Ramos based on the acclaimed play *Namíbia Não* [*Not Namíbia*] by Aldri Anunciação, himself the son of a well-respected Black union leader and politician in Bahia. It imagines a dystopian present where a far-right government offers to send Afro-Brazilians back to Africa as reparation for racism. Later, officials begin deporting holdovers. The plot's dystopian turn resembles the recent wave of far-right politics taking over Brazil following a decade of progressive governments, with hate speech echoed by conservative media and a powerful but amorphous mass of influencers. The hopes of the resistance are a series of "afrobunkers" where people seek refuge to reorganize and resist. Following a run in the international festival circuit during 2021, the film finally was released in Brazil in 2022 to good reviews and large audiences.

### **Breaking Boundaries**

We imagine things to both materialize them and maintain their materiality. But imagination also has its "tenses," as famously defined by Raymond Williams in the essay *Utopia and Science Fiction* (1978). Works like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* are "open utopias" insofar as they are imperfect but still offer pathways where temporalities become denser and more fluid, teaching a form of problem solving that can reopen possibilities. Williams sought to explain this combination of hope and determination as akin to an impulse "which now warily, self-questioningly, and setting its own limits, renews itself" (Milner 95). SF can fulfill this heuristic function through the imagination of innovation and alterity, by working in the liminal space between the mass-cultural market and community practices, supported by three socially generative elements of SF as part of the mass-cultural genre system:

*Temporality*—SF often deals with the density of time, either by depicting far-off or near futures, time travel, uchronias (alternative presents) or multiple, interlaced temporalities. If we agree that temporality is a contested space, "something that always eludes complete co-optation by capital, something on a different categorical or ontological level leading to multiple fractures

and sites of resistance” (Burges and Elias 12), it can be a fertile ground to challenge narratives that uphold a linear trajectory of time, or which seek to erase the wrongs of the past. Afrofuturists, for instance, struggle so that the past may seep into the present and the future, giving time a stickiness that demands more complex understandings; time itself is a common language whose synchronization carries mobilization potential.

*Speculation*—Speculation is a mental state (Kind) that serves here as a generous umbrella term for the intersection of SF’s affective investment in technoscientific and temporal thinking. Psychologists consider speculative thinking a way to reflect about what could happen and make decisions based on a series of mental processes and calculations informed by our knowledge (Glăveanu 87, 94-95). We see it is one of the central affordances of the mass-cultural genre, mediating our entanglement with technology, science, and the world’s knowledge hierarchies and their scientific paradigms, highly complex technical systems, and often competing cosmologies. Speculation is both about filling in the spaces of our socially cognitive processes (future imaginaries, for instance), but also a contemporary mode of operating in markets and governments attempting to predict and direct the future.

*Genre infrastructure*— John Rieder proposed in 2017 that SF is a mass cultural genre supported by boundary objects, a concept he borrowed from science and technology studies to explain the dynamics of negotiated meaning at play. Boundary work in SF communities has similarities to how science and technology are negotiated and accepted through sociotechnical imaginaries, which are collective ways of thinking. These boundary objects are “plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star 1999, 2010). This also describes the pliable yet solid character of SF and how it provides shared spaces of contestation and collective engagement. Maintaining and cultivating these shared spaces often is up to a care economy of community work. People embedded in these knowledge systems intervene in them according to their political aims, becoming part of the “genre infrastructure” that creates emergent spaces for an organizational ecology operating with a distributed leadership model, as has been proposed recently as a tool and paradigm for progressive activists (Routledge 2017, Nunes 2021). This concept expands the paratextual focus (Määttä 115) to how community members consciously leave what Star called “trace records” of their interventions into how the genre is constructed.

By toying with how we imagine such elements as temporalities, technology, and alterity using elements from a globally recognized genre, Afrofuturists seek agency over the representation of the future and its construction. The way cognition (Hutchins) and particularly art (Gell 220-237) are socially distributed allows Afrofuturism to operate as a political-aesthetic subjectivity intervening not only in the technoculture of SF but the West’s failure to conceive of different futures. These efforts gradually grow in popularity until they have effects on the real world, we argue. Indeed, enough people have become mobilized by these subjectivities in Brazil to form communities merging the widely disseminated visual and narrative repertoires of SF with the social and political networks honed by their activist predecessors. Imagination, optimism,



creativity, contestation, and curiosity are the watchwords of these socially conscious creators hacking the machinery of the genre to enact change in the present and lay the groundwork for opening up the future.

## Notes

1. This result is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 852190, CoFutures).
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3. <https://memoria.ebc.com.br/agenciabrasil/noticia/2012-04-17/novelas-brasileiras-passam-imagem-de-pais-branco-critica-escritora-mocambicana>
4. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjdy0jtDoDY&ab\\_channel=Il%C3%AAAi%C3%AA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjdy0jtDoDY&ab_channel=Il%C3%AAAi%C3%AA)
5. <https://afrofuturismo.com.br/>
6. *Okê Oxóssi* (1970, acrylic on canvas, 92 × 61 cm): <https://masp.org.br/index.php/acervo/obra/oke-oxossi>  
*Xangô sobre* (1970, acrylic on canvas, 91 × 61 cm): <https://masp.org.br/livros/abdias-nascimento-um-artista-panamefricano-a-panamefricano-artista-capas-shango-takes-over-241>
7. <https://www.youtube.com/@bsambrasil6716/streams>
8. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBU5MYaDKjo&ab\\_channel=ElzaSoares](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBU5MYaDKjo&ab_channel=ElzaSoares)
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# The Alchemy of History: Balancing Alteration and Retention in *A Master of Djinn*



Paul Williams

It will surprise no one when I say that fantasy fiction—indeed, all fiction—is fundamentally, to some degree, a reflection of our primary reality. As Tolkien notes, if a fairy story is not actually about people, it is “as a rule not very interesting. [...] for if elves are true, and really exist independently of our tales about them, then this also is certainly true: elves are not primarily concerned with us, nor we with them” (“On Fairy-Stories” 113). No matter how foreign the storyworld may feel, it is made up of references to our own: Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea series is shot through with a cosmology pulled from Taoism and populated with people as familiar as ourselves; epic fantasies by Brandon Sanderson are rife with bits of various cultures scrambled together to generate in-world identities. Alternate history fictions operate differently because they openly proclaim their referential time and space. They retain a recognizable historicity while simultaneously upending that history. I will use P. Djèlí Clark’s 2021 Nebula Award-winning novel, *A Master of Djinn*, to examine the rhetorical work found when an alternate history fantasy balances elements of retention and alteration to generate a storyworld that is both recognizable history and fantastical otherworld.

First, though, to clarify the issue of genre. When written as science fiction, alternate history normally presents a thought-experiment concerned with questions of causation: add Divergence A to Historical Moment B and generate Alternate Reality C. In this type of story, historical moments are the materials that an author adjusts and shuffles around to achieve an end, with an emphasis on plausibility. But when the divergence is fantastical and not debatable, we must turn away from causation and focus more on how the world and the historical record are altered and how they remain the same. After all, there is only so much insight into causation we might glean from a world wherein the Nazis won thanks to an alliance with Cthulhu. But we can track how certain historical markers, such as the Nazis themselves, remain in a non-historical world and are recontextualized in a space where historical icons transform into powerful narrative symbols. In this way, alternate history fantasies do not ask us to seriously think about how to plausibly change history, but rather to meditate upon how we imagine impossible changes might comment upon the historical record.

*A Master of Djinn* is set in 1912 in a version of Cairo that, forty years earlier, was flooded by magic and magical creatures: djinn appeared in Egypt; goblins in Germany; we might presume that the fae now inhabit Ireland, and Baba Yaga is likely traipsing about Russia. Armed with supernatural powers and wondrous machines built by the djinn, Egypt preempts British colonization (which would have begun in 1882) and becomes a world power, with Cairo now a

rival to London and Paris as major global metropolises (2). There is a doubling effect here. As readers we feel historically situated thanks to surface details that signal the early twentieth century (unprecedented urban sprawl and industrialization); greater international interconnectedness; jazz music; a proliferation of technology throughout society; there's even talk about European powers on the brink of war. However, the historical record is upset by the presence of magic and djinn, a government agency that specializes in supernatural matters, airships, and, of course, Egypt's position in global politics.

The decision to use the strategies of fantasy rather than science fiction here speaks to one of fantasy's virtues, namely the ability to make the impossible cogently believable. Or, as Tolkien puts it, "Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability" ("On Fairy-Stories" 134). It is difficult to imagine a rational version of the nineteenth century, with the imperial rat-race driven by industrialization and facilitated by new technologies, in which Britain did not colonize Egypt. To overturn colonialism, and specifically by the colonized, requires the irrationality of fantasy. The Maxim gun gave Western powers the ability to so thoroughly overwhelm the peoples of Africa and elsewhere that magic is the only means available to flip the script. Clark hijacks an era that Eric Hobsbawm calls the "Age of Empire," referring to the decades leading up to World War I. This era was marked by a rapid spread of Western powers across the globe in a mad dash to control the resources necessary for rapid industrialization. Clark subverts this, first by empowering nations that have been subjugated in our timeline to overturn colonization on their own terms, and second, by changing the parameters of industrialization, with djinn who can produce magical machines. Yet these intrusions are a complication, not necessarily a solution to the problems of history. The intervention has enabled colonized nations to throw off their oppressors, but the human tendencies that underpin imperialism remain and must still be confronted.

The tension between recorded and counterfactual history means the narrative structure of an alternate history is intrusion fantasy, since something supernatural has inserted itself into a recognizable world. According to Farah Mendlesohn, the intrusion fantasy resolves by either repelling or integrating the foreign element (115). While some alternate histories do end by restoring the original course of events, the majority of alternate histories negotiate and integrate to produce a fully counterfactual world. In Clark's *Dead Djinn Universe*, the alternate history is already the new normal for the characters. The heroine, Agent Fatma of the Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments, and Supernatural Entities, reflects how she "was born into the world al-Jahiz left behind: a world transformed by magic and the supernatural" ("A Dead Djinn in Cairo"). The intrusion means that we can both recognize the historical storyworld for what it is while also recognizing its ability to signify its differentness. We dwell upon how Fatma's world improves upon our own, with women enabled to work in professions such as magical law enforcement, more national autonomy, and so forth. And yet, this world means more to us because it is directly referencing a recognizable past.

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History itself becomes a major source of myth for alternate history fantasies. From postmodern historiography we recognize that history cannot be truly apprehended and we only know it through texts (Hutcheon 16). However, much of history becomes mythic in our cultural consciousness as we rehash stories in an effort to explain how we have arrived at our current moment, and certain events loom so enormously in our collective imagination, similar to how Rome and Camelot are often used to signify a Golden Age, historical evidence notwithstanding. In *Stories About Stories*, Brian Attebery argues that fantasy finds its roots in mythology, reimagining and updating myths to speak to our sensibilities and our cultural moment. Alternate history fantasies signify the recognizable past while introducing any number of mystical novum. In so doing, the altered past can embody and explore the story we have told about it, questioning the permanence of that story and introducing useful complications. This carries us beyond questions of causation and dwells upon the matter of history as a story, something we can interrogate.

The doubling of canonical and counterfactual history is an essential ingredient to alternate history. The storyworld must achieve “a ‘Goldilocks’ zone” between the historical and the counterfactual, according to Catherine Gallagher, which “is neither too close nor too far for comparison” (73). Within this zone, historical actors (whether human characters or larger, metonymic entities) are always charged with a doubled meaning; the reader must track when history maintains itself and when it deviates, and the resulting dialogue carries the rhetorical meaning of the utterance. The author must decide what to retain and what to alter. Some of these choices naturally follow as consequences of the text’s ontological divergence, and others perform the wish fulfillment described by Tolkien. Reorganizing early twentieth-century geopolitics directly stems from imbuing Egypt with supernatural powers; filling Cairo’s airspace with steampunk airships is a fun affectation that directly reflects Clark’s own preferences.

Important to an alternate history is the way the text engages with the historical process, by which I mean how the text represents historical developments. The intrusive element might cause significant changes in the course pursued by time’s arrow, but historical events have a degree of momentum. However, that momentum is still subject to a slightly different course and impact. Rather than simply wipe away the intervening events, alternate histories hypothesize how certain changes to the timeline could conceivably play out, retaining events that get reimagined in the new timeline. The result is that the zone of historical narrative is opened up to a complex game of reversals and distortions. In *A Master of Djinn*, we read that, thanks to magic and technology granted by the djinn, the Egyptians routed the British at Tell El Kebir in 1882. In our history, this was a decisive moment when the British broke Egyptian resistance to colonial rule, but in the Dead Djinn Universe, it signifies the beginning of postcolonialism as Egypt begins to reclaim itself. Similarly, the Battle of Adwa in 1896 did result in a European defeat in our history, but that same Ethiopian victory is recontextualized as a part of a larger anti-colonial campaign rather than an anomaly. Both events serve the rhetorical work of reclaiming African independence and reshaping the historical world.

Alternate histories must perform a delicate balancing act. Ahistorical interventions typically

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signify a utopian impulse, stemming from a desire for justice to be applied to history's wrongs. However, alternate histories cannot automatically fix human history: in adjusting one system, the rest will reorganize. The novel must account for the consistencies and foibles of human behavior. Moreover, historical processes must be allowed to work out in a believable manner. It would be too easy to say that by breaking colonialism in the nineteenth century, Clark has created a world with a trajectory toward world peace. However, not only would this not make for a particularly interesting novel, it would also not be very convincing to anyone familiar with history. To suggest that resolving one systemic problem can fix humanity is naive, and alternate histories are a sociologically-focused genre, attempting to understand human behavior when operating outside of the set narrative of recorded history. Or, as Gallagher puts it, writers of alternate history:

prefer agents with consciousness, subjectivity, and some ability to make decisions and take unpredictable actions. Whether they are individuals, political parties, corporations, cities, governments, races, armies, or nations, they have their "own" ambitions and emotions, strengths and weaknesses, cultural constraints and opportunities; most importantly for alternate-history writers, they have good and bad luck, and they can foresee multiple future options. (145)

This is the work of literary psychological realism. The characters are shaken out of a preexisting narrative (recorded history) and must act in a new context. But they carry with them their old qualities. While alternate history can upset the context of systems that resulted in past oppressions, humanity still needs to work through its foibles, its prejudices, its yearnings to dominate and control. In Clark's novel, when it is revealed that Abigail Wellington is the mastermind behind her father's murder, we learn that she wants to wrench history back to its old trajectory. She plans to subjugate the djinn and use them to reassert British dominance over the globe. In other words, Abigail seeks to fend off the intrusion because it serves her well, while integration may pose the best opportunity to improve our world for everyone. She signifies reactionary attitudes that bristle at history's tendency to change, as signified when, with MAGA-like enthusiasm, she declares she "will make Britannia rule again" (331). Because she signifies so much of what is troubling in our own time, we are most relieved to see Abigail's plans defeated, even if as a character she devolves into a Saturday-morning cartoon. She signifies that, while we can imagine a change of circumstances in history to redress historical injustices, we cannot resolve these problems with mere wishing.

Even as Clark shatters colonialism and complicates the complex web of narrative nodes from our historical record, there looms over the novel a shadow of another significant historical myth: World War I. For all the disruption Clark introduces into the storyworld, the threat of global conflict is noted at the novel's opening, when Lord Wellington argues that his secret society should spearhead efforts to defuse war. Those anxieties carry over to the end: after the spectacle-laden, city-leveling climactic battle against the Nine Ifrit Lords, Kaiser Wilhelm II jovially remarks to other European leaders that "If we ever do have a war, I only hope it is as glorious" (371). The fact that such a war remains feasible within the Dead Djinn Universe is telling of a few things. It

affirms that World War I resulted from such a complex series of causes that it would be difficult to prevent, at least through the intrusive means Clark employs. This is similar to 2012's *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*, when Moriarty muses that "You see, hidden within the unconscious is an insatiable desire for conflict. So you're not fighting me so much as you are the human condition. [...] War, on an industrial scale, is inevitable. They'll do it themselves, within a few years. All I have to do is wait." And with the potential for such an international war, we must wonder how it would play out in a world with the magic of djinn and goblins contributing.

This question of magic contributing to an alternate World War I indicates a potential failing of the human societies within the Dead Djinn Universe, namely a lack of receptivity to broader metaphysical principles and an ethics of magic. This goes beyond the idea that "With great power comes great responsibility" of Spider-Man lore. In the *Earthsea* books, Ged learns that magic alters the Equilibrium of the world, and only by cautious expressions of power have wizards kept themselves from breaking the planet and cosmos. In Clark's novel, because magic is still new to a world that carries with it the social complexities of our own history, these lessons have not fully integrated into society.

Too often, history is a comforting story-space, since it already happened and we have pulled through. The causation debates of science fiction tend to ask questions about how history could be changed, whether for good or bad, in an effort to inspire political action. Fantasy, however, questions the stories we tell ourselves about the past, how it happened, and what are essential events of that past. Fantasy provides a meditative space to explore what has gone before, to question how we understand it, and to rethink the past in the context of our own present.

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# Not Another Cog in the Biopolitical Machine: K. Ceres Wright and Afrofuturist Cyberfunk



Graham J. Murphy

The cyberpunk movement has a well-documented history<sup>1</sup> that I'll gloss over as an introduction to this paper. First, although there are plenty of literary precursors to the movement's emergence in the early-1980s, including (but not limited to) Samuel Delany, Harlan Ellison, J. G. Ballard, John Brunner, James Tiptree, Jr., Joanna Russ, Philip K. Dick, and Thomas Pynchon, cyberpunk's oft-cited core is the quintet of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, and John Shirley. Thanks in part to such editors as Ellen Datlow, Gardner Dozois, and Stephen Brown, these newcomers' writings brought them into one another's orbit and the impact of their fictional output was quickly irrefutable, particularly after Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) became the first novel to win the Philip K. Dick Award (1984), Hugo Award (1985), and Nebula Award (1985) for Best Novel. Print-based cyberpunk soon expanded its roster, chiefly thanks to the marketing savviness of Bruce Sterling and his edited collection *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986). Meanwhile, cyberpunk's dominant visual splendor—i.e., the simultaneously sprawling but also vertical cities; the overlay of virtual and 'real' worlds; the proliferation of cyborgs, virtual entities, and artificial intelligences; etc.<sup>2</sup>—was codified by a trifecta of Hollywood films: *TRON* (dir. Steven Lisberger, 1982), *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), and *Videodrome* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1983). In his coverage of *Blade Runner*, Scott Bukatman remarked that "cyberpunk provided the image of the future in the 1980s [...] the aesthetic of cyberpunk was almost defined by *Blade Runner* (58:50), although Scott admits he inherited this aesthetic in part from the visual stylings of French cartoonist Jean "Moebius" Giraud, particularly his illustrations for Dan O'Bannon's "The Long Tomorrow" published in *Métal Hurlant* #7 and #8 (1976) before being republished in English in *Heavy Metal* #4 and #5 (1977).<sup>3</sup> Finally, Brian Ruh writes that "Japanese elements permeate many of this mode's foundational texts, and Japan continues to produce many important cyberpunk examples that push the ideas and concepts central to this mode, particularly as the synthesis of human and machine so central to cyberpunk's core becomes more and more a part of our quotidian realities" (401). It is this quotidian reality—i.e., a reality (or realities) that many (including myself) have argued looks increasingly cyberpunk-ish—that fuels not only the ongoing engagement with cyberpunk motifs by successive waves of (literary, cinematic, acoustic, and so forth) artists but the adaptation and evolution of these motifs to suit contemporary conditions. It is within these cyberpunk currents that we can locate sf newcomer K. Ceres Wright.

As per her online bio, Wright "received her master's degree in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University and her published cyberpunk novel, *Cog* [2013], was her thesis for the

program” (“About”). In addition to *Cog*, she has written a handful of short stories for various anthologies and she recently founded the Diverse Writers and Artists of Speculative Fiction (DWASF), an educational group appealing to “underrepresented creatives in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and all of their related subgenres.” She is currently the organization’s president. Finally, as she has remarked to the Midwest Black Speculative Fiction Alliance, cyberpunk has been foundational to her craft: she first encountered Gibson’s *Neuromancer* in the early 2000s, and *Cog* was a deliberate attempt to write in a Gibsonian vein, although she is by no means merely copying Gibson’s work, either then or now (“Interview”).

Let me circle back to why I’m focusing on Wright, and it has to do with what Isiah Lavender III has written about Steven Barnes, whose contributions to cyberpunk have “gone largely overlooked, in part because of the mode’s monochromatism” (14). Specifically, writing on Barnes’s *Streetlethal* (1983), Lavender positions Barnes as “the only Black cyberpunk writer working in the heyday of [cyberpunk’s] first iteration” (14). More to the point, however, Barnes’s work foreshadowed “Afrocyberpunk or cyberfunk, recent divergences made by black writers from cyberpunk’s norms” (Lavender, “Critical” 308). Wright epitomizes these recent divergences in her Afrofuturist cyberpunk, although I’ll come back to that term in a minute. In the meantime, consider her short story “Talismaner” (2021) which is set on the planet Yemaya, named after the Ocean Mother Goddess in Santería, an Afro-Caribbean religion practiced around the world whose roots stretch to the Yoruba religion (Snider). The story follows Tala, who is scrabbling to pull herself and her family out of the slums of Waneta, and in so doing she turns to techno-biological implants so she can become a shamhack, someone who can hack into the planet’s atmospheric waves and siphon energy, albeit illegally and with inconsistent reliability. After her implants, however, Tala learns she is a Talismaner, a once-in-a-lifetime shamhack who can not only draw forth energy but pull objects through energy conduits and even move people through space. Of course, her abilities draw the attention of the powerful socio-economic elites, and although Tala’s life is threatened, she also portends a brighter future because she can make meaningful change for those disenfranchised by the current socio-economic cleavages that define Yemaya’s social fabric.

Meanwhile, in Wright’s story “Mission: Surreality,” the protagonist is Concordat, an information broker, street hustler, and nascent rebel who lives in the City, a sprawling urban city made of “20 million souls, 1500 different species all crammed together in plascrete and biosteel” (Davis, “Welcome”). Tellingly, every person in the City is implanted with the Tell, a series of subdermal techno-organic implants that allow Cityzens to access a cyberspatial network called the Wave; unfortunately, the Tell also allows Watchers to monitor Cityzens to ensure compliance with the City’s rules. When a Cityzen named Shai Gea learns how to synthesize something called Ooze that will purge all traces of the Tell from a person’s body, Concordat is tasked with brokering the funding that will allow Gea to start mass production and distribution. And, as might be expected, Concordat’s actions in this enterprise bring her to the attention of Watchers that threaten to derail the entire venture.

## FEATURES

### *Afrofuturist Cyberpunk*

“Mission: Surreality” was first published in *The City: A Cyberfunk Anthology*, edited by Milton J. Davis and published in 2015, followed by a soundtrack made available on Spotify in 2019; “Talismaner,” meanwhile, was published in 2021 in Davis’s edited anthology *Cyberfunk!*. The promotional material for cyberfunk describes it as “a vision of the future with an Afrocentric flavor. It is the Singularity without the Eurocentric foundation. It’s Blade Runner with sunlight, *Neuromancer* with melanin, cybernetics with rhythm” (Cover). And, if you recall from a few paragraphs ago, Afrocyberpunk or cyberfunk are “recent divergences made by black writers from cyberpunk’s norms” (Lavender, “Critical” 308). In fact, Wright observes that contemporary cyberpunk trends “toward settings in the far future, on distant planets, where the landscape is not quite as bleak, where corporations do not dominate every aspect of life, and where characters have sunny dispositions” (“Cyberpunk”). Although Wright never uses the term *cyberfunk* in this description, her Afrofuturist cyberpunk is perhaps better described as cyberfunk: a modern articulation of cyberpunk that finds “old beliefs [...] juxtaposed against futuristic inventions” (Wright, “Cyberpunk”).

Cyberfunk is a very provocative term because there is a play of contrary dispositions: first, cyber is a reference to the intimate feedback loops involved in information processing, but it also evokes what has been called *cyber-capitalism*,<sup>4</sup> which “does not signal a utopian postindustrial, post-Fordist world characterized by creativity and global cooperation. Such neoliberal notions [...] simply mask the exploitative nature of the labor that underlies cyber-capitalism as with all capitalist formations” (English and Kim 223). Similarly, funk calls to mind the Afrofuturist soundscapes of, among others, Sun Ra, who, as per Ytasha L. Womack, “believed that music and technology could heal and transform the world” (53). At the same time, in the common vernacular, funk is a state of unhappiness, depression, or outright despair. We can therefore see in the term *cyberfunk* both a cybernetically infused transformative potential organized around a communal identity and a cybernetically infused despair organized arising from the failures of a utopian postindustrial, post-Fordist world. Wright’s cyberfunk expertly navigates this complicated terrain.

Consider Wright’s short story “Of Sound Mind and Body” (2017). The story follows Dara Martin, a woman who, thanks to an experimental treatment, can transform herself on a cellular level at will, although not without a fair amount of gradually intensifying pain. Dara is an undercover agent with Homeland Intelligence, and in her disguise as Chyou Sòng she has spent the past five months trying to learn what China’s Minister of Commerce Enlai Chin is planning regarding upcoming trade talks, a mission that has had her flirting and now going on a date with Yuan Chin, the Minister’s brother. She also crosses paths with the suspicious Githinji Diallo, and Dara’s research into this character’s personal history is where Wright provides a very brief overview of “Little Africa,” a very real community in the heart of the city of Guangzhou that is heavily populated by African and African-Chinese immigrants and citizens. Relaying her suspicions about Githinji to her handler, deputy station chief Rona Huang, Dara learns Githinji is also an agent, although he has a separate (and secretive) mission: he is an assassin, and after killing

the Minister of Commerce following Dara's successful extraction of trade information, Githinji turns his sights on Dara who, unfortunately, drowns while trying to escape. The story ends with Rona talking to Jim Roberts, Counselor at the US embassy, who is seemingly unaware that Rona had ordered Githinji to kill Dara after the successful completion of her mission. Rona reveals to Jim "there's a new program the [US] government's overseeing. Downloadable consciousness. We may be able to transfer her personality and memory to another body and start over."

These ideas of recordable experiences, transferable consciousness, and/or the swapping of bodies, coupled with the exploitation of labor that underlies cyber-capitalism, are consistent throughout Wright's cyberfunk. For example, "A Change of Plans" (2020) is set in Addis Ababa, circa 2070, and it follows Dani, a streetwise girl who is living as an information broker to the criminal class, a life very reminiscent of Concordant from "Mission: Surreality." Dani discovers illicit technological chips are making their way out of Kaliti Prison. Much like the Tell from "Mission: Surreality" that allows Watchers in the City to monitor Cityzens, the chips in "A Change of Plans" not only enable surveillance but also moderate behaviour which, in turn, fuels a black market: "The guards torture the prisoners and record their brain scans throughout. Then they transfer those memories and reactions to a chip and sell them to people who buy kink robots and want an authentic experience." Unlike Dara's experience in "Of Sound Mind and Body," however, Dani can extricate herself from her trouble, all while reconnecting with her estranged mother and carving off a more hopeful future for herself, including joining and contributing to a women's monastery that gives assistance to a local children's home.

The idea of exploiting the laboring class and generating profits from society's dispossessed and/or most vulnerable informs Wright's debut novel, *Cog*. Published before the aforementioned short stories, *Cog* is arguably the cog that turns the gears on these later stories because many of the motifs and conceptual issues in the short fiction are already nascent in this novel. The novel's chief antagonist (even if his role in the events isn't revealed until later) is William 'Wills' Ryder, the heir apparent to Geren Ryder's American Hologram corporate empire, at least until the arrival of a previously unknown older brother, Perim Nestor, complicates the family dynamics. One of Wills's R&D projects is consciousness transference as well as using a downloaded personality to achieve brain wave parity with a subject to effectively control their mind, albeit on a more subconscious level. And, as part of the beta trials, Wills is investigating the development of clone bodies to achieve consciousness transference, though in the meantime, his most viable candidates are medically fragile comatose patients who effectively have no use for their bodies anymore.

Given the brevity of this paper, I can only gesture towards where this nascent article is heading once it turns into a full-fledged piece, and it has to do with the transhuman condition and what Sherryl Vint calls the biopolitics of epivitality. In *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First Century Speculative Fiction*, Vint explains that the biopolitical implications and ramifications of biotechnological advances in the 21st century have created the condition of epivitality; specifically, "neoliberalism and biotechnology demands new ways of thinking about the ongoing reinvention of the idea of life and the living" (2). In other words, biotechnological advances mean that the

flow of “capital becomes interested in humans less for their capacity to provide labour-power and more for their capacity as biological entities” (5). For example, consider the end of the story “Of Sound Mind and Body”: Dara Martin, the undercover agent, is dead but her handler, Rona, tells Jim Roberts, the counselor at the US embassy, that the promising new program of consciousness transference will likely allow Homeland Intelligence to effectively resurrect Dara. When Jim asks Rona if resurrection in a new body is what Dara would have wanted, Rona coldly responds: “Doesn’t matter what she wants. She signed a contract. Her body parts are ours.” Dara’s worth according to the age of epivitality is in her role as what Vint calls the *immortal vessel*, the technological advances organized around “the fetish of preserving and valuing life beyond any limits” that, in turn, is “part of the ongoing reinvention of ‘life itself, enabling a view of living as something that might be engineered, created in the lab” (26). While Dara’s labor is valued while she is alive, her true worth is quite literally in her role as a biological organism. Thus, in this biopolitical age of epivitality, “Of Sound Mind and Body” painfully shows that life is reconfigured “as merely a resource for capital accumulation, as easily liquidated as any other asset” (29); in other words, what is valuable is the human *body*, not the *human* body.

Similarly, consider the suffering prisoners in “A Change of Plans” or, for that matter, the comatose patients in Cog who are the vessels for Wills Ryder’s experiments in transferable consciousness. These figures align with what Vint calls *the living tool* of biopolitics. They throw into sharp relief “the real subsumption of life by capital” by revealing “ways that the gap between organism and thing has decreased, perhaps even collapsed” (47). While Vint turns to the association between robot and slave in science fiction as emblematic of *the living tool*, the conditions of prisoner and comatose patient aren’t far off the mark: their value is as nothing more than an object or raw material in service to the needs of capital. The prisoners in the story help fuel an illicit sex kink trade for wealthy clients while the comatose patients offer the uber-wealthy the opportunity to live in the form of the transhumanist posthuman. In both cases, the reduction of the human to object-status fuels neoliberal profits and economic exploitation.

In closing, Wright is heavily invested in Afrofuturist practices and politics and her cyberfunk is deeply problematic, at least if we understand problematic as, to quote Carl Freedman, providing “critical traction to a conceptual framework within which further research and analysis can be conducted.” As I’ve gestured in this conference paper that will most certainly require later development, Wright’s cyberfunk engages with a conceptual framework that is our biopolitical age of epivitality, an age fostered out here in our quotidian reality saturated by the techno- and biological transformations we see currently taking place all around us. In focusing on those who are the exploited, the disenfranchised, the medically vulnerable, and so forth, Wright demonstrates in her cyberfunk fiction that in this age of epivitality our worth is increasingly shifting from the labour we exert in service of neoliberalism to the body we sacrifice to the neoliberal machinery. And, in drawing our attention to these fraught conditions, Wright’s cyberfunk stresses the importance of fighting to make sure there is more to living than simply as cogs in the biopolitical machine.

## Notes

1. See Murphy's "Cyberpunk and Post-Cyberpunk" for a detailed overview of the movement.
2. See Schmeink's "Afterthoughts" for details.
3. For details about Moebius's influence upon cyberpunk, see Labarre.
4. See Tumino for an early exploration of cyber-capitalism.

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### Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*: Queer Ecogothic Africanfuturism



Luke Chwala

#### Africanfuturism: A Model for Change

Around and below him the clear ocean waters roiled with strange, impossible sea life. What looked like a giant bright-red-and-white flat snake undulated by not three feet below. ‘What have you done to the ocean?’ Agu asked the manatee. Were the monsters attacking the oil rig and the supply vessel, too? These were Ayodele’s people and earthly allies? Ayodele was not only a shape-shifter, she was a liar. She hadn’t come in peace at all. He heard the sea cow’s response in his head, like a child’s voice through a mobile phone. ‘You will see,’ it said. (100)

The passage above is from Chapter 21, “The Sea Cow,” of Nnedi Okorafor’s 2014 novel, *Lagoon*. It is a short half-page chapter that utilizes the gothic trope of the monster to draw attention to an issue plaguing the Anthropocene. Agu asks why monsters are attacking an oil rig and supply vessel, an indication of the pollution threatening the Atlantic Ocean’s ecosystems off the coast of Lagos, the Gulf of Guinea. ‘Lagos’ is Portuguese for lagoon and refers to the body of water that flows into the ocean in the Nigerian capital city’s harbor. While Lagos’s lagoon is a habitat for a plethora of aquatic organisms, it has an infamous history of being polluted by urban and industrial waste. Pollution is at the root of the conflict of the novel. Extraterrestrials that appear monstrous to Lagosians have in part come to remedy this pollution. The so-called monsters in *Lagoon* appear as queer hybrids and sometimes shapeshifters, lifeforms produced via alien sea life evolutions, and sometimes mythological beings that manifest themselves in and interact with the material world. Led by the shapeshifting alien peacekeeper, Ayodele, who calls herself a space ambassador, a marine biologist (Adaora), Nigerian soldier (Agu), and a Ghanaian hip-hop artist (Anthony) collaborate to awaken the humans of Lagos to their monstrous treatment of one another, other lifeforms, ecosystems, and their endangerment of the Earth. These extraterrestrials seek symbiosis with Earth’s lifeforms to correct humanity’s unsustainable ways of living and being. This imagined future thus demands significant adaptation and change for sustainability, a society cognizant and respectful of biodiversity, and the dismantlement of distinctions and boundaries. Importantly, this futurity is steeped in Nigerian culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view. *Lagoon* is part of a genre Okorafor calls Africanfuturism, a term coined in her 2019 blog, *Africanfuturism Defined*. There, Okorafor writes,

“Africanfuturism is similar to ‘Afrofuturism’ in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture,

history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa” (qtd. in Talabi).

Okorafor’s Africanfuturism puts Nigeria’s capital Lagos front and center as the setting for a story that challenges readers to ponder fears about both difference and the future, a future escalating towards unsustainable ecologies. Through an examination of the way that the novel utilizes a queer ecological framework, I argue that Okorafor’s *Lagoon* can be read as an ecogothic text in the way that it utilizes the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural to resolve pressing environmental crises. *Lagoon* offers a rich commentary on queer agency, Gothic ecologies, and Africanfuturism—what I call queer ecogothic Africanfuturism. Before turning to my critique, I will first provide a brief overview of the queer Gothic, the ecogothic, and queer ecology. The intention is to clarify how these theoretical frameworks inform my analysis of queer ecogothic Africanfuturism.

### **Queer (Gothic) Ecologies**

In *Queer Gothic* (2006), George E. Haggerty reminds readers that the Gothic “offers a historical mode of queer theory and politics: transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to dominant ideology” (2). The Gothic is political. The Gothic is often queer. Gothic tropes have been used to explore fears and anxieties not only about queer difference but also ecologies and Nature. Though there are literal queer characters in *Lagoon*, ‘queer’ also acts as a metaphor for the monstrous Other. The Gothic trope of the monster (and monstrosity itself) has a long history with not only human and nonhuman ecologies, but also with queerness and queer identity in the ways that the monster and monstrousness work through fears and anxieties. Okorafor’s protagonists’ supernatural powers are in part queered as the novel’s plot evolves to resolve its conflict. Alien lifeforms are also queered as both Other and hybrid lifeforms that Lagosians perceive as a threat. The novel moreover literally showcases queer characters being subjected to hate and violence, such as the eventually murdered cross-dressing character, Jacobs, as well as other members of the LGBT student group called The Black Nexus. Many of the fears and anxieties permeating Lagos are rooted in what is different, what is unusual, and what is queer, and this perspective offers rich possibilities for a queer Gothic critique of the novel.

Additionally, *Lagoon* can be read through an ecogothic lens because of the ways it mitigates anxieties about sustainability. Andrew Smith and William Hughes posit in their introduction to *Ecogothic* (2013) that the Gothic appears to be a form well placed to provide a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory, and political processes because of the Gothic’s ability to capture and reveal human anxieties (8). Writing about ecofeminism in this volume, Emily Carr argues that “women’s Gothic fiction has undermined fictions of the human and nonhuman, the natural and unnatural by creating worlds in which the everyday is

collapsed with the nightmarish” (qtd. in Smith and Hughes 12). Carr posits that in much Gothic fiction written by women, “distortion, dislocation and disruption become the norm, and [in] the domestic and grotesque, the alluring and terrible coexist” (qtd. in Smith and Hughes 12). Okorafor’s *Lagoon* uses an alien invasion plot to not only undermine fictions about the human and nonhuman (via the monstrous) and the natural and unnatural (via the concept of queerness) by collapsing the everyday with the nightmarish, for instance, in the ways that the novel uses the Gothic motifs of terror and horror to showcase corruption, violence, patriarchal hypermasculinity, and the exploitation of resources as problems plaguing Lagos, but the extraterrestrials also importantly come to Lagos to offer the Earth solutions to these problems that are reminiscent of queer ecologies, namely to embrace difference through coalition, symbiosis, transformation, change, and adaptation.

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2016) notes that queer ecology aims to “reimagine evolutionary processes, ecological interactions, and environmental politics in light of queer theory” to highlight “the complexity of contemporary biopolitics” by drawing “important connections between the material and cultural dimensions of environmental issues” and insisting “on an articulatory practice in which sex and nature are understood in light of multiple trajectories of power and matter.” Put simply, queer ecology asks us to abandon biophobia and embrace biophilia, or what Edward O. Wilson defines as “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (85) in order to understand interconnections that include but are not exclusionary to sexual, gender, and racial diversity. In sum, queer ecology insists that life is sociobiopolitical and further emphasizes that coalitions are urgent for sustainability. Queer ecology offers a unique lens through which one can examine the Gothic in Okorafor’s *Lagoon*. For example, though most humans in *Lagoon* see the alien invaders as monsters, and, in turn, fear and persecute them for their queerness, it is the aliens who offer humanity sustainable ecologies. By embracing difference and respecting interconnectivity, the novel’s aliens posit that humans can best learn to empathize with and sustain life. A framework of queer ecologies might then examine symbiotic relationships through the ways that biodiverse lifeforms realize interdependent, empathetic coalitions based upon affinity, adaptation, and collaboration to sustain ecosystems. Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, I posit, showcases solutions invested in both an ecogothic and queer ecological framework that work in tandem. The monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural, for instance, act as plot devices that resolve the novel’s conflict of unsustainability as the novel features extraterrestrials that offer coalitions, symbiosis, transformation, adaptation, and change as solutions. *Lagoon* is a novel that leads readers to ponder a need for sustainable ecologies, and it does so with Gothic tropes often used to examine queerness (the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural). It is to these Gothic tropes I now turn.

### Gothic Monsters, Symbiotic Becomings

“Here there be Monsters.”

This phrase appears twice in Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, first in Chapter 44, narrated by Udide Okwanka, the giant spider trickster narrator aka master weaver of tales from Igbo folklore, and secondly as the title of Chapter 48, a chapter that showcases a giant alien-swordfish hybrid, among other sea creatures attacking a boat envoy of superhuman ambassadors to the Nigerian President and the alien ambassador Ayodele, as they attempt to meet the alien Elders on the waters (228-229, 241-247). In the first instance, the monsters referred to are sea creatures, alien hybrids, and the humans who perpetuate mayhem above ground and out of the sea. In the second instance, the monsters referred to are solely the angry antagonists of the sea (the creatures of the sea that have endured human toxins and mistreatment). Extraterrestrials are an obvious form of the monster showcased in the novel. However, Nigerian folklore and mythical entities (often read as monstrous, queer figures) also surface to remedy the novel’s conflict, a conflict that has influenced Earth’s unsustainable ecologies. Unique among Okorafor’s monsters are the Road Monster that calls itself the Bone Collector, a sentient stretch of the Lagos-Benin highway that attacks humans; the subterranean Igbo spider narrator, Udide Okwanka; and the Yoruba trickster god of language and the crossroads, Legba, who is recast as a technological 419 internet scammer expert (but also features as the spirit form of Papa Legba from Nigerian folklore). The novel’s four protagonists are also cast as monstrous in that they are supernatural and/or have superhuman abilities not unlike those that characterize Marvel’s X-Men. Ayodele shapeshifts from Nigerian human forms to a monkey, a sea creature, and a miasma, gas, or mist, which is in the end inhaled by the inhabitants of Lagos. The marine biologist, Adaora, who Lagosians often refer to as a “marine witch,” can create a shield around herself and breath under water through gills that form as needed. The Nigerian soldier, Agu, has superhuman strength that can result in an incredible force that can kill upon impact. The Ghanaian hip-hop artist, Anthony, has a voice that can project deadly vibrations and sounds (a gift referred to in the novel as *The Rhythm*). These attributes are used to save Lagos from itself and to realize symbiosis with Ayodele’s alien species.

The novel moreover alludes to several staple Gothic monsters that include witches, zombies, ghosts, vampires, bats, spiders, and sea creatures, some of which are alien hybrid shapeshifters much like the protagonist Ayodele herself. There are clearly Gothic tropes at play in *Lagoon*, many of which one can argue are queered attributes, but the important takeaway from Okorafor’s use of monstrous tropes is that they are used to remedy an ecological crisis and other human monstrosities such as murder, rape, theft, corruption, and further violent acts that are often committed by religious leaders through acts of homophobia or transphobia. Adaora, Agu, Anthony, and, eventually, Nigeria’s president, form a coalition with Ayodele and her alien species. Together, they offer symbiosis and change.

The uncanny is also utilized to draw attention to queered characters that promote adaptation, symbiosis, and change. The Gothic has a long history with the uncanny. There are several uncanny

tropes in the novel varying from the alien invasion trope to human/nonhuman/alien hybrids to shapeshifting lifeforms and animated objects. These tropes evoke a sense of the uncanny while at the same time serving as plot devices that move the story towards the Ecocene. Perhaps the most obvious example is that of Ayodele herself. Adaora notes a physical resemblance between herself and Ayodele, and Adaora's character and identity also bears a striking resemblance to Ayodele. Furthermore, though Ayodele appears in human form as a Nigerian woman, her physical attributes are strangely reminiscent of a spider. In some ways, Adaora and Ayodele are like doppelgangers because of the ways they bear a similar phenotype, possess supernatural powers, and are chastised by Lagosians as demons and/or witches. Ayodele comes as an ambassador for the extraterrestrials that seek to resolve Earth's existential crises set in motion by humanity's violent and unsustainable ways of life, but Lagosians believe these aliens have invaded Earth because they seek harm. This could not be further from the truth.

These extraterrestrials have been watching the Earth and humans for quite some time, living as hybrid creatures beneath the sea and perhaps even producing the shapeshifting lifeforms that the novel showcases in its protagonists, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony. Indeed, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony do not realize their full supernatural abilities until after initial contact, and several characters emerge only as a result of the conflict that these extraterrestrials seek to resolve—that is, the conflict produced by the Anthropocene. At one point, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony are transformed underwater into animal-human hybrids in transit to take the Nigerian President to The Elders (the alien leaders sent to resolve Earth's conflict). These transformed selves are both uncanny and queer, yet are used to realize peace and symbiosis. Moreover, the Bone Collector (constructed of a highway), Udide Okwanka (who resembles a spider), and Legba are uncanny figures whose purpose is to tell the novel's story and see the realization of its plot. The novel insinuates that though the Bone Collector, Udide Okwanka, and Legba have always been watching over Lagos unseen, their purpose has always been for this very moment (to resolve the novel's conflict of the unsustainable present). While these uncanny (often supernatural) characters in the novel are feared as monsters, they actually stand in as metaphors for the real monstrosities perpetuated by human beings, as humans rampage, murder, persecute one another, and pollute the sea with toxins.

The supernatural is utilized to showcase transformation, but also enables the novel's resolution. Queer agency, coalitions, biodiversity, symbiosis, transformation, change, and adaptation are all aspects of queer ecology that are realized through the supernatural. While Ayodele is frequently admonished for her supernatural abilities and often labeled a witch or demon, she consistently reinforces and promotes adaptation as well as the aliens' purpose as change. When Father Oke, a character who routinely uses Christianity to persecute anyone outside of what he perceives as normative, asks Ayodele if she is a witch, she responds, "I am not a witch; I am alien to your planet; I am an alien. . . . We change. With our bodies, and we change everything around us" (46). The mantras "I am change" and "We are change" are often-repeated phrases in the novel, and these phrases are both literal and metaphoric. Ayodele's shapeshifting

is a literal form of her change, as when she transforms into objects and lifeforms. She says, “We take in matter . . . What we can find. Dust, stone, metal, elements. We alter whatever substance we find to suit us” (38). However, what her species promotes most is overarching change. When Agu asks Ayodele if it is a coincidence that all four protagonists that have been brought together have names that begin with the letter “A,” she indicates that it is not a coincidence, stating, “We are change. . . . The sentiments were already there. I know nothing about those other things” (39). As the novel progresses and Ayodele is endlessly targeted for her queered essence and supernatural abilities, this essence and these abilities are what enable her and the other protagonists to promote transformation of Earth from an age of the Anthropocene to the Ecocene via an alien-human coalition that will value biodiversity. Endangered ecosystems are to be respected. Extinct animals will live once again. Alien-human and alien-nonhuman hybrids will remain. The fossil fuel-driven society that has contributed to much of Lagos’s pollution (and that of the entire Earth) will cease to exist. The extraterrestrials will provide Earth with a new technology to remedy its existential crises. The world must become symbiotic.

### **Conclusion**

Okorafor’s *Lagoon* utilizes the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural to critique the queer, the human and nonhuman, and the natural and unnatural through the ways that it collapses the everyday with the nightmarish to capture and reveal human anxieties about difference, hierarchy, and sustainability. In these ways, *Lagoon* is not only quite Gothic but also traverses the queer ecogothic. Okorafor’s novel juxtaposes queered Nigerian humans and aliens, scientific thought and Christian evangelism, and the Capitalocene and Ecocene in a postcolonial Nigeria brimming with a laundry list of Gothic elements, including power, corruption, patriarchal hypermasculinity, religious violence, terror and horror, the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural, in order to bring to the forefront and remedy postcolonial and ecological crises. Aliens have often been utilized as metaphors for difference, for instance in tales of reverse colonization or as queered characters that challenge humans to change. Yet, Okorafor’s tale utilizes Gothic tropes in a unique way, both to showcase the dangerous future into which humans stray and to offer a solution—symbiosis. Symbiosis is an instrumental tenet of queer ecology. Queer ecologies offer a framework for queering the ecogothic that enable the resolution of issues plaguing the Anthropocene as humans collectively turn toward the Ecocene. Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon* utilizes a queer Gothic ecology to showcase an Africanfuturism that moves towards an investment in the Ecocene. *Lagoon* shows how Gothic elements such as the uncanny, the supernatural, and the monstrous can be utilized to imagine positive change. Importantly, Okorafor’s Ecocene envisions a coalitional future of biodiverse, symbiotic becomings that are invested in African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view. Here African identity empowers queer agency, which in turn enriches Gothic ecologies. Queer Ecogothic Africanfuturism promotes Ayodele’s mantra, “I am change.” To move towards the Ecocene, humans must not fear but embrace fluidity, queerness, transformation, and adaptation.

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## FEATURES

# Afrofuturist Women of the Water : Mami Wata, Sirens, Predators, Deities, Metamorphosis, and Survival



Gina Wisker

Women of the water play several roles in African-originated mythology and folklore, and latterly in Afrofuturism. They draw their energies from the beautiful seductive female water deity Mami Wata, who brings possibilities of wealth and longevity to those who engage with her, offering her gifts (although sometimes she responds with the opposite of positive experiences). They also draw their mixed energies from mermaids who, like the sirens of Greek mythology, appear in international folklore as dangerously seductive creatures born perhaps of the imagination, loneliness, and desperation of those long at sea.

These women of the water also have other roles in African and African American women's horror, the contemporary Gothic, and in Afrofuturism, which recalls and recreates magical histories, sometimes as a warning and sometimes to recuperate the damaged negative past, turning stories of enslavement into ones of agency and freedom.

While Tananarive Due notes, "I needed to address my fear that I would not be respected if I wrote about the supernatural" (2002), it is arguably through the supernatural and fantasy that we can interpret behaviours and events, and only then imagine otherwise.

### **Afrofuturism**

In the "outro" to *Octavia's Brood* (Brown and Imarisha, 2015), Adrienne Maree Brown outlines a dynamic, forward-looking message of statutes or tools: one recognizing the power of science fiction, the other of agency in working to take forward different representations and actualized modes of being. They characterize afrofuturist work as challenging, visionary fiction, which:

explores current social issues through the lens of sci-fi; is conscious of identity and intersecting identities; centers those who have been marginalised; is aware of power inequalities; is realistic and hard but hopeful; shows change from the bottom up rather than the top down; highlights that change is collective; and is not neutral – its purpose is social change and societal transformation. The stories we tell can either reflect the society we are part of or transform it. If we want to bring new worlds into existence, then we need to challenge the narratives that uphold power dynamics and patterns. We call upon science fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, myth, and everything in between as we create and teach visionary fiction. (Brown and Imarisha, 2015, 279)

Others argue for the power of science fiction and Afrofuturism in creating alternative histories and futures (Bould, 2014, 2015; Csicsery-Ronay, 2012). Their emphasis is on values, imaginative



expression, and action, stressing the social justice work that these related forms of writing should engage with. The figure of Mami Wata and those of merpeople are used to explore historical, lingering and contemporary social issues as both a warning or an imaginative celebratory way forward.

### **Mami Wata**

Mami Wata ('mother water') the water spirit, is seductive, rewarding, worshipped, and dangerous. At once beautiful, protective, seductive and dangerous, Mami Wata is celebrated throughout much of Africa and the African Atlantic and is believed to have overseas origins in both European-originated mermaids and Hindu gods. She "is often portrayed as a mermaid, a snake charmer or a combination of both ... She is not only sexy, jealous and beguiling but exists in the plural as part of a school of African water spirits" ("Who is Mami Wata?").

Wikipedia elaborates on her seductive activities abducting travellers, who then benefit financially and through enhancements to their looks through their interaction with her. Because of this, they and others return and leave her capital goods. She is persuasive and possibly ruthless, and seems to have much of the illusory promise accorded to mermaids as traditions tell "of the spirit abducting her followers or random people whilst they are swimming or boating. She brings them to her paradisiacal realm, which may be underwater, in the spirit world, or both. She might keep them there if she allows them to leave, they return home wealthier, and in dry clothing. These returnees often grow wealthier, more attractive, and more easygoing after the encounter" (Wikipedia).

There are many stories of river travellers coming across her grooming herself (like mermaids combing their hair) while admiring herself in a mirror. She will usually dive into the water, leave her possessions behind to be stolen by the traveller, then appear to the thief in his dreams demanding the return of her goods. She next demands he be sexually faithful to her and, if he agrees, he obtains riches. She has groups of worshippers but also prefers to interact with individuals, and has priests and mediums dedicated to her in Africa, the Americas, and in the Caribbean. Mami Wata is a powerful, lovely woman who seeks beautiful gifts "of delicious food and drink, alcohol, fragrant objects (such as pomade, powder, incense, and soap), and expensive goods like jewellery" (Wikipedia). Nowadays, she likes designer jewelry and Coca Cola. The picture painted is of a manipulative goddess who rewards her followers with money and looks. Finally, we are told she wants her followers to be healthy, wealthy, and her men faithful.

However, she's not represented as only seductive; she is also seen as dangerous and is blamed for all sorts of misfortune. In Cameroon, for example, Mami Wata is blamed for causing a strong undertow that kills swimmers. This will become important when we look at Tananarive Due's "The Lake" (2013). Mami Wata is a complex figure to read, at once beautiful and rewarding but also controlling, dangerous and mean. The figures of merpeople who appear in and carry the imaginative dark or liberating messages of several fantastic texts by African American women writers can be seen to grow from this powerful, energetic figure of Mami Wata as it is based in

West African lore. However, while Mami Wata appears as seductive, dangerous, materialistic, just as traditionally are sirens and mermaids, and is developed in this fashion by some African American women's work, Afrofuturist writing takes both Mami Wata and the mermaid into new waters, rewriting negative histories, and reconfiguring both as powerful figures of female freedom.

Mami Wata appears in a range of African and African American writing, so in Nnedi Okorafor's 2014 speculative fiction novel, *Lagoon*, an alien spaceship appears beneath the waters of Lagos Lagoon and the new arrivals cause transformations in the natural and human world. When the first alien ambassador sets foot on Bar Beach in human female form, then disappears into the sea, a local boy compares her to Mami Wata. Later, an antagonist interprets another alien in female form as Mami Wata and surrenders to her seduction, accompanying her into the sea to be transformed.

Mami Wata also appears in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Warrior* (2017).

She has been understood also as La Sirène, a Haitian siren figure like the ancient Greek sirens who tried to lure Odysseus onto the rocks to perish. Water dominates Haitian life, and there are many religious beliefs based on it. In Haitian lore, the Lord of the Water is Agwé (see Hopkinson's Agway the merchild, in *The New Moon's Arms*, 2007) and his consort is la Sirène, portrayed as a beautiful woman with a fish's tail, holding a mirror that acts as a portal between our mundane world and the mystical realm. Because she lives at the border (between the ordinary and the magical, between the world of land and the world of the ocean), la Sirène is the keeper of occult wisdom. She has a beautiful voice, is known as the Queen of the Choir, and owns a golden trumpet (anyone discovering it will live a life of wealth). While her image brings good luck particularly for sailors, and is frequently used on homes, on ships, and at lottery drawings, she is also demanding, and if people don't worship her reverently or they fail to pay their debts, she uses her physical and vocal beauty to lure them to an early grave. She is also reported to kidnap babies to raise them in her underwater lair.

La Sirène, whose number is 7 and whose bird is the dove, is a great ally and a terrifying enemy worshipped in Vodou ceremonies. She sounds as materialistic as Mami Wata, as her favourite offerings are cigarettes, seashells, desserts, and perfume. As a figure, la Sirène goes beyond mere reportings of mermaids, deepening the lore behind them and standing out as one of the most comprehensive and well recorded images of a mermaid. Annie in Tananarive Due's short story "The Lake" (2013), herself half French, resembles Mami Wata and also the legendary Haitian figure of la Sirène.

Mermaids, or more generally merpeople, are variously represented as the Other, alluring because different, free and powerful, of the water but also meant to be trapped, kept as trophies, deprived of freedom, kept for the use of others and displayed like sea creatures in some form of artificial ocean. This model of dichotomous representation lies behind the tales of their dangerous allure, their containment as objects for observation, and finally their metaphorical use as figures of transformation and empowerment, an imaginative movement forward through

rewriting a negative past and creating a free, transformed future. They are fascinating and diverse in themselves but are also used by writers to engage with issues of rewriting troubled histories of enslavement and dehumanization, so while some tales are more interested in the seductive side of Mami Wata or mermaids, others combine this with both exposure of the dark past and of slavery, imprisonment, and then move on to express the vitality and power of escape, self-actualization, rewriting the damaged past, speculating for a positive future through Afrofuturism.

### **The Water Phoenix Bola Ogun**

Mermaids, Mami Wata, and la Sirène are linked with transformations (not always for the best) and latterly with Afrofuturism's rich focus on rewriting the damaged past, imagining a positive diverse future through escape into alternative modes of being. In "The Water Phoenix," being imprisoned for others' entertainment almost costs the mermaid her life. The film "The Water Phoenix" (2017), written, directed and starring herself as this dazzling sea creature, is a triumph for Bola Ogun, who expressed great frustration on trying to get films made as a marginalized person, as herself—a first generation Nigerian-American filmmaker. She turned to crowdfunding to get some of the funds needed for this short film to be completed and uploaded to Vimeo (by 2019), where in 2019 she reported 750,000 views. The synopsis begins: "When an imprisoned mermaid is betrayed by her caretaker, she must find a way to escape the aquarium alone." It is actually her lover, rather than caretaker, who not only betrays her, but sells her out to an unscrupulous oceanarium owner. But it is ultimately a tale of escape and empowerment as are those by Nalo Hopkinson, which follow.

### **Tananarive Due and Nalo Hopkinson**

Both Tananarive Due and Nalo Hopkinson reinvigorate these powerful, sometimes alluring and freeing but sometimes dangerous female water figures, Mami Wata, La Sirene, merpeople and mermaids in their work. Tananarive Due, named after the French for Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, was born in Tallahassee, Florida, the oldest of three daughters of civil rights activist Patricia Stephens Due and civil rights lawyer John D. Due, Jr. Due gained a B.S. in journalism from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and an M.A. in English literature, focusing on Nigerian literature at the University of Leeds, UK.

In Tananarive Due's *Ghost Summer* (2013), in the haunted and magical context of Gracetown, Florida, all are warned to stay away from the lake in summer since in its waters lurks a dark energy, a legacy from the town's history of slavery. All the tales center around the lake, but two in particular focus on dangerous water creatures/people. In "Free Jim's Mine," for example, a collusive freed slave mine owner transforms into a terrifying underground river creature to try and prevent the escape of his two young enslaved relatives. In "The Lake," Tananarive Due lets loose her predatory mermaid. Annie seems to transform into Mami Wata.

Gracetown, the small town in *Ghost Summer*, perhaps (ironically) named after Elvis's home or Paul Simon's song, is a central location charged with the ghosts of slavery, plantation brutality,

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localized pain, and death, all of which act as a microcosm for a broader cultural history of inequality, brutality, and suffering, both publicly and privately suppressed. Water is central to *Ghost Summer* and Gracetown, with its dark histories and its dubious transformative powers. Summer visitors are told to stay away from the lake, but it invades their day and night lives. The water is alive, stirring uneasily with its deadly past. Most of the community histories are those of slavery and its legacies (Wisker, 2019). The traumatic past of the town leaks out from the lake, out from the earth, burrowing through lost tunnels and up the mineshaft of Free Jim's mine, taking the form of demonic creatures, bodily invasion, or re-enacting historical slave escapes played out in ghostly sight and sound. The geography of a haunted past infuses the lives of those who live there and all who visit family in the summer, at the most dangerous time.

This is a collection of ghost stories and, in *Democracy's Discontent* (1996), Michael J. Sandel emphasises the social justice function of ghost stories, commenting on the power of storying our condition that, "Political community depends on the narratives by which people make sense of their condition, and interpret the common life they share" (350). Ghost stories return the undead in order to expose and preferably right historic, suppressed wrongs. Those wrongs of an enslaved past are central to *Ghost Summer*. Gracetown's lands, barns, houses and especially its constantly disturbed and disturbing lake are variously upset by property development and unthinking visitors. Also disturbed are complacencies and suppressed histories, revealing dark secrets, exposing historical cover ups, and enabling the marginalised and silent to have a voice. The hidden, violent past is exposed in these stories, which are largely set in the 21st century, with some during slavery ("Free Jim's Mine") that are engaged, political, driven by social justice and the unquiet brutal past of slavery. This small town is in the middle of a drained swamp, where boundaries exist between land now owned by African Americans and that owned by the McCormacks, the descendants of Scottish slave owners who, themselves immigrants, benefitted historically from forcibly imported, transported slaves. Both lake and swamp invade and trouble the lives of generations of children and adults. Swamp leeches invade babies who become suddenly well-behaved, bodies of escaping slaves are dug up on farmland. The older generation keep the secrets:

I wasn't going to say anything to you kids – but there's bodies buried over on that land across the street, out beyond Tobacco Road. McCormack's land.... the university folks say they were black.'

It was the coolest thing Grandma had ever said. (67)

Children and pre-teens spending family holiday summers round the lake in Gracetown become sensitive to the past. They sense and somehow invite back those neighbours and relatives, children long dead, enabling their stories to be disinterred.

### **Free Jim's Mine**

One tale concerns two young escaped slaves, who hide overnight in Jim, a relative's, mine, but in the dark night waters of the mine, this historically collusive relative transforms into a monstrous frog to try and hunt them down. Jim warns the runaways of their unlikely success:

“It always goes wrong, girl,” Uncle Jim said. “Don’t get it into your heads that you’ll both make it up to North Carolina – and then what? Philadelphia? You’re fools if you think this ends well. You never should’ve come. Think of the last words you want to say to each other, and be sure to say ‘em quick. You won’t both survive the night.” (P.140) Of course he knows the reason why but at least warns them about the water creature which will find and finish them off “As a boy,” he said quietly, “I heard stories about Walasi. A giant frog. My mother told me, her mother told her, her mother’s mother, through time. To the beginning.” (142)

At night, the two young people have no choice other than to hide in the flooded mine, but as it gets later, they are not alone.

Ripples fluttered in the lamplight. Then a frothy splashing showered them. Lottie screamed, but did not close her eyes. She wanted to see the thing. A silhouette sharpened in the water, like giant fingers stretching or a black claw. Her hands flew to cover her eyes, but she forced her fingers open to peek through. The creature churned the water, tossing its massive body. A shiny bulging black eye as large as her open palm broke the water’s plane, nestled by brown-green skin. Lottie screamed.

The creature flipped, its eye gone. (143)

They lash out at the massive creature and survive the night, however, and when Free Jim reappears in the morning and reaches for Lottie, “his two gold rings flared like droplets from the sun. His pinkie finger, a bloodied crust, was freshly sliced away” (146). Jim is clearly free because of his collusion with those who would recapture escaped slaves, and perhaps his transformation into the violent, disgusting Walasi is a curse upon him for that collusion. Whatever the real story, the two survive the water creature’s attack and continue their escape.

### **“The Lake” is a Mami Wata Tale**

Abbie, the lithe, attractive teacher with an unexplained dark past takes a job in Gracetown. The other staff question her about her origins but she is reticent, aware this is an intrusive exploration both about being Black and her speaking French (she has Haitian origins). But also we begin to consider, perhaps, that there are problematic stories in her background. The visiting children and everybody in Gracetown knows that it is dangerous to swim in the lake, but no one mentions why. Although warned about swimming in the lake, Abbie takes to it like a fish to water, initially barely noticing how she can stay under for longer, how her feet are becoming webbed as her body becomes stronger and more muscular. She spends longer and longer in the water

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after work, and while questioning her adaptation to her new habitat, primarily feels empowered, pleased, and invested.

She did not hesitate. She did not wade. She dove like an eel, swimming with an eel's ease.  
*Am I truly awake, or is this a dream?*

Her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, bringing instant focus. She had never seen the true murky depths of her lake, so much like the swamp of her dreams. Were they one and the same? Her ribs' itching turned to a welcome massage, and she felt long slits yawn open across her skin, beneath each rib. Warm water flooded her, nursing her; her nose, throat and mouth were a useless, distant memory. Why hadn't it ever occurred to her to breathe the water before? (20-21)

As Abbie adapts, she is responding to a drive within her, a recognition of a different self, a different place where she came from, a place where she is one with the water. As she transforms into a creature part human part mercreature, part Sirene or Mami Wata, so she frees up her instincts to hunt as well as to seduce. An alligator is her first prey: "An alligator's curiosity brought the beast close enough to study her, but it recognized its mistake and tried to thrash away. But too late" (20-21).

Her friendly relationships with her teenage boy students who come over to help with rebuilding the house become more inappropriate, sinister, yet not quite fully seductive until they become her prey. While the boys fix things Abbie takes another lake swim, allowing free rein to her developing watery self, freeing it from the moral restraints of the land world, becoming something else:

As the water massaged her gills, Abbie released her thoughts and concerns about the frivolous world beyond the water. She needed to feed, that was all. She planned to leave the boys to their bickering and swim farther out, where the fish were hiding.

But something large and pale caught her eye above her.

Jack, she realized dimly. Jack had changed his mind, swimming near the surface, his ample belly like a full moon, jiggling with his breaststroke.

That was the first moment Abbie felt a surge of fear, because she finally understood what she'd been up to – what her new body had been preparing her for. Her feet betrayed her, their webs giving her speed as she propelled towards her giant meal. Water slid across her scales. (27)

Abbie might realize her metamorphosis into her true self, but she is powerless and probably unwilling to stop the trajectory as it brings her directly to her next meal, Jack. Ghosts, frogs, invasive swamp leeches, and transformed human/water creatures with anti-social appetites have something to tell the people in Gracetown, which is a liminal space, a crossroads of time, lives, and

spaces. The histories of brutal erasure of Indigenous and African American children at its core are now more widely known (McGreevy, 2021; Eligon, 2019) and have entered Tananarive Due's own family history:

This story and the previous one, "Summer", are a kind of odd prophecy: In 2013, I received a call from the Florida Attorney General's office informing me that my late mother, Patricia Stephens Due, had an uncle, Robert Stephens, who was probably among dozens of children buried on the grounds of the Dozier School for Boys, a reform school in Marianna, Florida, where boys were tortured and killed for generations. I had never heard of the Dozier School, buried children, Robert Stephens, my great-uncle who died there in 1937, aged fifteen. (127)

African American Gothic shocks and upsets any sense of settled history, of shared reality, exposing the deeply disturbing psychological insecurity of all that seems comfortably real. But while much of this revelation is disturbing, it is also potentially the start of a new healthy way forward. This rewriting, re-understanding, and reinterpreting is also part of a forward movement and a characteristic of Afrofuturism (Hopkinson and Mehan, 2004; Lavender and Yaszek, 2020; Delaney; Hopkinson and Mehan, 2004), that rewriting of the past and speculation into a positive future.

In Afrofuturism, history is reconceptualized, rewritten from a positive African American perspective and positive futures imagined (Wisker *Contemporary Women's Ghost Stories: Spectres, Revenants and Ghostly Returns*, 2022).

### **Nalo Hopkinson**

Mami Wata also appears in Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003), while in her Afrofuturist *The New Moon's Arms* (2007), merpeople are part of a life-affirming celebratory metamorphosis, a positive re-telling of the horrific brutal drowning of transported enslaved people thrown overboard to die because they were sick or considered worthless, from the slave ship the Zhong, bound from Africa to the Caribbean. In this latter novel, middle-aged Chastity's/Calamity's reignited self-worth is aligned with her returned magical powers. Afrofuturism in this tale reclaims a magical positive reading as it also reaffirms a positive version of women's vital self worth: "you can't find something if you don't know you've lost it" (Hopkinson, *The New Moon's Arms*, 115). Nalo Hopkinson's Afrofuturist, speculative fictions explore experiences and worldviews as divisive, dangerous reminders of a troubled past, and simultaneously they also conjure up culturally intertwined, positive new futures. In *The New Moon's Arms*, Torontonion/Trinidadian/Jamaican Hopkinson uses strategies of the postcolonial/African diasporan literary Gothic and speculative fiction to explore some of the tensions and potential riches of the liminal spaces of identity, aging, and cultural hybridity. All of these comments highlight the role that writing has to speak truth to power, and offer ways forward. Speculative fictions—and particularly Afrofuturism—enable the critique, expose the illegitimate, biased representations, and construct and celebrate alternative voices and ways forward.

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The novel opens on middle-aged Calamity's father's funeral—a fellow mourner bursts her drawers, a brooch falls, it is reclaimed as Calamity's. The carnivalesque, bawdy comic causes a breach of order in the everyday and a breach in a constrained narrative. The moment is a liminal space, one of loss that also opens up the opportunity of a new energy, and most of all, the power of finding what was lost, re-thinking, reclaiming and revitalizing what was suppressed, and moving forward. This is a carnival version of the spirit of Afrofuturism—reclamation, new understandings, new life and vision, reimagining the past and the future.

Marvellously energetic and creative, *The New Moon's Arms* focuses on Calamity and the fictional Caribbean island of Dolorosse. Calamity, who befriends a merchild when herself a child, now rescues a boy from the sea, understanding his name to be Agway (for Agwe the Haitian sea god), and cares for him until he is healthy and ready to return to his parents. Not everyone knows, but Calamity knows that around the coast of Dolorosse are a community of merpeople and, as the island struggles with toxic waste in the waters, the overbuilding of hotels reducing the bat population, the sea and seabird damage for the desalination plant so they are threatened but also a part of a potential recuperation, parallel to Calamity's own recovery of her historical magical powers as a 'finder' and the magical return of her father's orchard—this is a rich novel of damaged histories and transformed lives, reimagined positive futures for Calamity for the merpeople, and for the island itself.

The foundational source of the potential for a positive transformed future lies in remaining, rewriting, and re-understanding the past, and here Hopkinson (like Rivers Solomon after her), reimagines and reclaims a terrible dark and real moment in African American and Caribbean history. Historically, the transported slaves on the *Zhong* (1781), were brutalized, dehumanized, and thrown overboard (captains could claim compensation for those drowned at sea; the sick or damaged were, in monetary terms, considered worthless). During their crossing, instead of being brutalized further, the slaves on Hopkinson's imagined ship chose instead to jump in the sea, swimming free, transforming, seizing agency, and becoming merpeople. The merpeople represent a creative transformational response to an intolerable death. Their origins lie with those who escaped from the *Zhong*, morphing into hybrid survivors flourishing in the new medium of water:

The sailors would remove the dead and dying. The more that died the more space for the remaining. The dada-hair lady was heartsick at the relief she felt when another body was removed. The Igbo sailor described how they threw the dead bodies over the side, how large fish with sharp teeth were following the ship now, waiting for their next meal.

The young woman takes power: "We are leaving now!" she shouted in Igbo.

The people's arms flattened out into flexible flippers. The shackles lipped off their wrists. The two women who had been chained to her flopped away, free, but the dada-hair lady remained unchanged and shackled. The little boy in her arms was transforming, though. He lifted one hand and spread his fingers to investigate the webbing that now extended between them. Some of the people who had been forced back into the holds were making



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### *Afrofuturist Women of the Water*

their way out, now that their shackles had slid off. The hips was so far tilted that they didn't have to climb; just clamber up the shallow incline that led to the hatch. The people's bodies grew thick and fat. Legs melted together. The little boy chuckled, a sound she'd not heard from him before this. The chuckle became a high-pitched call. The people's faces swelled and transformed: round heads with snouts. Big liquid eyes. (316)

Afrofuturism, as creative story-telling, has the power both to reimagine the damaged past positively, reclaiming power in doing so, and positively will the transformed future into being. Nalo Hopkinson's merpeople, descendants of the self-freed slaves, are part of the new magically enriched future on Dolorosse, where not only does the magical orchard return along with Calamity's powers as a finder, but there will be a united response against the damage done to creatures, water, and people to move towards a positively transformed future.

#### ***The Deep* by Rivers Solomon (2018)**

In *The Deep*, brutally jettisoned slaves also transform into a form of merpeople: water-breathing descendants of African slave women tossed overboard who have built their own underwater society. While this is a short novel, it is a highly creative piece made up of different inputs and responses, some building over others or misheard – so that without indication of a single owner, it becomes a co-owned piece, developing creative voices in different forms. As a result, *The Deep* emerges as a joint creative enterprise between a network of people, some acknowledged at the end. It grew from the practice of 'artistic telephone' insofar as the way phrases are transformed when shared over time and space--a series of new interactions of telling of *The Deep*. These tellings were started as a game by the Detroit techno-electro duo of Drexciya-James Stenson and Gerald Donald, with their mainly instrumental music and many collaborators, from 'the Underground Resistance' and 'the Aquanauts' taking from the original mythology behind the world of the music and of the text. They further developed the spare elliptical world-building tactics of the story from Drexciya and first made *Splendor and Misery*, a 2016 concept album in which the 'The Deep' was defined as a song. Next, three people then wrote *The Deep*, avoiding first-person pronouns, and Rivers Solomon then continued the work, developing:

their misheard whisper to the chain, filling out our song's narrative with their particular concerns, politics, infatuations, and passions.' Rivers fixed on the refrain 'y'all remember' to avoid 'I' and created Yetu which focused the tale 'the immediate and visceral aim inherent in passing down past trauma'(The Deep p 160-161) There is also more music focusing on merpeople. (Drexciya)

#### **Conclusion**

These African American stories are ghost stories, some horror, all Afrofuturism, each a fluid blend of genres. Each takes from and evolves from tales of mythical historical water goddesses, sirens, mermaids, and merpeople, to expose terrible histories, inherited selfish cruelties and deadly threats, and, in some instances, to dig back into a reimagined history in order to push forward,

rewriting tales and histories of dehumanisation and death as positive, as escape, transformation, re-empowerment, and imagining forward into celebration of rich active diverse lives. In these contemporary tales, the figures of mermaids, mercreatures, and of Mami Wata, the African water deity, are reconfigured and revitalised to rewrite negative histories; explore potential, individual, community and sexual freedoms; and freedom from the terrible deadly oppressions of an enslaved past and, through the energies of Afrofuturism, create a magical, agentic, positive future.

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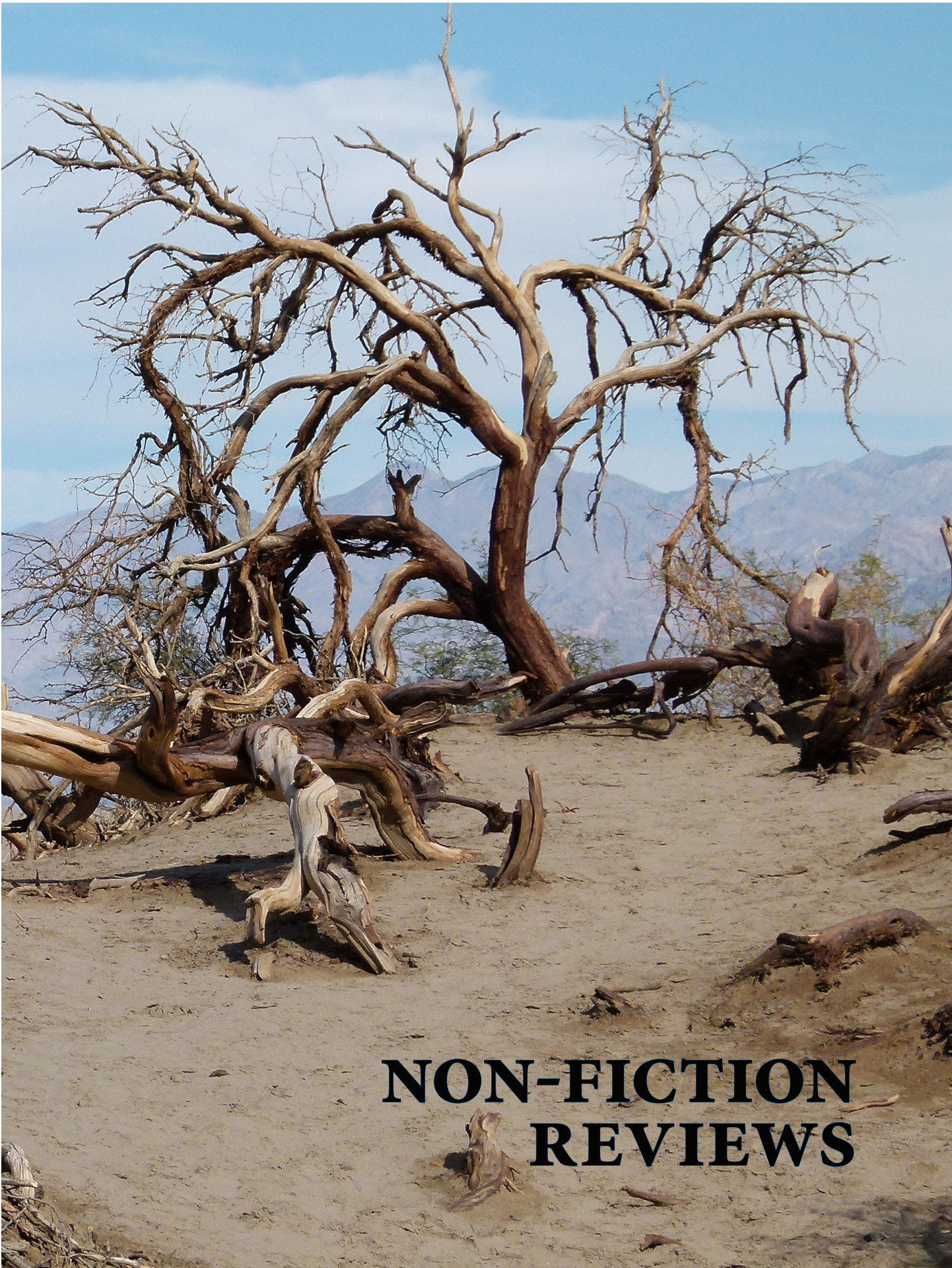
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**NON-FICTION  
REVIEWS**

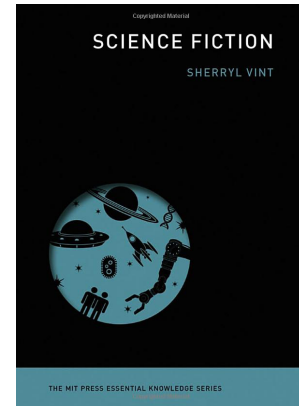
### *Science Fiction,* by Sherryl Vint



R. Baker

Sherryl Vint. *Science Fiction*. The MIT Press, 2021. The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series. Paperback. 224 pg. \$15.95. ISBN 9780262539999.

Sherryl Vint's *Science Fiction* aims to provide a foundation for understanding science fiction (SF), both as a genre and as a pervasive, multifaceted cultural discourse. Surrounded as we are by rapid industrialization, hyper-networked communication, and complex sociopolitical issues, Vint writes, "it has become axiomatic to say that the world is becoming like science fiction... in ways both marvelous and malign" (2). Taking this as its starting point, the book serves as a sustained exploration of SF as a mode of thinking and cultural praxis. Deftly sidestepping arguments for yet another, ever-more-exact operational definition of what precisely SF is, *Science Fiction* instead takes a much more interesting track: focusing on the many things SF can do.



The overarching question, explored from multiple angles and disciplines, is simple: how can science fiction (and its derivatives) help people—from many walks of life—respond to and conceptualize the contemporary world? How and by whom is SF, and its myriad influents, being used as a powerful tool to imagine the world otherwise, both in terms of 'hard' science and in the service of culture, ethics, and social justice? Although Vint does her due diligence in laying the introductory groundwork of canon, influential writers, and milestones in the history of SF, she also makes it clear from the start that these histories are fraught, variegated, and messy, just like science and technology, governance and philosophical systems, and human history writ large. Vint follows many, multivocal threads of speculative possibility throughout the text, making connections between fields and time periods, and offering alternatives to common-knowledge understandings of SF and its canon. *Science Fiction* is not an exhaustive history of must-read works, nor does it dicker about the parameters of genre inclusion and definitional technicalities. Instead, it focuses on the outward expansion of SF and SF thinking—particularly in recent decades—and the ways it entangles itself within wider communities, discourses, and debates ranging far beyond the fiction itself. Science fiction, Vint contends, offers an important set of tools, an "everyday language" allowing people to think through and intervene in the myriad possibilities arising from "the world made otherwise" through rapid industrialization and technological change (4).

Although it would be impossible for any book to cover every aspect of SF and its offshoots, Vint nevertheless manages to enfold an impressively wide range of disciplinary fields and foci: the utopian tradition, futurology/speculative design, the colonial imaginary, AI and transhumanism, genomics and posthumanism, the Anthropocene, and speculative economics/financialization each receive their own dedicated chapter, and together make up the overarching organization of the book. However, the choice of *these* chapters (at the inevitable exclusion of others) is not as restrictive as one might think; each serves as a scaffold rather than a fencing-in and points the curious reader toward myriad supplemental sources. Vint is a thoughtful and courteous facilitator throughout, tipping her hat towards the various parties, artistic and cultural traditions, political agendas, scientific innovations, academic disciplines, and sociocultural impacts swirling around or bridging these conversations, even for matters she admits are beyond the scope of the book. In both form and content, *Science Fiction* upholds its (refreshingly pragmatic) thesis: that SF is an active and evolving mode of thought, better understood as a cultural praxis than as a static, definable canon (165).

One of the book's many strengths is how it both actively challenges the widespread assumption that 'hard' SF is the gold standard to which the genre should be upheld, while also carefully tracing the history of editorial gatekeeping via which such 'norms' arose. Acknowledging that "there *is* a relationship between science fiction and science, albeit not the simple fantasy that science fiction inspired specific inventions" (45), Vint also points out the problematic, techno-determinist tendency for those in power to automatically equate all science and innovation with *progress*; the text offers examples of how SF (and SF scholarship) continues to have an important role in deconstructing such facile assumptions. It emphasizes the nonlinear, often co-iterative relationships between science fiction, scientists, innovators, entrepreneurs, artists, and social justice movements alike, all of whom engage, in various ways, with speculating the parameters of the possible. Vint's straightforward, unapologetic discussion about the deeply colonial tendencies that creep through SF, on levels both historical and contemporary, is particularly well-executed here. Equally so is the book's interest in the many countervailing voices challenging such hegemonies, particularly the rise of BIPOC, feminist, and queer SF as central to the discourse in recent decades.

Of course, an academic reader whose work focuses more narrowly will doubtless find points of contention, or problematic omissions, within a given chapter. Speaking for myself—colored by my own focus on the environmental humanities—Vint's chapters on climate change SF, and on speculative finance/economics, felt somewhat rushed and rather curtailed in terms of complexity, particularly with regard to political critique. Indeed, despite its excellent discussion of racism and sexism in the history of SF, the book as a whole is oddly shy about addressing contemporary SF as activist praxis in terms of climate and class justice. For example, despite an extended discussion of Kim Stanley Robinson and his work that declares him "unquestionably the most important living sf writer addressing environmental themes" (134), Vint makes no mention of his (increasingly outspoken) environmental socialist politics. However, given its widely heterogenous target

audience, where one can assume neither common cause nor shared vocabulary, and the book's overall goals, the decision to remain somewhat politically hands-off is understandable. For this reason, the 'further reading' bibliography at the end of the book, along with a helpful glossary of terms, is an especially excellent addition.

In sum, *Science Fiction* is both enjoyable to read and genuinely useful as a teaching tool: equally appropriate for the undergraduate classroom, early-career scholars building knowledge foundations, and field-adjacent researchers looking for a primer on how sf intersects with their own work. The book sketches an outline of SF as a genre, and how it functions as a cognitive toolkit for the postindustrial world: a creative cultural form offering ways of thinking *otherwise* within the fraught, often-dystopic, technology-ridden 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**R. Baker** is an English PhD candidate at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Their work is situated at the intersections of the environmental humanities, contemporary science fiction, and feminist STS, with a focus on anticolonial and anticapitalist worldbuilding, particularly surrounding the social and technical infrastructures of climate justice, restoration and repair. Their current project focuses on contemporary narratives of space travel, exploration, and colonization; they are broadly interested in how these speculative scientific discourses, alongside science fiction, might also push against dominant narratives of conquest and control.



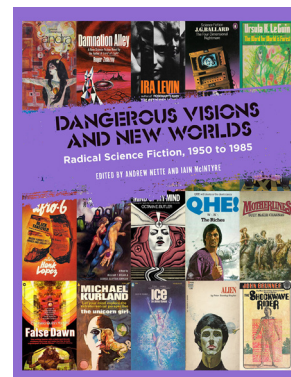
### *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds*, edited by Andrew Nette and Iain McIntyre



Mark Scroggins

Andrew Nette and Iain McIntyre, eds. *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds: Radical Science Fiction, 1950-1985*. PM Press, 2021. Paperback. 224 pg. \$29.95. ISBN 9781629638836.

Andrew Nette and Iain McIntyre's essay collection *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds*, as its title indicates, focuses in the first case on the 1960s 'New Wave' in science fiction, a movement whose key moments include Michael Moorcock's editorship of *New Worlds* (from 1964) and Harlan Ellison's 1967 anthology *Dangerous Visions*. The collection's thirty-five-year subtitle, however, signals its larger scope and ambitions: an overview of what the New Wave made possible—an opening up of the genre to a wide variety of new voices, new thematic concerns, new formal constructions. Histories of SF invariably devote a chapter to the New Wave, describing how its writers, as part of larger counter-cultural movements in the postwar decades, reacted against an overwhelmingly white, male 'Golden Age' genre that avoided psychologism, elided sexuality, and prized technological and scientific extrapolation over social exploration. But they tend to read the New Wave as part of a dialectical back-and-forth within the genre, a temporary shift in priorities which would be absorbed and transcended in the following decades. *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds* implicitly asserts that contemporary SF—perhaps the most multifarious, diverse, and socially and politically engaged of popular cultural forms—was not just made possible by, but *is* the New Wave, a tsunami which never receded, but continues to buoy us up.



Sumptuously illustrated with photographs of authors, book covers, and other ephemera, *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds* appears at first glance more like a coffee table book than a serious overview of the genre. It contains almost forty items, which toggle between two- or three-page capsule presentations and full-length, deeply developed essays. The capsule presentations (sidebars?) tend to be brief thematic summaries or short bibliographic notes: nuclear war in SF, drugs in SF, revolution and rebellion in SF; the publishing history of *New Worlds*, *Doctor Who* novelizations, The Women's Press and SF; and so forth.

The full-length essays—which, alas, vary widely in quality—cover an unexpected variety of topics, from the fairly canonical (J. G. Ballard's SF work, Alice Sheldon/James Tiptree Jr., Philip K. Dick, Octavia Butler), to the relatively obscure (Hank Lopez's *Afro-6* [1969], gay SF novels of the 1970s, Denis Jackson's *The Black Commandos* [2013]), to the pleasantly quirky: one doesn't expect

to find an essay on R. A. Lafferty in such a volume, but Nick Mamatas's "God Does, Perhaps? The Unlikely New Wave SF of R. A. Lafferty" is welcome reading.

Nicholas Tredell's "The Energy Exhibit: Radical Science Fiction in the 1960s" offers an excellent distillation of what was new about Moorcock's *New Worlds*, as well as some good examinations of representative books by Brian W. Aldiss, Norman Spinrad, and Moorcock himself. In "On Earth the Air Is Free: The Feminist Science Fiction of Judith Merril," Kat Clay provides a welcome reminder of what was really ground-breaking about the work of the anthologist and writer who by some accounts coined the term "New Wave." Rebecca Baumann's "Speculative Fuckbooks: The Brief Life of Essex House, 1968-1969" is a straightforward history of this SF-porno publisher, whose rather high-minded, even 'literary' project was undermined by its very conditions of possibility: the 1960s court cases which made pornographic fiction legal in the US resulted in a flood of easily accessible erotica, a saturated marketplace in which Essex House could not survive.

This is not for the most part an academic collection, though a few of its essays were previously published in scholarly journals. It's good to re-read Rob Latham's lively "Sextrapolation in New Wave Science Fiction"; others of the "academic" chapters, unfortunately, have the stuffy atmosphere of dissertation chapters. There's a wonderful breadth and variety to the materials covered in *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds*, but at times the book feels just plain scattered, both in its subject matter and in the approaches its authors adopt. While essays on the Strugatsky brothers (a career overview) or Le Guin and Heinlein (comparing *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* [1966] and *The Dispossessed* [1974]) are informative, it seems something of a stretch to include them among the other materials here assembled.

One shouldn't go to *Dangerous Visions and New Worlds* expecting something like a *Cambridge Companion to New Wave SF*; it's just not that sort of book. But one would have welcomed, if not a full bibliography of materials related to the subject, at least some suggestions for further reading, and perhaps a timeline of important events and publications. And one would have welcomed a greater degree of editorial uniformity among the pieces (including some draconian cuts to some of the more wordy essays). One of the volume's great joys, however, is its plethora of reproductions of paperback covers—literally hundreds of them, ranging from '60s and '70s updates of Golden Age pulp motifs to the mind-blowing abstractions and surreal scenes that make SF cover illustration one of the most consistently stimulating subgenres of visual art in the last third of the twentieth century.

**Mark Scroggins** is a widely published poet, biographer, and critic on modern and contemporary poetry. In the Fantasy/SF field, he has published a monograph, *Michael Moorcock: Fiction, Fantasy and the World's Pain* (2015), and essays and reviews in *Foundation*, *JFA*, *Fafnir*, and the *NYRSF*.

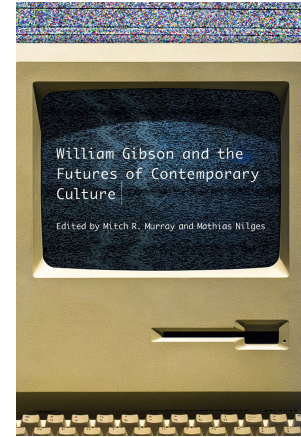
### *William Gibson and the Futures of Contemporary Culture*, edited by Mitch R. Murray and Mathias Nilges



Jonathan P. Lewis

Mitch R. Murray and Mathias Nilges, eds. *William Gibson and the Futures of Contemporary Culture*. Iowa UP, 2021. The New American Canon: The Iowa Series in Contemporary Literature and Culture. Paperback. 290 pages. \$90.00. ISBN 9781609387488.

*William Gibson and the Futures of Contemporary Culture* is divided into three sections: “Gibson and Literary History,” “Gibson and the Question of Medium,” and “Gibson and the Problem of the Present.” Each section has strengths, particularly in putting Gibson’s work into context with cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk, steampunk, and other genres Gibson foments and subverts.



In the “Gibson and Literary History” section, Phillip E. Wegner opens the volume with a view of SF when *Neuromancer* was published, along with, Wegner notes, Samuel Delany’s *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand* and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Wild Shore* (all 1984). Taken together, Wegner argues, these texts “mark the past, present, and future of the practice of science fiction and the notions of the literary more generally” (22). In “When it Changed: Science Fiction and the Literary Field, Circa 1984,” Wegner successfully places Gibson, Delaney, and Robinson’s novels in the context of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the cultural landscape of Reagan-era popular and literary culture, including film, indie and pop music, architecture, and cultural criticism. Wegner’s essay provides a useful opening for the volume in question as it firmly places *Neuromancer* along-side such touchstones as Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and Michel Foucault’s second and third volumes of *Histoire de la sexualité* (1984). As well, Wegner interestingly locates *Neuromancer* as an experimental, albeit realist novel, in the tradition of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922).

The second essay in the collection, “No Future but the Alternative: Or, Temporal Leveling in the Work of William Gibson” by Kylie Korsnack, likewise sets a key tone for the book by examining Gibson’s use of time-travel and disembodiment in the first work in the Jackpot Trilogy, *The Peripheral* (2014), as well as in the graphic novel *Archangel* (2017) and the displacement in time experienced by Cayce Pollard in the first work in the Blue Ant Trilogy, *Pattern Recognition* (2005). Korsnack effectively navigates the complex play of time and history in these works to show that “readers find themselves occupying multiple temporalities simultaneously” (61). This fractured temporality demonstrates, in both the Blue Ant and Jackpot trilogies, how characters

like Cayce in *Pattern Recognition* and Flynn in *The Peripheral* find “themselves split between body and mind” while living, not just in some future, as in the *Sprawl* and *Bridge* trilogies, but in the ever-confusing now (63). The “ever-confusing now” is an apt description of Gibson’s approach to modern life, as Korsnack’s essay demonstrates in full.

The third essay, “The Shelf Lives of Futures: Williams Gibson’s Short Fiction and the Temporality of Genre” by Nilges, is a highly useful inspection of Gibson’s short stories, starting with “Fragments of a Hologram Rose,” published in 1977, that connects Gibson’s turn to realism in the *Blue Ant* Trilogy, or, as Wegner argues, a turn that never occurred as Gibson has always written realistic fiction about nows that have not yet been. Nilges further argues effectively that, in 1981’s “The Gernsback Continuum,” “past futures continue to haunt and influence the present. . . . [A problem] that is crucial not only for writers of science fiction but for our ability to engage with and imagine alternatives to the problems of our present” (73). Nilges thus proposes that in Gibson’s short fiction, and one can surely argue his novels as well, the future is never not really present, albeit, as Gibson has said, not equally distributed.

The fourth and final chapter in the first section of the collection, Takayuki Tatsumi’s “*The Difference Engine* in a Post-Enlightenment Context: Franklin, Emerson, and Gibson and Sterling,” reads the novel through the end of the Cold War, situating *The Difference Engine* (1990) alongside Robert Zemeckis’s film *Back to the Future 3* (1990) and Steven Spielberg’s film of Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* (1993). This essay connects the end of the Cold War to the end of “territorial clear-cut binary opposition to temporal chaotic inconsistency” (83). Further, Tatsumi argues that *The Difference Engine* owes a great deal of its construction to Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and the writings of Franklin and Emerson. This reviewer would have liked a more nuanced reading of the novel in this essay, however.

Part Two of the collection opens with Andrew M. Butler’s “A New Rose Hotel is a New Rose Hotel is a New Rose Hotel’: Nonplaces in William Gibson’s Screen Adaptations.” Butler’s essay is a welcome one—not enough is made in the criticism of Gibson’s adaptations of “New Rose Hotel” and “Johnnie Mnemonic” and an original, unproduced script for *Alien 3*, or his successful scripts for *The X-Files*. Butler builds from his argument in Sherryl Vint and Graham Murphy’s *Beyond Cyberpunk* (2010) to say that cyberspace in Gibson’s screenplays is an “outopia or non-place” like the Los Angeles of Ripley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982). For Butler, Gibson’s adaptations and original pieces work because they place their protagonists “in cities and other nonplaces they can no longer read or navigate, overwhelmed by the semiotics and forms of representation at odds with their identities, relationships, and histories” (107). One can extrapolate this analysis to much of Gibson’s work, especially the *Blue Ant* and *Jackpot* trilogies.

Maria Alberto and Elizabeth Swanstrom’s “William Gibson, Science Fiction, and the Evolution of the Digital Humanities” explores this exciting development in textual and non-textual analysis, examining how Gibson’s work foments explorations of the digital, particularly, they write, “conversations his work has prompted regarding embodiment, cognition, gender, race, and so

on” (121). What the digital humanities bring to studies of Gibson’s work, Alberto and Swanstrom argue, is how, e.g., his linguistic choices and innovations have impacted SF and SF studies, as they demonstrate through lexical dispersion plots. Such data mining is useful for showing how Gibson’s work “was of special interest to science fiction scholars thinking about these issues” (126). Alberto and Swanstrom readily admit that they are not “formally trained in computational linguistics,” but their findings are strongly suggestive that further explorations of Gibson’s semantic impact on SF will be profitable (128).

Next up is Roger Whitson’s “Time Critique and the Textures of Alternate History: Media Archaeology in *The Difference Engine* and *The Peripheral*”; Whitson argues that “Gibson’s media archaeology shows that computing fundamentally transforms our experience of alternate history by illustrating the links between the human social imagination and the infrastructure of branching processes found in networked computational logic” (135). In other words, Whitson says that by examining the plays with history in *The Difference Engine* and *The Peripheral* (and, one should add, its sequel *Agency* [2020]), one can see just how history and imaginative narratives unfold. Further, Whitson argues that the “interlacing of platform and governance—where what was once on the periphery becomes central, utopia becomes dystopia, future becomes past, alternative history becomes our history” to suggest that forms and contents merge (141). E.g., Gibson and Sterling’s play with Babbage’s Analytical Engine and Gibson’s play with the quantum server in Shanghai that creates “stubs” in history raise ontological questions about the experience of mediated reality. Whitson’s analysis is a highpoint in section two of the collection.

Sherryl Vint opens section three of the collection with “Too Big to Fail: The Blue Ant Trilogy and Our Productized Future.” Vint’s work here connects to Wegner’s opening chapter through Gibson’s apparent turn from SF to realism and argues that this turn shows that Gibson is “nostalgic for the power of art to resist capitalism’s infiltration of social and political life, now at such a point of saturation that commodity relations have replaced all social ties” (154). Vint’s argument is successful in demonstrating this saturation through Cayce Pollard, Hubertus Bigend, and other characters who, in the particular case of Bigend, work “actively to co-opt any social or creative activity that is not oriented toward market profitability and redirect it to that end” (154). Vint’s essay is especially strong in her connection of late capitalist advertising and Gibson’s characters’ attempts to recover an ever-receding, stable reality as they seek to “escape the commoditized society of the spectacle” (158). This essay is a highlight of the collection.

Amy J. Elias reads the first novel in Gibson’s apparent “return” to SF in “Realist Ontology in William Gibson’s *The Peripheral*.” The Jackpot Trilogy continued in *Agency* and will apparently conclude in *The Jackpot* (Gibson’s working title for the forthcoming novel), but Elias’s interest lies in the questions raised in *The Peripheral* about how we experience reality through “Hugh Everett III’s 1957 many-worlds interpretation in quantum mechanics (which claims that there are many parallel, noninteracting worlds that exist at the same space and time as our own . . .)” (168). As a scholar deeply interested in the application of Everett’s interpretation in contemporary SF, this chapter’s analysis is highly useful; yet beyond the personal, Elias’s work cogently places

*The Peripheral* at the center of Gibson's interest from his earliest fiction in how the ultra-rich "third-world" or colonize the past for resource extraction in their realities, separate from the rest of us poor saps.

Aron Pease's "Cyberspace after Cyberpunk" dovetails with Vint's chapter and continues the exploration of Gibson's seeming abandonment of cyberspace for the present especially resulting from the complete commodification of the Internet by "transnational corporations" (179). And yet, Pease argues, *Spook Country* (2007), e. g., the concluding volume of the Blue Ant Trilogy, takes as givens such cyber inventions as GPS technology in its "locutive art" that "prompts wonder initially, but later bored familiarity" like so much of Internet culture (180). For Pease, Gibson has continued his exploration of cyberspace, but the world caught up to his initial visions because he imagined them. And thus it seems that Gibson's later characters "disregard their devices almost as nuisances, exhibiting none of the cyberpunk's romantic attachment to machines" (180). There is, in other words, a nostalgic desire for a world before cyberspace and yet a total need for cyberspace to find meaning in the world—as in Cayce Pollard's quest for the creators of "the Footage" in *Pattern Recognition*, e.g. Finally, Pease argues that, like Elias, "the Blue Ant Trilogy thus captures the emerging space of empire that subsumes the spaces of the former colonial empires" (187). Pease finally states that this seizure explains Gibson's move from "science fiction to the science fictionalized present," a compelling conclusion to the chapter's interests (194).

Finally, Christopher P. Haines concludes the volume with "'Just a Game': Biopolitics, Video Games, and William Gibson's *The Peripheral*." Haines argues that Gibson offers "one of the most incisive critiques of gaming and financialization" in the first novel in the Jackpot Trilogy. Further, Haines says that *The Peripheral's* use of time-travel is best understood through the politics of the rich using the less fortunate, as the novel's klepts gamify the exploitation of the lower classes and the extraction of technologies from the "stubs" that carry out research and development amidst their own destruction in the Jackpot. Haines also notes Gibson's prose style in this novel as echoing the speed of his plots: "sentences are modular and clipped, dropping subjects or verbs, coining neologisms that collapse ideas together" (207).

Among the many reasons to appreciate the collection is the focus not just on Gibson's three completed trilogies, but his short stories, his steampunk collaboration with Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine*, the graphic novel *Archangel*, completed screen plays for *The X-Files* and the unproduced *Alien 3*, and three essays on the first work in the in-progress "Jackpot Trilogy," *The Peripheral*. The second volume, *Agency*, published just before the collection, is mentioned only tangentially.

Novelist Malka Order's foreword centers Gibson's work in contemporary literature and the broader culture that it both anticipates and realizes. Order sets the stage for the collection with the statement that the "sense of upheaval and disconnection... is what makes his books so apt for the modern world" (xii). The uncanny, the unfamiliar, and the strange settings that open Gibson's works, Order argues, dislocate characters and readers from the conventional and make his work

so ripe, so overdue, Murray and Nilges rightly argue, for this collective assessment. The pair convincingly argue that one of reasons for the previous lack of a collection like this one is Gibson's turn from the wild speculative fiction of his early short fiction and the Sprawl Trilogy to a more realist aesthetic in the Bridge and Blue Ant trilogies.

All three sections of the work succeed in large part because of the nuanced close readings of Gibson's works and situating the novels especially within the contexts of Gibson's cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk poetics. The collection is therefore highly recommended for Gibson scholars and science fiction critics more broadly. There is a wealth of Gibson scholarship in *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, and *Science Fiction Studies* as well as other leading journals, with essays appearing each year. This new collection is a welcome addition to this criticism and should be a starting point for students and scholars working on Gibson going forward, building on Gary Westfahl's 2013 monograph for Illinois UP's Modern Masters of Science Fiction series and the recently published *Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2019) edited by Anna MacFarland, Lars Schmeink, and Graham Murphy. Mitch Murray and Mathias Nilges have curated a much-needed assemblage of critics and responses examining Gibson's short fiction, novels, and screenplays. This collection is an important new resource for Gibson studies and should be a touchstone for his work going forward.

**Jonathan P. Lewis** is Associate Professor of English at Troy University in Troy, Alabama. He has published essays on Neal Stephenson, William Gibson, and others in such journals as *Extrapolation* and *Foundation*. He teaches composition, World and American Literature, and SFF. He is currently at work on a monograph examining Hugh Everett III's Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics in contemporary SF.

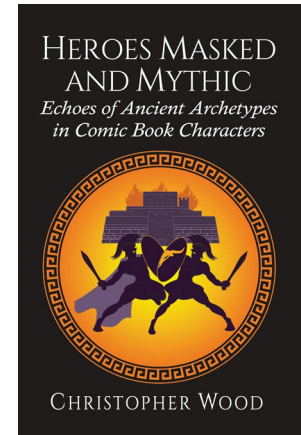
### *Heroes Masked and Mythic: Echoes of Ancient Archetypes in Comic Book Characters*, by Christopher Wood



Vincent M. Gainé

Christopher Wood. *Heroes Masked and Mythic: Echoes of Ancient Archetypes in Comic Book Characters*. McFarland, 2021. Paperback. 264 pg. \$39.95. ISBN: 9781476683157.

In *Heroes Masked and Mythic*, Christopher Wood performs a detailed analysis of the parallels between the heroes of Ancient Greece and comic book superheroes of the modern era. From Achilles to Captain America, Paris to Hawkeye, Troy to Gotham, Wood demonstrates that the concerns which informed the works of Homer and Virgil are alive and well in the works of Stan Lee, Bob Kane, and Kevin Feige. These concerns include, among others, the tension between personal honor and duty to family or community; the temperance of power with wisdom; and the dangers associated with being stronger, faster, more skilled than your contemporaries. Over the course of the book, Wood draws on various examples both from antiquity and today to establish and argue his central thesis.



Wood's book arrives when it has become almost a cliché to describe superheroes as modern myths. Batman, Superman, Spider-Man and their ilk have proved highly malleable, adapted by various creators to different media as well as different periods, reflecting changing social, cultural and political concerns as well as industrial, aesthetic and technological developments since the late 1930s. As Wood might say, this adaptability echoes the oral traditions of the Greek epic, stories that could be and have been told and retold by multiple tellers over the centuries. Comic books and superheroes have a prominent role in contemporary popular culture, largely due to the multi-billion-dollar film franchises that dominate cinemas as well as streaming services. In response to this prominence, superhero studies is a growing area of academic research, both in terms of scholarly studies and student work. Wood therefore offers a timely intervention with this in-depth study of long-standing discourses that influence the construction of narratives and characters, whether they wear tunics and brass or capes and face masks, vulnerable either in the heel or to kryptonite.

Wood's conceit allows him to consistently perform detailed analyses of his various case studies. Over the course of fourteen chapters, with such evocative titles as "Wonder Woman: Echoes of the Amazon Warrior" and "The Hand of Fate: The Infinity Gauntlet and the Moirai," Wood delivers some striking insights. Early on, he traces the history of myth itself, including the



Ancient Greek understanding of the term and the importance of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell on our (and Wood's specifically) contemporary understanding of the term. He also argues that the term "hero," while seeming self-explanatory, is also highly contingent on historical, social and political context: "Heroes, multi-faceted as they generally are, serve to define our society" (Wood, 6). As Wood identifies, what it means to be a "hero" is something that many a 'hero' based text has explored over time.

In "Chapter I: Captain America: An Achilles for the Modern Age," Wood draws attention to both heroes being the most noble warrior, identified by their shields and close relationships with their male comrades. Furthermore, Wood highlights the importance of both characters being "out of time" (46). This is an interesting notion that speaks to the centrality of heroes being outsiders and also liminal, a point Wood returns to in "Chapter VI – He Who Commands The Sea: Proteus, Scamander and Denizens of the Deep." Here Wood expands the discussion beyond individual figures, demonstrating that the epic/superhero tale relies also upon physical and social spaces. The hybridity of the aquatic warrior manifests in the home of Proteus in Greek myth, "the island of Pharos, a liminal zone, neither completely on land nor beneath the sea" (Wood, 118) as well as Marvel's Namor, the Sub-Mariner, who "bridges the physical realms of land and ocean" (Wood, 122). The attention to location continues in "Chapter VIII – Defending the Epic City: Gotham and Troy." In this chapter, Wood highlights moral decline in tension with architectural strength, the strong structure of Troy juxtaposed against the waning nobility of its inhabitants. Despite the sturdy walls, mighty gate and lofty towers, Wood identifies that decadence and lavishness have made the people of Troy "weak" (Wood, 147) and indeed vulnerable to violation. Wood's argument that the siege and ultimate sacking of Troy is a form of "sexual innuendo" (Wood, 148) is persuasive and intriguing.

Chapter VIII also highlights the main problem with *Heroes Masked and Mythic*. While Wood's analyses of the classical texts are insightful, modern comic book texts and their adaptations do not receive the same level of attention. Wood argues that DC's Gotham City is comparable to Troy in terms of its corruption, but his choice of evidence seems to contradict that. Citing *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight*, Vol.1 #27 (February 1992) and *Gates of Gotham*, Vol.1 #2 (August 2011), Wood quotes the line, "I wished to lock evil out of men's neighborhoods and hearts. I fear that instead I have given it the means to be locked in" (150). An analysis of Gotham, whether that be in comic book, film or TV form, reveals an insular environment with only minimal connection to the outside world. Gotham seems, therefore, very different from the role played by Troy in the Iliad, a city defined by its relationship to the invading forces of the Greeks. The protector role parallel between Hector and Batman is therefore dubious, since Hector, the literal prince of Troy, defends it against the external threat, while Batman, a vigilante, defends Gotham against its "home-grown criminal forces" (250). The forces at work within a Batman story seem distinct from those in the Iliad, including the "feminine and motherly" (151) aspects of the respective cities. While Troy is to be protected but ultimately violated, Gotham degenerates and regenerates, giving "new life to both heroes and villains within her realm" (151). Wood's own argument suggests that

Gotham is far more resilient than Troy, making his parallel between the two cities as well as their respective guardians unconvincing.

Wood's tendency to pay greater attention to the historical than the contemporary texts undermines much of his argument. This problem is exacerbated by the book being rather one note: Wood establishes the parallel and then reiterates it across his chapters. The different case studies and contexts demonstrate a wide area of research, but the critical attention to the comic book texts and their adaptations is often superficial, describing the parallels rather than exploring possible unique qualities of the different media. Furthermore, Wood's principal type of analysis is narrative, with the basic tenets of superhero stories identified and some storylines discussed briefly. Although some panels are reproduced (pp. 52, 67, 77, 97, 109, 166-7), analysis of these visual elements is limited at best, neglecting the unique qualities of the comic book medium. Furthermore, there is very little audio-visual analysis, which would be less of a problem if the book only focused on the comic book iterations of these characters. When a crucial scene in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) receives only a narrative summary (p. 48), it seems remiss to exclude discussion of mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing.

This omission leaves Wood's arguments incomplete. The media forms of comic books, film and television, not to mention animation and video games, rely as much on their visual and indeed audio composition as the narrative structures, character construction and use of archetypes. When Wood does perform visual analysis, it is of antiquarian relics, such as vases, mosaics, palace reliefs and figurines (see 41, 56, 73, 89, 105, 108, 117, et al). Wood's analyses of these ancient artefacts are effective and likely to open many a reader's eyes to ways of understanding these materials. However, within the context of the book the very strength of this analysis is frustrating because of the unexplored avenues of different forms of visual storytelling. Arguably, the comic book format itself is a continuation of the embossed shield and painted vase, a point made in the postmodern and highly referential superhero film *Unbreakable* (2000):

I believe comics are our last link... to an ancient way of passing on history. The Egyptians drew on walls. Countries all over the world still pass on knowledge through pictorial forms. I believe comics are a form of history... that someone somewhere felt or experienced.

To discuss ancient visual representation but to omit contemporary forms, is a missed opportunity for Wood, especially since he demonstrates great analytical skills and draws together different examples to support his arguments. Imagine what he could have done with more attention to comic book and cinematic visual representation.

The different types of attention to different sources highlights Wood's position as a classical scholar, here trying his hand at contemporary media discussion. His critical framework serves to highlight the continued relevance and indeed influence of ancient history and art. *Heroes Masked and Mythic* is certainly useful in this regard, and Wood's committed study is likely to be useful for scholars and students of classicism looking for ways to trace historical developments and

archetypes. For scholars of contemporary media, the book may work in dialogue with studies of comic books, film and television, but on its own it serves as little more than an introduction to classicism through the gateway of contemporary superheroes.

**Dr Vincent M. Gaine** is an academic, film critic and podcaster based at Lancaster University. His monograph, *Existentialism and Social Engagement in the Films of Michael Mann*, is published by Palgrave. He has published further articles and book chapters on filmmakers and genres in the *Journal of Cinema* and *Media Studies*, *European Journal of American Culture* and *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, as well as reviews and interviews for the websites the Critical Movie Critics, the Geek Show and Moving Pictures Film Club, and also discusses film and media on the podcast *Invasion of the Pody People*. He specialises in the intersection of globalisation, liminality and identity politics in media, and is currently researching spies, superheroes and Boston.

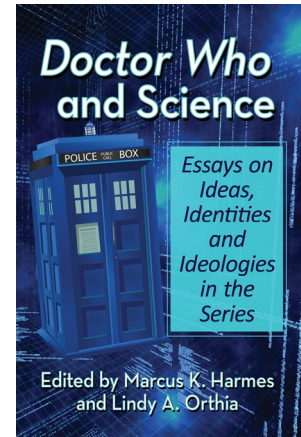
### *Doctor Who and Science: Essays on Ideas, Identities and Ideologies in the Series*, edited by Marcus K. Harmes and Lindy A. Orthia



John McLoughlin

Marcus K. Harmes and Lindy A. Orthia, editors. *Doctor Who and Science: Essays on Ideas, Identities and Ideologies in the Series*, McFarland & Company Inc., 2021. Ebook. 235 pg. \$39.95. ISBN 9781476642000.

This collection presents a distinctly interdisciplinary set of essays, the vast majority of which testify to the significant scholarly and personal investment of their authors in *Doctor Who*, both as a modern series and a historical institution. As the editors themselves note, “academics tend not to write about *Doctor Who* unless they are also fans or at least highly engaged viewers” (14). This particular set of expert fans includes physicists, translation professionals, media and cultural scholars, astronomers, geneticists, science communicators, literature specialists, historians and more, so the collection has an interesting variety of methodological approaches beyond those usually seen in traditional literary and cultural studies. Alongside critical analyses of *Doctor Who* episodes are quantitative analyses of public engagement, exposition of scientific norms and cutting-edge gender and identity discourses.



Despite this open-ended attitude to content, the curatorial approach is distinctly of the modern humanities, with an emphasis on explicating *Doctor Who*'s complex and often illuminating relationship with issues around gender, sexual and racial representation, and empire. The editors get the question of pronouns out of the way early, mandating the use of they/them when speaking of the Doctor generally, but allowing for gendered usage when referencing a specific incarnation. Despite the potential—acknowledged by the editors—for the odd instance of grammatical confusion, this two-pronged approach is largely effective and engages admirably with the show's own development and modern innovations in gender inclusivity.

Focus is laid on the show's function as a science communicator, rather than simply recording instances of scientific accuracy—or inaccuracy—in specific episodes; *Doctor Who* can, the editors argue, serve only to proselytize for science at the “macro” level, introducing reason and scientific method as general concepts (6). Despite this, essays do occasionally go as far as equating the show's quality with its faithfulness to real science. Elizabeth Stanway's “Who's Moon” talks about the show's “recklessly indifferent” attitude toward scientific fact (41) in the 2014 episode “Kill the Moon”; lack of faithfulness to microbiological and astrophysical reality, Stanway argues,

indicates “a decline in the quality of scientific and educational representation of the Moon” (41), thus introducing one of the more interesting questions raised by the collection—to what extent *Doctor Who* must balance its responsibility to science communication with its nature as creative fiction. Stanway frames this within the show’s influence on audience’s attitudes towards science specifically, a perspective supported and built upon by Kristine Larsen’s analysis in the same volume of the “chilling effect” (127) such shows can have on women’s participation in STEM fields. Stanway’s analysis of Google search trends is far from conclusive when it comes to demonstrating the show’s impact on viewer interest, though the inclusion of real-world events alongside episode broadcast dates is an intelligent and necessary one.

Whether it be issues of climate change, space sovereignty or gender inclusivity, one of the collection’s most compelling arguments is that *Doctor Who* has, for better or worse and throughout its history, contributed to public perceptions of science and scientists. The collection does an admirable job of balancing its conclusions: while *Doctor Who* is not without flaws, sharing many of them with the culture which gave birth to it, nevertheless the authors seem to believe that it may still serve a vanguard function. Larsen’s own essay, “The Mad Scientist Wore Prada,” offers a balanced and intriguing analysis of Rosalynn Haynes’ catalogue of feminine stereotypes as they appear in *Doctor Who*. Larsen’s analyses of the Rani and the Master/ Missy are nuanced and thorough, extending far beyond a simple reiteration of Haynes’ initial list; sections dealing with Missy’s emotional response to the Doctor’s friendship and her own rehabilitation are particularly astute, noting the cart-before-the-horse nature of the writing; she asks whether such an emotionally charged Master would be possible in the Moffat era were they not so overtly feminine, and the reader is inclined to agree. Larsen’s conclusion, that the presence of these stereotypes harms inclusivity, is strengthened by the recorded instances of backlash to gender inclusion in the show from fans and critics, though Larsen does acknowledge that by approaching only the “mad scientist” characters, analysis is funneled towards characters whose depiction must—by necessity—be negative.

The collection’s more niche and episode-specific studies most demonstrate the strength of passion-driven scholarship; Harmes and Scully’s close study of the “Evil of the Daleks” serial and its depiction of Victorian-era science and pseudoscience offers fascinating insights into the production methodology of old *Who*, the real-life emergence of professional scientists, and the demise of the amateur, gentrified scientist. Essays like Natalie Ring’s regeneration piece and Halley and Bowker’s translation study offer fun and well-rounded explorations of the real-life parallels to *Doctor Who*’s soft-SF themes and ideas, whilst Mike Stack offers a nuanced and intricate study of the differences between sex and gender—all framed neatly by the regenerative process.

Editorial work is largely accurate, with tables and visual information presented appropriately. A small number of typographical and grammatical oddities remain, including incorrect punctuation usage in chapter titles. In all, readers will find in this volume a varied and thoroughly researched set of essays whose topical and enthusiastic approach demonstrates the versatility and longevity of *Doctor Who* scholarship.

NON-FICTION REVIEWS  
*Heroes Masked and Mythic*

**John McLoughlin** is a PhD researcher at Cardiff University studying the intersection between the Exegesis of Philip K. Dick and the literary and philosophical writing of Walter Benjamin. McLoughlin is interested in cultural detritus, nonlinear approaches to art and revelation, and alternative cultural and literary perspectives. Originally from Liverpool, John is a lifelong SF fan and fine artist with a keen interest in interdisciplinary studies, plus a passion for bringing unlikely sources of meaning together.

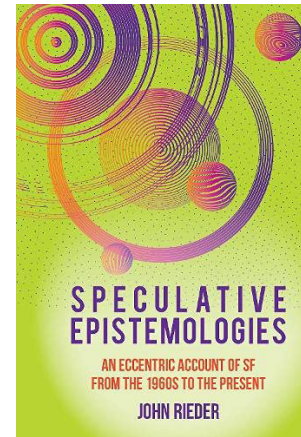
### *Speculative Epistemologies: An Eccentric Account of SF from the 1960s to the Present*, by John Rieder



Paul Graham Raven

John Rieder. *Speculative Epistemologies: An Eccentric Account of SF from the 1960s to the Present*. Liverpool UP, 2021. Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies, 70. Hardback. 192 pg. \$125.00. ISBN 9781800855410.

John Rieder's introduction to *Speculative Epistemologies* aims the book at the question of "truth effects in sf" and invokes the Harawayean expansion of those initials: the field of enquiry includes science fiction and speculative fiction, of course, but also "speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact" (1-2). The book's heart is six close readings of stories from the genre's subcultural margins, which Rieder hopes will "trace a history of sf that captures the increasingly feminist, racially and ethnically diverse, philosophically ambitious, and politically engaged character of [sf's] subcultural centers of gravity from the 1960s to the present" (2). The speculative epistemologies of the title are "counter-hegemonic ways of knowing" (2), while the eccentricity of the subtitle refers not to the substitution of Hawaiian shirts and a fedora for a personality, but rather to an engagement with "multiple centers of gravity," resulting in non-Copernican orbits such as those of comets and the like.



In other words, this is a tour of the Oort cloud of the generic solar system. Perhaps that's not the ideal metaphor, however, given Rieder here extends the model of genre (re)formation set out in his *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (2017; *SFMCGS* hereafter): an Actor-Networkish approach which "resists any monolithic, centrally organised description" (3) in favour of exploring an ever-shifting assemblage of subnetworks through which the meaning of a term such as 'science fiction' is perpetually under (re)construction. Which is to say that 'science fiction' is not the simple category identifier that it's sometimes taken to be, nor is it exactly like a solar system—unless, perhaps, we consider solar systems over a timescale for which our mayfly lifespans make us woefully unprepared.

Nonetheless, if that's the map we're taking for Rieder's territory, then his navigational rubric is a popular aphorism pulled from Shapin and Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (1985), a landmark work in Science & Technology Studies (STS): "solutions to the problem of knowledge are solutions to the problem of social order" (3). To this claim Rieder adds a rider of his own:

“the problem of knowledge/social order is therefore also, always, the problem of narrative or storytelling” (ibid).

The waystations on this journey are six sfnal texts that foreground the social struggles—and hence the alternative ways-of-knowing—of women, Indigenous communities, and queer communities: Pamela Zoline’s “The Heat Death of the Universe” (1967); Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977); Samuel R. Delany’s “The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals” (1985); Theodore Roszak’s *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (1995); Albert Wendt’s *The Adventures of Vela* (2009); and “The Camille Stories” (2016) by the aforementioned Donna Haraway. Rieder’s itinerary is not intended to be exhaustive, but illustrative, taking in some exemplary texts which subvert the hegemonic culture—but also the hegemonic *sf* culture—of their time, resulting in “an enormously more significant realisation of the genre’s literary and ideological potential” (4). I will not presume to judge the suitability of Rieder’s choices, here, nor critique his analyses. For one thing, I have read only two of the texts (the Zoline and the Haraway) and know one more by repute (the Delany). For another, Rieder’s reputation as a wide and generous reader precedes him, and the chapters devoted to each work in this book are testament to a body of knowledge and experience that puts my own to shame. What I can say with certainty is that he provides ample reason to seek out the stories I haven’t read, and to return to those I have.

Therefore—and given my own position within (or is it my trajectory across?) the assemblage-of-assemblages that we think of as the academic disciplinary (solar-)system—I will instead concentrate on Rieder’s framing argument and conclusion. Though a critic and author of *sf*, and a regular (ab)user of the scholarly toolkit surrounding the genre, I would not presume to define myself as an *sf* scholar first and foremost. If I am legible at all to the disciplinary system, it is as some vigorously mutant species in which the genes of futures studies and STS got mixed up, perhaps by way of a comic-book villain’s experiments with a particle accelerator. This may serve to explain why Rieder’s work usually speaks clearly to me: the theory of genre advanced in SFMCGS, for instance, makes a lot of sense to someone who, in the words of their long-suffering doctoral supervisor, “has read more Latour than is necessarily helpful”. Throw in some Haraway (as theorist as well as fabulist), the foundational work of Shapin and Schaffer, a pinch of Bakhtin and Barad, and I’m in fairly familiar territory; to then be slung outward on a trajectory that traces that territory’s potential intersection with a (small-c) catholic conception of *sf* as an assemblage is a mission that feels, at times, like it was written just for me.

However, that feeling dissipates somewhat when Rieder reaches his conclusions. To explain why, I must attempt to sum up the theoretical framework that takes us there, which Rieder erects around the central issue of “truth effects” (1). This argument begins with the relationship—often claimed but, as here shown, most often honoured in the breach—between the epistemic bases of science fiction and the sciences for which it was (unwisely, and regrettably) named long ago. This part of Rieder’s argument includes a quick foray through the emergence of ‘hard’ *sf*—here shown to be driven by a cherry-picked nostalgia for an earlier *sf* which had hardly existed, and resulting in a “highly targeted storytelling practice, one that caters to a well-defined, narrow audience”



(11)—and the ‘soft’ New Wave counterpoint that emerged within the genre; it is also the part of the argument which I assume will be canonical to most readers here. What interests me more is Rieder’s delineation of an epistemological chasm between the reality- and truth-claims of sf-as-fiction on the one hand and science-as-non-fiction on the other. Here, the vastly different effects (and perhaps also affects) of authority and plausibility must be (re)examined within what Rieder calls regimes of publicity: “the material practices of the production, circulation and reception of discourses” (12) wherein the boundaries and protocols of ‘genre’ are built, maintained and reconfigured over time.

For Rieder, this process requires focussing on the label ‘science fiction’ as commonly used rather than as expertly defined, thus resisting pressures to purify sf of its entanglement with mass culture, and with the inextricably related techniques of advertising and market research. The latter are connected by Rieder (quite rightly) to the “fake news” phenomena of the moment, produced by the “outrage industry” as part of an assault on “the authority of evidence-based truth” (12). Meanwhile, “the real, true ‘cognitive’ power of sf” must be found “by tracing its proliferating networks of influence and association,” rather than by the aforementioned process of purification (12): the broad church that the term now represents, and its indirect and polymorphous relationship to the episteme of scientific enquiry, is precisely the result of sub-subcultural struggles within the subculture of SF itself. This dynamic is how the idea of ‘hard’ SF emerged, and—first as tragedy, then as farce?—how the more recent Puppies crusades emerged, but it is also what gave rise to the far more inclusive and radical countercurrents which Rieder is charting in this book.

So far, so good. But early in his conclusion, Rieder turns toward drawing a hard and exclusionary line between, on the one hand, both the vernacular (and liberal-hegemonic) notion of ‘science fiction’ (for which his figure is the bloated monolith of the Marvel movies franchise) and the more radical tradition that the book focusses on, and on the other hand, the post-truth narratives of the MAGA movement. He rightly notes that, while the radical tradition with which *Speculative Epistemologies* is concerned takes a critical and oppositional attitude to the more ‘same old capitalist technoscience, but with slightly better minority representation draped over it’ position of the liberal mainstream, the two blocs are united by a science-like commitment to evidence as the foundation of truth claims, albeit a very instrumentalised lip-service one in the latter case; the fables of the outrage industry, meanwhile, have given up any such pretence in favour of that infamous coining, ‘alternative facts.’

This argument is eminently tenable, to be clear. But I struggle with a corollary that seems to suggest that the fabulatory futures of the post-truth episteme are thereby beyond the pale in terms of the genre dynamics he has described in this and earlier works: disconnected from the somewhat-more-sciencey speculations of SF and, furthermore, undeserving of any attempt at critical engagement.

I can see where Rieder is coming from, here, not least because he sets it out clearly, referencing the circumstances of his writing the conclusion against the backdrop of the January

6th insurrection at the US Capitol. Which is to say: I don't blame him for getting on his soapbox. But I do feel that his argument is a poor fit with the book that precedes it. It's not contradictory, exactly, but nonetheless: to go from detailed explorations of works which illustrate the long and close relation between radical sf and the academic regimes of publicity in particular, and then to hop-skip from there, over the mainstream movies of the commercial regime, and on to a regime that doesn't even define itself as science fiction at all—even though I would argue its futurities are, contra Rieder, demonstrably no more 'improbable' than those of the Black Panther movie (2018), and to its fans distinctly less so—in order to dismiss the latter as illegible to analysis and undeserving of engagement... well, it feels like one hell of a leap.

I can see the logic in holding up MAGA futurism's refusal to debate in good faith as a reason to "acknowledge, with regret, outrage's own practice of putting itself outside of any meaningful dialogue" (157), both academically and politically. But politics and logic are not blood relatives... and my (admittedly limited) training in pedagogy leaves me wondering whether we are (to borrow a metaphor from William G. Perry) simply stonewalling the disruptive students who've finally cottoned on to the first solipsistic stages of epistemic multiplicity and leaving them to be swept up by demagogues.

And if we concede that debate is impossible, engagement pointless—what then? Because regretfully allowing these epistemes the exit from metaphysics (and hence analysis) whose impossibility forms the basis of our critique of them, and hoping it will just die out if we stop looking at it, doesn't seem like a strategy that's going to win over the long haul. Worse, our condemnation and dismissal of these alternative futurities is exactly the effect that their authors—because outrage futures definitely have authors, or at least curators, with political positions and agendas as well-defined as any author Rieder explores in this book—would most like them to achieve. The trap has long been built in: our dismissal of these speculative epistemes—justified by reference to names that post-truth fandoms will identify as 'postmodern neoMarxists,' and using five-dollar words aplenty—enacts the elite disdain that those narratives already claim to be all that can be expected of us, tweeting our wokenesses in the sacred groves of radical-leftist academe. Our rejection is prophesied; as a consequence, it will be celebrated, and the division deepened. For all our faith in our own epistemological foundations, we seem unable to escape the characterisation ascribed to us by theirs.

So surely seeking to understand these epistemes with the tools we have developed to that end is better than to shrug and retreat? Certainly, they differ hugely in their truth effects from the ones with which Rieder is here concerned, but—as he observes earlier in the book—they are shaped by the same media-systemic dynamics of niche and mainstream, of marketing and seriality. Indeed, the passing mention of the Puppies crusades could even form the basis for making the case that the sf subculture was a Ground Zero for the 'culture wars'—and it would be of a piece with the book's stated project of studying the effect of speculative epistemologies "on the formation of identities and communities" (back cover).

Other scholars seem to be pushing in this direction, too. David Higgins's *Reverse Colonisation* (2021; reviewed elsewhere in this issue), for example, shows that sf media which, at the time, were artefacts of a radical leftist (or leftish?) subcultural scene, have gone on to provide rhetorical strategies of resentment to the post-truth meta-episteme. More recently still, Sherryl Vint has described a project in which she intends to treat the adherents of post-truth futurities *exactly as fandoms*—a move which gestures back to the deep history of sf fandom, prior even to the 'hard' sf controversy, as a harbor for some irrational, deeply weird, and disturbingly reactionary narratives of futurity.

None of this political meta-talk should be seen as casting any aspersions on the deep readings that Rieder has collected in this book, nor the theoretical framework within which he arranges and executes them: these, as always from this author, are exemplary, and will doubtless join my core collection of references in the field. See my quibbles instead as an intervention in a debate still ongoing, concerning how a once-marginal field of scholarship, having become much more relevant, influential, and mainstream in recent years, should best go about extrapolating its analyses and conclusions into the context beyond the texts which are its core concern. I am in no doubt that such extrapolations are worth making; indeed, I make them in my own (much less notable or exemplary) work.

But we too are in the business of truth claims effects as are, perhaps, all authors, knowingly or not. Rieder notes that Derrida—a 'postmodern neo-Marxist' *par excellence!*—observed that there can be no exit from metaphysics, and this lack of exit informs, for instance, the feminist critical engagement with a male-hegemonic science whose episteme put women under erasure. MAGA futurism may have put truth under erasure, but that's all the more reason for us to insist on seeking it there: the very commitment to truth that supposedly defines our opposition to it surely behooves us to seek it in our opposers. The alternative can only serve to sustain the destructive division which their imaginary dreams of making canon.

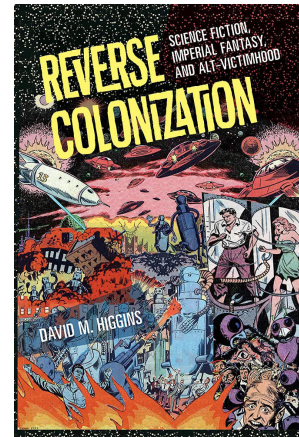
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### *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*, by David M. Higgins



Jeremy Brett

David M. Higgins. *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*. University of Iowa Press, 2021. The New American Canon: The Iowa Series in Contemporary Literature and Culture. Paperback. 250 pg. \$39.95. ISBN 9781609387846.



*Reverse Colonization*, David M. Higgins's new work of clever, thoughtful textual analysis, has the unenviable privilege of being a necessary book for the dark and ominous times before us. Those times make the experience of reading the book sadly relevant when harried readers might have appreciated a more standard dive into the strictly and more comfortably theoretical. On the other hand, as the shrill, shallow, and twisted concerns of the Right infiltrate ever deeper into our culture—including the ongoing evolution and development of science fiction and fantasy—understanding how those concerns impact the writing and reception of these genres becomes almost a duty. We're seeing it most recently in the 'Puppygate' kerfuffle of 2013-2017, in which a sad sack coalition of self-described revolutionaries led a backlash against perceived 'injustices' committed against 'traditional' (i.e., white, male, and cisgender) modes of science fiction storytelling. The irony is palpable—we see supporters of the Empire now think of themselves as the Rebel Alliance, and fans raised on and claiming to love *Star Trek* now decry perceived 'wokeness' in the utopian ideals of the United Federation of Planets. The phenomenon has become a veritable orgy of willful cultural misinterpretation.

But, as Higgins delineates so well in his study, that reactionary impulse, that "appropriation of righteous anti-imperial victimhood—the sense that white men, in particular, are somehow colonized victims fighting an insurgent resistance against an oppressive establishment—depends on a science fictional logic that achieved dominance in imperial fantasy during the 1960s and has continued to gain momentum ever since" (4). These dark and bad-faith interpretations have deep genre roots, in what Higgins calls the "imperial masochism" (2) that centers important SF&F works of the 1960s and 1970s. It behooves us, then, to have scholars like Higgins so deftly analyze the imperial masochism phenomenon, if only to better understand the ways in which beloved texts can be so disastrously misread, misused, or misdirected. But these kinds of projects also help readers and scholars alike uncover the evolution of bad-faith arguments from good-faith ones, for, as Higgins notes, the roots of reverse colonization narratives lie in soil of positive motivations.

Reverse colonization is no new concept in science fiction. Higgins offers a useful and well-written summary of its history in his introduction, along with an outline of its appropriation by nostalgic imperial fantasists and illiberal right wingers into narratives of imperial masochism. The *ur* story here is, of course, Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897), in which Wells used the cover of a fictional Martian invasion to allow his readers—beneficiaries of the advantages of an aggressive world empire—to imagine themselves as the colonized victims. But over the next century, this perpetrator/victim reversal and appeals to reader empathy and to increasing anti-colonial sentiments mutated in some cases into Higgins' imperial masochism, which he defines as a sort of dream logic in which the “subjects who enjoy the advantages of empire adopt the fantastical role of colonized victims to fortify and expand their agency.” The pleasures of imperial masochism lie in a conscious enjoyment of the “presumed moral superiority that fantasies of victimization enable” (2-3). Although right-wing positioning of reactionaries as social and cultural victims is not new, Higgins's study is pioneering in its uncovering of what he calls “science fiction's troubling complicity in the formation of modern imperial discourses and practices” (3) (and a concurrent adaptation and misuse of SF imagery: note, for example, how the “red pill” of *The Matrix* has become an important metaphor for many alt-right subcultures). Higgins also delves into the irony that the anti-imperial 1960s (when science fiction, as well as the greater culture, finally dismissed the idea of the noble conqueror or colonizer) produced several important works inadvertently fostering the notion that those with actual social, cultural, and political power are actually the powerless victims of evil conspiracies against them.

Higgins takes on a number of important mid-century texts (taking care, it should be noted, to explicitly deny any implication that the authors were working with deliberate reactionary intent), particularly in the book's first chapter. Herbert's *Dune* (1965, an inadvertently popular text among the alt-right), Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1962), and Clarke's novelization of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, based on his and Stanley Kubrick's screenplay) are all offered up for their particular explorations of interior masculinity that replace—or seek to replace—the old Golden Age of Science Fiction imperial narratives of planetary settlement and conquest. All three works offer what can be read as optimistic portrayals of authoritarian *Übermensch* fantasies. What is key to the appeal of these stories—what makes them feel heroic rather than oppressive—is the fact that Heinlein, Herbert, and Clarke frame their iconic supermen as victim-heroes struggling to achieve freedom, rather than as fascist heroes bent on domination. In particular, all three novels use the logic of reverse colonization to portray psychedelic awakening as a triumphant victory against empire (32).

In the tradition of the decade that spawned these works, the way to true liberation and true mastery is to free one's mind and let the body follow. The true path to power in these texts lies in eschewing dreams of conquest (and the psychological barriers of internal colonization) in favor of real, lasting agency. This sounds reasonable enough, but Higgins argues that the result across the narratives is to invite white elite male heroes to identify as psychically colonized victims who must reject the passive consumer nature of their societies; these protagonists evolve greater forms

of self-mastery and heroic masculinity that have unsettling parallels to fascist ideas of manhood and power. From these examples, it's not hard to see how some readers may make a wrongheaded conceptual leap towards championing reactionary ideals while calling themselves 'victims' of an inferior society.

Higgins devotes a chapter to Philip K. Dick's body of work and his narrative preoccupation with the idea of consensual reality as a "colonizing system of control" (66). Of course, Dick is rightly heralded for his explorations of the truth behind the realities we perceive, but Higgins thoughtfully dissects the potential pitfalls of this sort of mindset. Incel mass murderer Elliot Rodger (who constantly referenced examples from science fiction in his twisted self-reflections) is cited as an example of how disastrously narratives and authorial intent can be perverted. As Higgins notes, "(Rodger's) autobiography reveals a disturbing engagement with an even deeper mode of science fictional thinking: the idea that reality itself is somewhat wrong, twisted, or broken, and that an insurgent revolution must be fought against such a false reality to create or restore a better world" (62). It is a seductively believable idea and falls into easy line with Dick's 1960s-1970s stories that depict our perceived reality as a prison and our brains colonized by untruths and false beliefs. Higgins points out that Dick has been one of the preeminent creative minds of the genre in projecting the idea of a false reality obscuring the truth—neither Higgins nor we would blame Dick for the disastrous social situation that can arise from this (we've all been forced to bear witness to the Trumpian and right-wing strategies of discarding troublesome and inconvenient realities in favor of desired outcomes), but the seductiveness of the idea clearly has influence on today's alt-right, and its science fictional groundings therefore deserve analysis and consideration. More specifically in this chapter, Higgins uses Dick's alternate history classic *The Man in the High Castle* (1962, itself a story of a false reality within a larger truth) to explore the ambivalent tensions in reverse colonization texts between imperial critique (the dissection of imperial morality) and imperial masochism: these texts at once "ask audiences to identify with victims, yet they can also enable audiences to identify as victims" (69). The book does good work in encouraging its readers to sympathize with victims worldwide of oppression and injustice, but as Higgins explicates, it also fortifies feelings of imperial masochism by "inviting privileged male subjects to identify as victims struggling against internal and external domination" (ibid). *Castle* demonstrates that reverse colonization narratives often operate within a "contested imaginative terrain" (ibid) in which imperial masochisms can be both enabled or dismantled, which, of course, reinforces the complexity of texts and the foolhardiness of identifying singular interpretations.

False realities and mental prisons become real prisons in Higgins's exploration of both the cult television show *The Prisoner* (1967-1968) and Thomas M. Disch's 1969 literary adaptation of the series. *The Prisoner*, of course, is rooted in the concept of the integrity of the resisting individual standing against an all-encompassing system, and it is famous for championing free will over the oppression and conformity of social life. But Higgins makes the interesting argument that the show can also be read as a "carceral reverse colonization fantasy" (99), a work centered on the fantasy of an elite white male whose self-possession signifies a moral and emotional center

invulnerable to lies or societal violation, and which promotes the secessionist dream of withdrawal (that, sadly, lies at the heart of much alt-right discourse). These types of carceral fantasies (including both Disch's *Prisoner* and his 1968 novel *Camp Concentration*, also touched on here) "encourage and enable identification with imprisoned subjects and give force to liberatory, anti-imperial sentiments – for good or for ill" (123). Again we see the potential for texts to serve either (or multiple, to expand past the binary) sides in social and political rhetoric, strategy, and worldviews.

The next chapter is particularly thought-provoking in its focus on and creative use of the metaphor of entropy, sparked here by the idea among some commentators that pro-Brexit voters were motivated by the fears of "social entropy"; that is, the science fictional notion that the United Kingdom under the European Union and the continuing forces of globalization faced inevitable and approaching "heat death" (126): the destruction of everything that makes Britain *Britain*. Worries over this entropy drove the actions of nationalists and reactionaries to escape the prison of European control in favor of an 'independent' UK. Entropy is a central theme for many New Wave writers, and as a metaphor for the inevitable disintegration of empire it is key, says Higgins, to the early work of British New Wave writers J.G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock. Certainly Ballard and Moorcock are not fans of an inherently unjust and stratified British Empire, but Higgins presents their work as marking "the decline of empire with profoundly mixed feelings, because for them, empire frequently embodies the apex of civilization and human aspiration striving against entropy, decay, darkness, and savagery" (128). It's certainly an interesting take, especially when one considers, say, the liberal and anti-establishment views of Moorcock, but Higgins makes a thoughtful case that both he and Ballard are writing reverse colonization stories that both attack the imperial idea while at the same moment "framing imperial elites as tragic and helpless victims of entropic decline" (128). Both authors use the inevitability of erosion and destruction to strike a fatalistic tone that sees empire's fall less as a good in itself and something that can be manipulated to serve the underserved, and more as a troubling, regrettable and universal phenomenon that erases the great as well as the small and which inflicts a complete lack of agency on imperial participants. (The chapter ends on a more complex note by analyzing two *New Worlds* pieces—one fiction, one non—by David Harvey that complicate the notion of entropy and its more simplistic conceptions by some authors.)

Higgins concludes his study of texts with a look at Samuel R. Delany's post-apocalyptic trilogy *The Fall of the Towers* (1963-1965) and its concern with the significance of objective information. Higgins describes Delany's characters across the three books as "colonized prisoner-victims trapped in lies and illusions that exist to perpetuate imperial wars" (187), who must ultimately be liberated by an exposure to truth and the breadth of vital information. In doing so, victims' consciousnesses are raised to a point where they may accurately engage with the accepted fantasies that power oppressive imperial systems and overcome them. The imperial project, built on lies and preconceptions, is too large for any one person to overturn, and none of Delany's individual characters can apprehend the bigger picture, but a collective effort, a "difficult, tentative,

and uncertain exploration of the world's true complexity that must be undertaken despite the fact that perfect, ultimate knowledge will always, by necessity, remain forever out of reach" (188).

A commitment to an awareness of complex and objective truths is necessary, Delany argues, to obviating imperial exploitation, which can only occur because victims alone are too small to see how that exploitation functions. But that awareness must be tempered by the irreducibility of subjective experience. In this, Higgins sees Delany as a valuable corrective to an irreconcilable "opposition between modern and postmodern ideals of political consciousness. He therefore offers a much-needed model for what cognitive justice might look like in a post-truth era" (167). As an antidote to the simplification of empire, Delany provides a reverse colonization narrative that can be an effective imperial critique, on the grounds that the "more a reverse colonization narrative refuses to simplify empire and explores the complexities of imperialism in a thoughtful manner, the less traction such a narrative offers for misappropriation in service of imperial masochism" (167).

Higgins's book is a valuable and important study, indeed, crucial in this time when science fictional ideas and narratives are worryingly turned to malignant purposes, many of them inspired by harmful imperial fantasies. As he notes, "I still believe that science fiction has a powerful capacity to function as a critical literature of empire...science fiction, I argue now, almost always takes empire as its central subject, but whether a given narrative perpetuates or challenges imperial discourse and practice (or does both simultaneously) depends very much on that particular narrative and the context of its production and reception" (200). Certainly he has made that clear in this volume. Although for the good of our relations with one another it is vital that narratives exist which provoke empathy in readers by letting them see through the eyes of others, it is equally important to realize that the possibility for harmful, destructive, even murderous misinterpretations of that enterprise exist. Such are the social complexities of the genre we all love.

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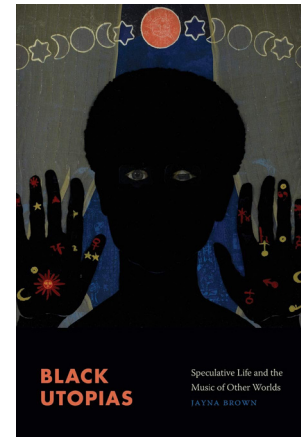
### *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*, by Jayna Brown



John Rieder

Jayna Brown. *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*. Duke UP, 2021. Paperback. 224 pg. \$25.95. ISBN 9781478011675. Ebook ISBN 9781478021230.

Jayna Brown introduces her argument in *Black Utopias* with a short, moving section about her father, who was a poet, a Black Panther, a political exile, then a prisoner in the US, and finally, after his release, a self-proclaimed prophet in communication about the coming final days with a spirit named Golden Ray. Brown writes that struggling with what she considered her father's psychosis led her to ask questions about where one can draw the line between vision and madness. Perhaps, she wondered, one ought to listen more carefully to "mad souls." The project of *Black Utopias* "is a way of residing in spaces of ambiguity" where the line between madness and prophetic vision cannot be confidently drawn (5). It is very worthwhile to follow her lead into exploring that uncanny space in this innovative, well-researched piece of scholarship.



Brown "use[s] the term *utopia* to signal the (im)possibilities for forms of subjectivity outside a recognizable ontological framework, and modes of existence conceived of in unfamiliar epistemes" (6). This is a very particular, narrow sense of what Lyman Tower Sargent, in one of the most widely cited essays in utopian studies, calls "the broad, general phenomenon of utopianism." Sargent defines utopianism as "social dreaming—the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (Sargent 4). But the envisioning of radically different societies in, for example, the Back to Africa movement or Martin Luther King's non-violent protest, or implied by the critical dystopian features of Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) or George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), are not part of the genealogy of black radicalism Brown constructs in this volume. Indeed the Harlem Renaissance is completely absent from Brown's essay, and Black nationalism is explicitly excluded from Brown's notion of utopianism because it seeks for recognition within the political and epistemological framework of white hegemony. Instead, says Brown, "the art and practices I consider involve a *radical refusal* of the terms by which selfhood and subjectivity are widely used and understood" (8). Brown wants to "redefine what the very term *radical* means" (26).

The version of radicalism that Brown delineates is indeed a stark departure from most received leftist, and especially Marxist, notions. She rejects dialectical thinking, which according to her remains inscribed within hierarchical practices that exclude black subjects from full participation in the category of the human. Nor are her radicals materialists in the scientific sense common to Enlightenment thought in general and most leftist critical theory in particular. Instead they embrace spiritualism and mysticism. Rather than rejecting life after death as an ideological soporific, they discover “radical forms of selfhood . . . produced in dream states, spirit, and temporal impulses not fettered by the cycle of life and death” (25). For the nineteenth century black woman preachers whose careers Brown describes, “The claim to life after death, while coded in the language of Christian belief, is a profoundly political claim by the living that they cannot ever truly be killed, enabling them to claim the space between life and death as another dimension of consciousness” (51). For jazz musician and poet Sun Ra, the subject of Brown’s final chapter, civil rights activism was an illusory project because the only way to achieve peace and equality was to be dead. Therefore Ra often enjoined members of his audiences to “give up your death for me.”

The key category for Brown’s redefinition of radicalism is the human. Her version of radicalism does not follow Marxist tradition or black nationalism in defining the goal of revolutionary activism as the seizure of state power, and it equally rejects civil rights protest’s goal of attaining equal treatment within the legal structure of state power. Brown’s radicals instead pursue something rooted in being itself, a sense of selfhood attainable only through “a complete break with time as we know it—an entirely new paradigm” (8). She argues that “black people’s existence is mythological in the first place. We don’t really exist, according to the logic of the human” (4). Readers familiar with the 1974 film *Space Is the Place* starring Sun Ra will surely hear echoes here of Ra’s film-opening declaration that time has officially ended, and of the speech Ra makes to a group of Oakland teenagers who challenge the outlandishly costumed musician whether he is for real. Ra replies: “I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. . . . I do not come to you as a reality; I come to you as a myth. Because that’s what black people are, myths.” What Brown adds to Ra’s position is an argument “that because black people have been excluded from the category human, we have a particular epistemic and ontological mobility” (7). There is “real power to be found in such an untethered state” because “those of us who are dislocated on the planet are perfectly positioned to break open the stubborn epistemological logics of human domination” (7). Brown accordingly places Sun Ra within a genealogy of black visionary radicalism that stretches back to the nineteenth century preachers Sojourner Truth, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Jarena Lee, and Zilpha Elaw, includes fellow mystic and jazz artist Alice Coltrane, and looks forward from them to the science fictional writing of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler.

As the inclusion of preachers at one end of this history and writers of fiction at the other indicates, it is not music or any other sort of artistic form that unites these figures, but rather notions of the self and practices of community. It is the ritualistic, immersive character of Alice Coltrane’s and Sun Ra’s performances that primarily attracts Brown’s attention, rather than their

innovations in the form of jazz (and both musicians could certainly afford rich material for a more formal approach). Brown says of Coltrane that her “mix of praise singing from the black Christian church, jazz, and Hindu worship songs” adds up to “a utopian practice of attunement with an infinite universe of aural vibratory phenomena” (60). Tellingly, Brown refers not to Coltrane’s audience here but to her “congregation.” Brown’s emphasis in the chapter on the four women preachers is less on any doctrinal position or rhetorical strategy than on their common investment and participation in alternative, non-heteronormative forms of community. Brown insists that the apolitical, otherworldly turn of the preachers and the musicians “also includes the concrete: the creation of community. Like Rebecca Cox Jackson’s Shaker community, Alice’s model could be considered escapist. But escape is an important trope in African American culture” (80). (Cf. Sun Ra: “If you find earth boring / Just the same old same thing / Come on and join us / At Outerspaceways Incorporated.”)

Brown’s chapters on Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany are similarly focused on the way some of their fiction envisions forms of community. Her approach to Butler’s Parable series and Delany’s *Triton* (1976) shows little or no interest in literary devices such as plot or point of view or style. The focus in the Butler chapter is on the protagonist Olamina’s religious ideas for their own sake, not for the way they function within a literary fiction, and the same is mostly true for her attention to the setting of Delany’s *Triton*. For scholars of science fiction, perhaps the most pertinent aspect of her reading of Butler is her insistence, against what she calls a hagiographic tendency in Butler scholarship, on the “complexities and contradictions” introduced into Butler’s work “by a particularly grim version of Darwinism” that jostles uncomfortably alongside “biological forms of cooperation, symbiosis, and commensality” (84). For Brown, the utopian experiment that Olamina launches in the Parable novels remains heteronormative and deeply humanist—which are not, for Brown, good things. Finally, “the extent to which the texts can imagine evolutionary possibility is held back by a concept of change beholden to heteronormative ideas of a biological imperative” (107). Brown’s argument has the considerable merit of emphasizing a set of issues within Butler’s work that is perhaps too often skirted or treated apologetically.

The pages Brown devotes to the nonfictional utopian writing of H. G. Wells are even more firmly set against critical evasion of what is problematic and disturbing in Wells’s writing. Brown argues that Wells “is revered as a foundational figure in science fiction while his frightening and horrific eugenicist ideas are ignored or minimized” (116). Within the structure of Brown’s argument, Wells acts mostly as a foil to help introduce an analysis of the way Delany “explores the malleability of biological matter and frees it from normative determination” (127) in *Babel-17* (1966) and *The Einstein Intersection* (1967). One of the main foci of Brown’s reading of Delany is his treatment of desire, which, she says, Delany does not take in a Hegelian or Lacanian sense as something rooted in negation or lack, but rather in Deleuzian terms as “a productive and generative activity” (138). The point is the way this alters conceptions of the subject and the dependence of subject formation on relationality. This is the place in Brown’s argument that relies

most strongly and productively on queer theory, asserting that “transgender and transsexuality theories” show the way to “relaxation of the need for set and fixed gender and sexual identities and the embrace of fluid and expansive modes of being” (138).

Brown’s final chapter is devoted to the person who seems to me to preside over the entire argument, Sun Ra. True to her approach to Butler, Brown avoids turning her analysis into a hagiography, facing squarely up to the authoritarianism of Ra’s band leadership. But she is more interested—and rightly so—in the way that “the homosocial space of the Ra houses was not modeled on that of a heterosexual family or compound of families. While they were based in discipline, they were not based in hierarchical rank or competition” (162). This kind of noncompetitive, nonmasculinist organization of the jazz orchestra runs counter to dominant practices of the music then and now, but for Brown it is more important that it is based on challenging the notion of the possessive individual and all that comes with it. In her reading of Sun Ra, Brown achieves the clearest enunciation of her profoundly non-Althusserian version of antihumanism. “For Ra,” she says, “being human is a state of ignorance and not a status we should be fighting for. . . . Black people have to let go of the idea of the human, which Ra sees as inseparable from the liberal terms that have defined it. . . . Ra’s call is not for a new genre of the human but a new genre of *existence*” (172-73).

Whether Brown’s intervention into utopianism, black intellectual history, and the genealogy and significance of Afrofuturism will end up being judged boldly iconoclastic or merely interestingly idiosyncratic I do not presume to be able to say. But I can say with absolute certainty that I learned a lot from this book, and that I found it a fascinating and pleasurable read.

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**John Rieder**, an emeritus professor of English at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, was the recipient of the SFRA Innovative Research Award in 2011 and the SFRA Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019. He is the author of *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan UP, 2008), *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Wesleyan UP, 2017), and *Speculative Epistemologies: An Eccentric Account of SF from the 1960s to the Present* (Liverpool UP, 2021). He has served on the editorial board of *Extrapolation* since 2010.

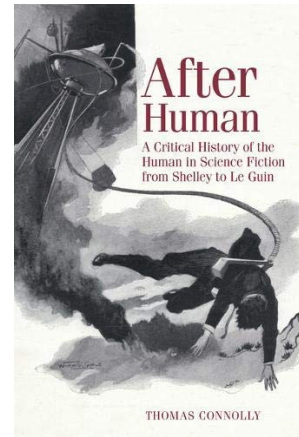
### *After Human: A Critical History of the Human in Science Fiction from Shelley to Le Guin*, by Thomas Connolly



Lars Schmeink

Thomas Connolly. *After Human: A Critical History of the Human in Science Fiction from Shelley to Le Guin*. Liverpool UP, 2021. Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies 69. Hardcover. 240 pg. \$119.15. ISBN 9781800348165.

Looking at critical theory as the body of work that defines our toolset as literary critics, in science fiction (sf) especially, one cannot but notice the dominant position that posthumanism has taken on ever since its rise to prominence in the 1980s. Donna J. Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) belongs into the category of must-reads for any sf scholar and its ripple effect into our field cannot be overstated. And given its timing, coinciding with the emergence of cyberpunk as a central mode of sf, it is no wonder that posthumanist readings have grown from there, proliferating in contemporary sf studies. But, as Thomas Foster has pointed out so aptly, cyberpunk is not the literary "vanguard of a posthumanism assumed to be revolutionary in itself" (xiii). Instead, it is a multiplier of posthumanism, a prism that changes the theory and allows it to take diverse forms.



But what comes out as a variety of posthumanisms must have gone into this prism at some point. It is this realization that feeds Thomas Connolly's study *After Human*, that much sf before the posthumanist turn must address these issues somehow, that "even the most avowedly humanist text raises posthumanist concerns" (20). Connolly argues that in its discussion of human interaction with technology and nature, historical text of sf will reveal their concern for posthumanist issues. He sees the 'post' of posthumanism as a feature within humanism itself, an admittance of "the constructed nature of human experiences of the world" (20). His study is, consequently, a critical history of sf texts that foreground human interaction, not with the inhuman (however that may be), but with technology and nature, and with other humans.

Connolly then proceeds to explore the humanist-posthumanist spectrum and the ontological modes associated with it in the history of sf through four chapters, each detailing a specific period of writing. Starting with 19th century proto-sf in the works of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, Connolly sets up a comparison of the depiction of primitive pre-humanity in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, which contrasts with the humanist view of self-realization and centeredness. In the next chapter, on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and E.E. Smith's Skylark series, Connolly then moves on to the relation of the

human and technology, shifting the mirror from primitive pre-humanity towards a technologized trans-humanity. Here, more clearly than with the humanist-oriented narratives of the turn of the century, two distinct lines emerge: one that sees humanity “rendered powerless by technological systems beyond their control” and one that argues for a “utopic image of human self-actualization, evincing ever-greater technological control over the material world” (109).

In the 1950s, Connolly argues, a similar duality can be found not in a technological trans-humanity but in an evolved supra-humanity, which he explores in Isaac Asimov’s Foundation-series and Arthur C. Clarke’s *The City and the Stars*. Finally, in the 1970s, Connolly shifts from trans- or supra-humanity to a true post-humanity, in discussing the utopian project of J.G. Ballard’s *The Crystal World* and Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*. All of the chapters analyze works that attempt to engage with new positions of the human, in developing with technological progress, in challenging the idea of individualism, or in decentering the human. But, as Connolly makes clear, many retreat back into their more humanist positions, not following through with fully embracing the posthumanism that they tease out. In his conclusion, Connolly sees these stories as positioned in a framework of how the non-human is approached, either “assimilative” (192) in that the human enfolds the non-human cognitively or culturally, or “transformative” (193) in that human cultural frames are challenged and changed. His analysis places the historical works discussed in this framework, thus allowing scholars of posthumanism to see the theoretical trajectories of the categories.

*After Human* thus cleverly uses the posthumanist scaffolding to re-read traditional science fiction and excavate positions of the human within it, tracing the development of posthumanist positions up to the 1980s. For those scholars interested to treat posthumanism not as a given of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but as a development of the humanism and anti-humanism that came before, Connolly’s book is a valuable resource explaining the lines of thought in sf that have led up to, for example, the cyberpunk multiplication of posthumanism. *After Human* will help ground current work in contemporary posthumanist criticism by providing a historical perspective.

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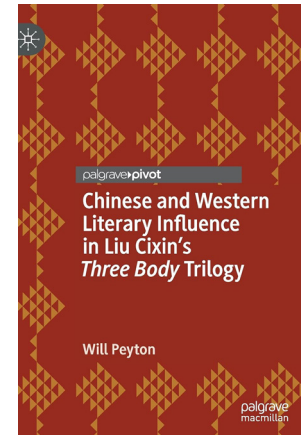
*Chinese and Western Influence in Liu Cixin's Three Body Trilogy,*  
by Will Peyton



Jerome Winter

Peyton, Will. *Chinese and Western Influence in Liu Cixin's Three Body Trilogy*. Palgrave Studies in Global Science Fiction. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 161 pg. \$54.99. ISBN 978-3030793142.

When the English translation of Liu Cixin's *Three Body Problem* won the Hugo Award in 2015, the moment was widely hailed in the Western news media as the global emergence of 'Chinese science fiction.' To what extent was that coverage merely a convenient marketing label? In this book-length inquiry into the eclectic influences of Western and Chinese literature on the *Three Body* Trilogy, Liu Cixin-scholar Will Peyton suggests the writer's interest in what the literary critic C. T. Hsia has called writing tinged by culturally distinctive 'Chinese characteristics' has been overstated; likewise, Peyton contends that in general the Sino-affiliated work typically grouped as Chinese SF (*kehuan xiaoshuo*) developed not simply independently from Western influence but in an extensive and dynamic dialogue with a wide variety of non-Chinese SF. Hence in this way Peyton advocates for understanding the *Three Body* Trilogy as a fascinating entry into the broad, cross-pollinating phenomenon popularly known as global SF: "Liu Cixin, like many contemporary Chinese authors, consciously views himself in a lineal relationship with translated Western writers, often making marginal reference to native Chinese fiction" (18).



Another controversial and complicated issue this book weighs in on is the precise political valences of Liu Cixin's work and specifically that of the *Three Body* Trilogy. As now plastered on his Wikipedia page, in June 2019, Liu Cixin, in a profile-interview for the *New Yorker*, parroted the standpoint discredited by Western observers and promoted as the official position of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that the mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang is justified to preempt future terrorist attacks. Peyton does not merely condemn the Chinese writer from the cosmopolitan distance of the Western intelligentsia, as so many glib commentators have done; oppositely, and more subtly, Peyton also specifically refuses to argue that Liu Cixin critiques the political unconscious of 'soft power' implicit in endorsing a distinctive brand of politically flexible Chinese science fiction against the dubiously universalized stipulations of human-rights rhetoric (thus eluding a well-flogged whipping post typified by the anti-China sentiment of certain U.S. Republican senators opposed to Netflix's in-development adaptation of *The Three Body Problem*). Instead, Peyton more productively historicizes Liu Cixin's dystopian political "fatalism" as evincing

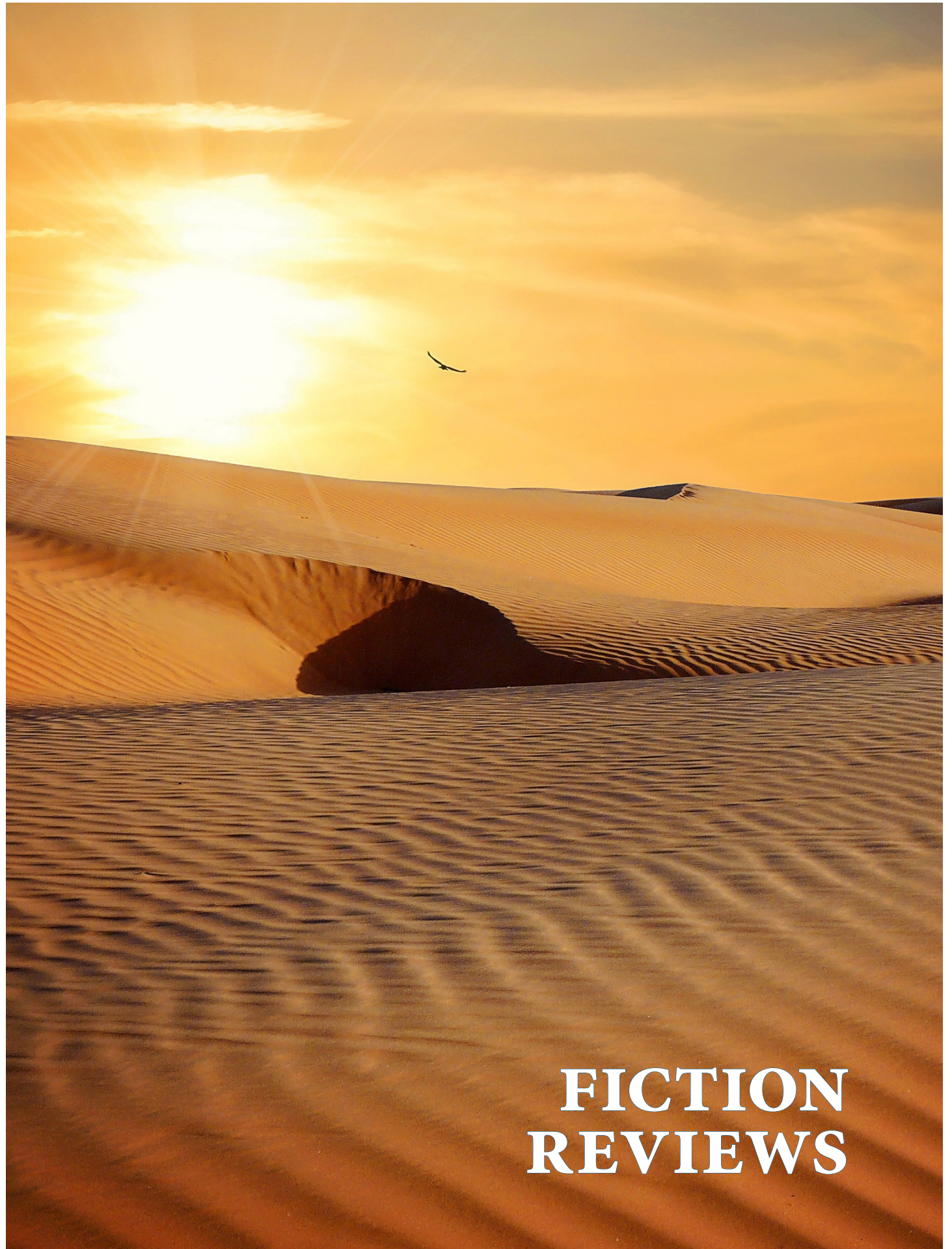
a shrewd “ambivalence towards defining or engaging with discussion of political progress” (139) very much in strategic consonance with the ideological messages emanating from the PRC.

The argument of the book flows from such concretely historicizing moves. The second chapter delineates Liu Cixin’s critical assays against the anthropocentric narcissism of modern literature. The chapter performs a close reading of the virtual-reality simulations depicted in the *Three Body Problem* as vividly representing a putatively neutral scientism indicative of Western-influenced, post-Mao Chinese literature. The third chapter explicates the impact of the Early Modern writings of Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella as well as Darwinian thought on Liu Cixin, Chinese SF, and the *Three Body Trilogy*. Its specific argument is that the cosmic sociology of the trilogy fuses these utopian traditions with a contemporary scientism influenced by Western thinkers such as Peter Singer and Richard Dawkins. The fourth chapter analyzes specifically *The Dark Forest* (2008) and *Death’s End* (2010) for their evocation of a broad Shakespearean humanism. The fifth chapter frames Liu Cixin in terms of the discrepant flavors of historical realism rendered by Arthur C. Clarke and Herman Wouk. The fifth chapter discusses the classic dystopias by George Orwell, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and Aldous Huxley to limn the ethical relativity of Liu Cixin’s dystopian space opera and its glimmers of utopian scientism. The seventh chapter contextualizes Liu Cixin’s fiction as a mature outgrowth of Chinese youth fiction of the Cultural Revolution. The eighth chapter concerns the technologically utopian bent of both Liu Cixin’s trilogy and Chinese science fiction more broadly, and the ninth chapter traces the fatalism toward progress in Liu Cixin’s work to competing strands of Confucian and Daoist political thought. This last chapter includes a cursory conflation, by way of Karl Popper, of the sheer multiplicity of rigorous critical theory that can be swept under the banner of “Marxist historicism” (131) with the doctrinaire propaganda of the Maoist Cultural Revolution and therefore seemed tendentious to this reader.

All in all, though, this book greatly appeals to readers and scholars of science fiction, Chinese literature, translation studies, global studies, as well as those interested in close readings of Liu Cixin’s seminal trilogy in light of its historical and literary context.

**Jerome Winter**, PhD, is a full-time continuing lecturer at the University of California, Riverside. His first book, *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism*, was published by the University of Wales Press as part of their New Dimensions in Science Fiction series. His second book, *Citizen Science Fiction*, was published in 2021. His scholarship has appeared in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, *Extrapolation*, *JFA*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Foundation*, *SFRA Review*, and *Science Fiction Studies*.





# FICTION REVIEWS

### Review of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, by Becky Chambers

Brianna Best



Chambers, Becky. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. Tor Books, 2021..

*A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, published by Tor, arrived in the hands of readers in 2021. Becky Chambers' first foray into softer sci-fi, *Psalm* speaks to both readers' need for comfort in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and our alienation from the structures of "normal" daily life. *Psalm for the Wild-Built* offers a vision of what a different kind of life might look like. Sitting at the junction of science fiction and fantasy, the novella asks important questions about what a future built on sustainability and care might look like.

*Psalm for the Wild-Built* takes its audience on a journey into the far future, after an event called the "Awakening." The "Factory Age" has long collapsed and the world that emerges from the rubble is one in which humans strive, as much as they can, to allow the natural world to heal from the damaging effects of the past. In the catalyst to this worldview shift, the Awakening, robots gained sentience. Offered the choice to stay or to create their own society, the robots decided to go off into the forest "so that we may observe that which has no design—the untouched wilderness" (2).

We follow two characters. Dex is a nonbinary monk whose job it is to travel from village to village to offer tea service; feeling that something is missing from their life, they decide to travel off the well-worn paths of Panga—their world—to an old hermitage ruin. On the road, the robot Mosschap walks out of the forest to introduce itself.

When they meet, Mosschap reveals it has been sent on a mission by the robot community to answer the question "What do humans need?" It offers Dex an exchange: Mosschap will help Dex get to the hermitage ruins and in return, Dex will teach it all about human customs and culture. The book follows this meeting of first contact between robot and human and examines the unlikely yet tender friendship that forms between the two. Both must answer questions that get to the heart of being in the world: what do humans need? And, for Dex at least, what makes a life fulfilling and driven by purpose? As the series continues, these questions become inextricably tangled together.



*Psalm for the Wild-Built* explores speculative fiction's role in addressing our political and climate crises: how might the future look if we manage to survive? What can we build from the ruins? And how might speculative fiction build worlds to strive for?

*Psalm for the Wild-Built* draws on a recent trend in speculative fiction that focuses not on the future of technology or space travel but rather on the ecological consequences of decades of striving toward these things. The culture created by Chambers in the novella does not rely on technology; it avoids the trap of declaring technology itself as the root of all past evil and exploitation. For instance, *Psalm* takes seriously the question of artificial intelligence, though perhaps it would be better to call it "mechanical consciousness." My preference here lies in the distinction between "intelligence" and "consciousness." Will Douglas Heaven writes for the *MIT Technology Review* that "intelligence is about doing, while consciousness is about being" (Heaven). The decision made to go out and observe the untouched wilderness exemplifies what it means to be concerned with being rather than doing. And I opt for "mechanical" in place of "artificial" because artificial implies an opposing "natural." "Mechanical" represents the vessel of Mosschap's consciousness, its mechanical body, without having to imply that its consciousness is unnatural next to Dex's. Chambers imagines a world where humans exist only as one part of a vast network of both human and non-human species that work collaboratively toward all their survival.

What seems maybe the most significant about this book is the tenor of its emotion. The world-building is idealistic. Everyone in this world has food and shelter. Money does not exist anymore. The preservation of animal life and the environment is the top priority on Panga. And people are nice. For some readers this is a weakness of the text. Talking to a friend of mine recently, I was surprised by his critique of the idealism in the novella.

I am reminded of conversations that I have had over the past few years concerning the idea that any sort of belief in the inherent goodness of things is naive and therefore escapist or unrealistic. This is not just a conversation in Science Fiction Studies, but I am reminded here of Suvin's distinction between science fiction, which often has important conversation about ethics and society, and fantasy, which offered only escapism from society. But I am wary of the idea, too, that sincerity and escapism do not have a place as useful rhetorical modes in literature or that they are inherently uncritical. The low stakes of the novella may not draw some readers in, but for me they provide almost a meditative refuge in the act of reading--a moment of leisure that provides an escape from the seemingly never-ending drive to work and produce work.

And the novella does offer some concrete ideas about building a sustainable future that we might test against our current everyday experiences. The novel asks important questions about how science fiction can respond to the crisis of climate change and late capitalism without resorting to the same types of liberal humanist ideals about progress that got us here in the first place. The novel also imagines a world that is delightfully queer and accepting. Even if it may seem too good to be true, *Psalm for the Wild-Built* offers a mode of speculation that allows us, while reading, to exist in a world that we might one day wish to create for ourselves.

FICTION REVIEWS  
A Psalm for the Wild-Built

I am planning on teaching this text in the fall 2023 semester in a class designed to look at how recent speculative fiction imagines possible futures. I am pairing this text and Catherynne M. Valente's novella *The Past is Red* because they offer two distinct ideas of what the future may hold. *The Past is Red* offers what might be considered the "more realistic" version of the future we are headed towards—a planet full of garbage and ruin and greed. *Psalm for the Wild-Built*, on the other hand, offers a world in which the impulse to care for each other and live sustainably becomes the dominant way of life. Is this naive? Or do such imaginings of worlds enable us to realize that they might also be possible for us?

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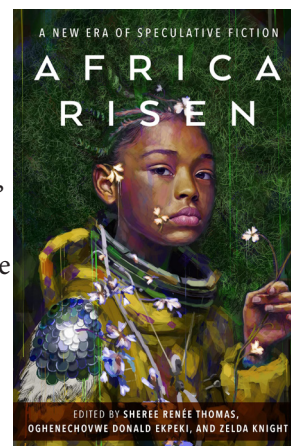
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### Review of *Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction*, edited by Sheree Renee Thomas, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight



Jeremy Brett

Thomas, Sheree Renee, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight, eds. *Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction*. Tordotcom, 2022.



The increasing exposure to the Western world of narrative traditions, subjects, and cultures outside its traditional worldview is one of the brightest trends in science fiction and fantasy today. These traditions have always existed and been a part of the human penchant for storytelling, of course, but for so long they remained, at best, occasional adjuncts by most readers and critics to the “standard” literary products of the Western sf/f traditions. However, African and Afro-Diasporan creators are moving more and more to the forefront, thanks in large part to recent collections such as Sheree Renee Thomas’ pioneering *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000) and its follow-up *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2005), Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall’s *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond* (2013), Nisi Shawl’s World Fantasy Award and BFA-winning *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color* (2019, 2023), Zelda Knight and Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki’s BFA-winning *Dominion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora* (2020), and so many others; to newer online venues like *FIYAH Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction*; and Black-led publishing ventures such as MVmedia. Writers from Africa and the African Diaspora such as Ekpeki, Nnedi Okorofor, Tade Thompson, Tochi Onyebuchi, Sofia Samatar, Wole Talabi, Tloto Tsamaase, Eugen Bacon, and Namwali Serpell exponentially enrich the experience of encountering sf/f.

So, then, the arrival of *Africa Risen* is less unprecedented and more another reminder—expressed as a wildly varied package of beautifully created content—that African and Afro-Diasporan voices demand and deserve wider exposure as well as a greater portion of sf readers’ and publishers’ attention, that there have always been multiple, not to say infinite, creative possibilities for examining our shared human future, and that African speculative fiction is, in fact, here and has always been with us. As the editors note in the collection’s introduction, “[r]emember that this is a movement rather than a moment, a promising creative burgeoning. Because Africa isn’t rising - it’s already here” (4). The book presents its readers with thirty-two highly individual

visions of where African sf is going, not limited by age, or gender, or national borders, or life experience. In doing so, the editors have produced a work that provides an impressive and multifaceted introduction for new readers looking to explore those aforementioned creative possibilities, and if, in the process, African and Afro-Diasporan speculative fiction can achieve wider ranges of reader attention and enthusiasm, that is truly all to the good and bodes well for future instances of creative richness in the genre.

Certainly, no readable review of any collection can provide detailed descriptions of every story in it, so I restrict myself here to highlighting several of the ones I think are the most interesting (well-written is not the defining factor here, since all the stories contained therein are worthy of praise for their style and writing quality—a tribute not only to the writers themselves but to the collection's editors for their judicious powers of content selection). Several of the stories involve intimate connections with the electronic world: Steven Barnes' "IRL" has particular value in these days of increased online presences, in its story of young Shango, who spends much of his time in the Void (a virtual Earth of fantasy kingdoms where ordinary people can exercise outsized, dramatic influence on their fellows) but who ultimately manipulates that fantasy world to affect his real emotional and financial existences. With "A Dream of Electric Mothers," Wole Talabi gives us a future Oyo State where governance is directed by the collective memory of generations of ancestors preserved in a national data server and accessed through induced REM sleep. The story is a beautiful meditation on the power of memory and the advantageous necessity of political consensus. In Ada Nnadi's lively and humorous "Hanfo Driver," the beleaguered Fidelis, grubbing for freelance employment in Lagos, finds himself roped into his friend Oga Dayo's latest scheme and driving a hoverbus of dubious condition through Lagos traffic. In a story of much grander scale, "Biscuit & Milk" by Dare Segun Falowo relates the chronicle of a pan-African ship fleeing into space to escape a dying Earth, finding instead a long journey of deep struggle and new definitions of home. And the collection's opening tale, "The Blue House" by Dilman Dila, skillfully charts an artificial person working through the central human question of identity.

A number of the stories here concern the struggles of the ordinary or the small, in worlds both fantastical and futuristic. Many of these stories see people grappling with particular issues of social, economic, or political injustice. In Tananarive Due's heartwrenching story "Ghost Ship," the sadly relevant issue of the exploitation of migrants is spotlighted in the tale of Florida, an American expatriate obliged by her crushing debts to smuggle a mysterious cargo by sea from South Africa to the United States (a dystopian US in which millions of nonwhites have fled to avoid racism and police violence). The dark evil of American racism is noted in another story, "Ruler of the Rear Guard" by Maurice Broaddus, concerning American student Sylvonne, who flees the horrors of her home country for a Ghana that has led the way towards welcoming home the people of the African Diaspora. Resistance to hatred and unjust power is seen in tales as disparate as WC Dunlap's "March Magic," which sees a group of righteous witches coming together with soul magic to bring dreams of racial progress into reality; Joshua Uchenna Omenga's fabulistic folktale "The Deification of Igodo," where a brutal ruler seeking to become a god faces deserved and dire

consequences from divine entities; Tobias S. Buckell's "The Sugar Mill," where centuries of white injustices have soaked the land with ghosts and angry memories; "Mami Wataworks" by Russell Nichols, a tale of a terrible future in which increasingly scarce water becomes a weapon that the powerful use to hold down the ordinary and the innocent, but which is poised for radical change via the intelligence and creativity of clever Amaya; and Tlotlo Tsamasse's visceral, searing "Peeling Time (Deluxe Edition)," which strikes a blow against the objectification and easy disposal of women in our human society, where trauma and toxic masculinity take on monstrous forms.

Beauty and the intensity of life and human existence abound throughout the collection, in stories of spaceships, spirits, and bodily transformations. The sheer variety and scope, combined with the geographical and cultural diversities on display, give a real richness to *Africa Risen* that makes it an excellent introduction for both scholars and casual readers of African and Afro-Diasporan traditions and demonstrates (though of course no proof is actually required) the robustness of the A + A-D speculative presence.

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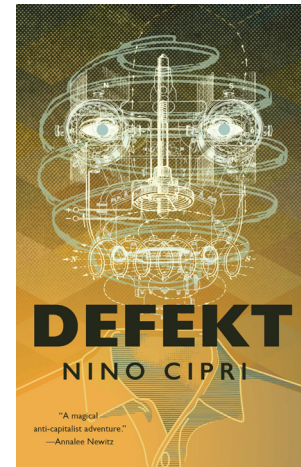
### Review of *Defekt*, by Nino Cipri

Yimin Xu



Cipri, Nino. *Defekt*. Tor Books, 2021.

Nino Cipri is a queer and trans/nonbinary writer and editor. They are a graduate of the Clarion Writing Workshop and the University of Kansas's MFA program. They are the author of the award-winning debut fiction collection *Homesick* (2019) and the novella *Finna* (2020). Cipri's *Defekt* is a winner of the British Fantasy Award. The narration takes place in an unknown time in a fictional corporate group, LitenVärld, an interesting Swedish name that means "little world" in English. As the narration reveals, the protagonist, Derek, is a humanoid working machine (Cipri's narration does not specify Derek's species) and the most loyal employee for LitenVärld. However, Derek's diligent working schedule is interrupted one day when he suffers from concerning physical conditions: a nose bleed and bloody cough.



This marks an ironic narrative turn, for one would assume a working machine will not suffer from physical weakness, which in return, foreshadows the company's overwhelming exploitation of its employees. But more ironic is that only by then is Derek informed that LitenVärld employees are entitled to sick leave. Thus, he asks for one day off; yet, unbeknownst to him, this single off day invites troubles with the company, in that his manager refuses to believe his reason for being absent and calls his loyalty into question.

Therefore, after returning to work, Derek is tasked with one special obligation: to eliminate the defects or "defekta" from other pocket universes. It is through the demystification of defekta and of pocket universes that we can catch a shivering insight into the company's exploitative supply chains. Through blackholes, LitenVärld opens portals to other, smaller universes with cheaper labor – hence, pocket universes – and delivers requested products back to LitenVärld for assembly. However, when requested products go through blackholes, there is a chance of mutation owing to gravitational pulls, so that these lifeless products may be transformed "into animate, murderous, mutant furniture. Corporate calls them defectives, or defekta in Swedish" (74).

Here, behind the seemingly science-fictional motifs in his narration—black holes and animated objects—what the author presents to us is rather a realistic concern about modern-day globalization, rooted in Marxist political-economic insight concerning the estrangement of labor:



This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces—labor’s product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.” (40)

To Marx, private ownership of production material produces the alienization of labor, in that under the capitalist mode of production, a worker is separated from his/her/their own products. In the era of globalization, this estrangement is furthered by geo-economic distances between developing countries where products are manufactured, and developed countries that claim most profits from production. Similarly, in the narration, Cipri manages to re-represent such an alienating process through a shift of locus from the pocket universes to the major universe containing LitenVärld.

Moreover, the estrangement of labor results in the deprivation of a worker’s significance, in that Marx argues that “man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.” (42). In the novel, this alienized human nature manifests itself first and foremost in the protagonist’s inhuman identity as a human-made working machine and further in his loss of self-identification outside of his position at LitenVärld: “He always felt naked without his uniform, and the feeling was more acute with mirror was coming in handy” (21-22).

To Marx, the solution to this lies in the class struggle between the bourgeois and proletarians, led by a collective entity of the working class, the Communist Party in his *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Cipri conducts an inward, but perhaps not less violent, search for such a solution. In particular, in the nightly inventory shift, Derek encounters the other four team members – his doppelgängers. Dirk is an earlier, masochist version of him whose dominating ego suppresses empathy, whereas Darkness represents the queer side of Derek, as demonstrated by the use of the non-binary pronoun “they.” The remaining two persona of Derek, Delilah and Dux, on the other hand, result from an industrial malfunction, in that Derek’s kinds are set to be adult men, while Delilah is a woman and Dux a teen. Led by the self-elected team leader Dirk, the five Ds set out to exterminate defekta in the inventory.

It is interesting to note how the five Ds form a small-scale patriarchy inside the small world of LitenVärld. It is more interesting to note an implicit connection between (conventionally-defined) masculinity and royalty to the company. Among them, Dirk is the most faithful one, whereas the rest of the four’s fidelity declines along with their waning manhood. This evokes how patriarchy, represented by Dirk in the novel, and capitalism, signified by LitenVärld, can be intertwined with each other, as Engels explores in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1902).

While others are searching for defekta, Derek realizes he can communicate with the outlaws. Sympathizing with them, Derek decides to show mercy, making himself a de-facto defekta in the eyes of Dirk. The two soon brawl with each other, carrying strong symbolism in the novel. As demonstrated earlier, the four Ds represent a unique persona of Derek himself, which makes the fight not only over fidelity to the company, but over the controlling of Derek's self-identification – either with the capitalist corporate company or with himself. With the help of the other three, Derek murders Dirk and launches a revolution inside the little world by negotiating with the company at the end of the novel. The finale serves more than as closure for Cipri's narrative arc but rather an indicator that capitalism and patriarchy can be overthrown by not only the unified working class, but the unified queering group. Here, I do not limit my understanding of queer to simply sexuality, but rather return to its archaic meaning, as in weird and marginalized. The two lexicons remind us of identity politics that draw attention to “the unjust squandering of resources on the less deserving – on migrants, people of color and queer people.... In this sense, identity politics is positioned in a variety of Marxist frameworks as ineffectual; as a politics founded on difference, it is inherently incapable of building the broad-based movement needed to destabilize capitalism” (Kumar et.al, 5-8). However, at the novel's conclusion, we see a possibility or at least an attempt, albeit at the fictional level, of reconciling identity politics with the Marxist paradigm of redistribution. The novel finishes with an email where the other four Ds demand that the company increase employee social welfare benefits. Moreover, the last chapter, titled “Changing the World, One Room at a Time,” foreshadows a potentially more radical and broader-based movement against capitalism. In this sense, identity politics proffers another possibility, as an analytical tool, of unifying the marginalized groups to co-sabotage capitalism.

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*Image by klimkin*

### *Andor*

Jamie Woodcock



*Andor*. Dir. Tony Gilroy. Lucasfilm, September 2022.

*Andor* is the fourth Star Wars live-action television series, continuing the development of the franchise following the purchase by Disney. The first season (released so far) takes place across a single year, while the second season is expected to cover a further four years leading up to the events in the film *Rogue One*. Broadly speaking, the series follows the early stages of the rebellion against the Galactic Empire. In particular, it follows Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) as he becomes a revolutionary, leading up to his death in *Rogue One* while stealing the plans of the Death Star.



The series ties directly into the later film, meaning the audience already knows the end before the first episode starts. From the very beginning, it is clear that this series is a different kind of *Star Wars*. In the first episode, we see Cassian shoot two corporate security guards. There is no question, unlike in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*'s multiple remasterings, of who shot first. From here, the plot first follows Cassian as he tries to sell stolen Imperial technology and then becomes embroiled in a heist and later the rebellion. Second, it follows Syril Karn (Kyle Soller) as he tries to trace Cassian for the murders and then comes into contact with the Imperial Security Bureau (ISB). The first season follows the early stages of the rebellion, the lives of those living under the Empire, as well as those trying to suppress opposition.

*Andor* takes a notably darker tone than either *The Mandalorian* (2019-present), *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022), or *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021-2022). The other three take more of a space-Western setting, covering the outskirts of the galaxy. In *Andor*, the focus conveys an impression of a franchise less driven by Groggu (“Baby Yoda”) merchandise sales. The closest to product placement we get in *Andor* is the Kalashnikov-inspired blasters of the rebels.

*Andor* goes in a much more deliberate political direction. Instead of the usual themes of *Star Wars*, it is much more about the work of imperialism and the rebellion against it. There are no lightsabers or Jedi superheroes ready to fight the Empire. On both sides of the rebellion, there is a sharp focus on the daily lives of people in *Star Wars*. As Tony Gilroy explained in an interview: “If you think about it, most of the beings in the galaxy are not aware of Jedi, and have never seen a lightsaber [...] It’s like, there’s a restaurant and we’re in the kitchen. This is what’s going on underneath the other stuff” (quoted in Hiatt). There are scrap metal workers on Ferrix

dismantling ships, prison labour, and the secret work of starting a rebellion—both with the organisation of a heist, as well as the manoeuvring of Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) in the Senate.

Similarly, there are no visible Sith Lords seen running the empire. Instead, there is the bureaucracy of the ISB. The staff meetings focus on reports and following orders, not taking initiative. They are also an arena in which ISB supervisors Dedra Meero (Denise Gough) and Blevin (Ben Bailey Smith) go up against each other. They clash over protocols, a power struggle that is more Kafkaesque office politics than a Sith punishing failure with a force grip.

The significance of this is that *Andor* draws attention to the life and activities of the rank-and-file: those trying to rebel, the ISB and the army against them, and those caught in the middle. *Andor* has, given the name of the series, the potential to focus on Cassian's actions. However, Cassian is often not the person leading the action, nor could he (or anyone else for that matter) do it alone. The hero's journey, even when it involves trying to overthrow a totalitarian government, can often reinforce conservative themes. For example, in films like *In Time*, *Equilibrium*, and *Dune*, there is one special person (and it often is a young man) who leads everyone else to victory.

*Andor* subverts this hero's journey. Cassian runs away from Ferrix after being pursued for the killing of two Pre-Mor Security Officers. The Imperial Army establishes a garrison and occupies Ferrix. Early in the season, there is evidence of collective organising in the community, with the banging of pots and pans to warn of the Pre-Mor tactical team. At Maarva (Cassian's mother)'s (Fiona Shaw) funeral, she posthumously gives a speech via holorecording calling for the people of Ferrix to revolt against the empire. Maarva had been part of an organisation called the Daughters of Ferrix and there is further evidence of organising behind the uprising. Cassian uses this as cover for a rescue, neither inciting nor leading the action.

The first season also later features Cassian being imprisoned on Narkina 5. The representation of prison labour is another departure from the usual *Star Wars*. Here, the series shifts to a direct portrayal of the Empire's power. In summary fashion, Cassian is sentenced and shipped off to a penal colony. It is a criticism of the prison-industrial complex, with prisoners making parts for the future Death Star. However, the prison is also part of the Empire's attempts to maintain order. Knowledge of the prison is kept from the general population, providing a way to both suppress dissidents and information. The prison itself is designed to prevent collective organising, and is overseen with repressive technologies, internal competition, and separation from other prisoners. This is organising against all the odds, with a panopticism that Foucault would have been impressed with. However, inmates find a way to overcome this, with Kino Loy (Andy Serkis) turning from floor manager to worker militant.

The *Star Wars* franchise has, of course, been concerned with many of these themes before. The original film trilogy reflected on the Vietnam War and Nixon's presidency. George Lucas modelled the Empire on both the British and American Empires, drawing on Nazi imagery to reinforce the criticism. The story follows the rebellion, albeit focusing on the hero's journey of Luke Skywalker

and other characters. The Prequel films address the rise of fascism and the collapse of democracy. These are more firmly space operas, providing social commentary alongside them. However, subsequent entries in the Star Wars series have not moved this critique much further, other than perhaps the focus on average citizens found in *The Clone Wars* and *Star Wars: Rebels*.

This different vision of rebellion and Empire is in part due to Tony Gilroy's background in spy thrillers as well as his interest in history—and particularly historical revolutions. For example, Gilroy explains the heist subplot was inspired by an account of Stalin's bank robbery in 1907 (Hiatt). The series often focuses on the dirty work needed for a rebellion. The representation of the rebels themselves is not as clear-cut as in earlier *Star Wars*. There are political divisions and tensions with a heavy emphasis on the need for sacrifice. There are powerful examples of this throughout including the climax of the prison break with Kino revealing he cannot swim, Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård)'s speech to keep his ISB source in line, as well as Cassian's future death which looms over the series. This is not a straightforward hero's journey.

*Andor* refreshes *Star Wars* as a social commentary on authoritarianism, empire, and the possibility of rebellion—if not revolutionary change. It is a much more politicised entry into the Star Wars canon, which at the same time centres on the lives of ordinary people. *Andor* takes *Star Wars* in a new direction which raises avenues for further academic research on the politics of rebellion, organising, and social change.

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### *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Jeremy Brett



*Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Directed by Daniel Kwan (關家永) and Daniel Scheinert, A24, 2022.

Since premiering on March 11, 2022, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (EEAAO) crushed all critical and popular expectations by becoming, according to IGN, the most awarded film of all time, with over 150 accolades that put it far ahead of the previous winner, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Furthermore, it was after that figure was announced that EEAAO won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress (Michelle Yeoh), Best Supporting Actor (Ke Huy Quan), Best Supporting Actress (Jamie Lee Curtis), and two additional honors. Moving from a small independent film into a phenomenon so global that the film seemed to be fulfilling the promise of its title, this was no small achievement for a film that defies easy explanation, analysis, or traditional linear progression. We could easily imagine somewhere out in the multiverse, a world in which a fantastical film with an almost entirely Asian-led cast, one that mashes science fiction, fantasy, surreal imagery, martial arts, and an immigrant mother-daughter emotional conflict at its heart, would be released, spend a few weeks as a curiosity, and then sink into the box office depths. dignity to a homosexual romance on TV, even though this episode seems disjointed in comparison to others as it distances itself from Joel and Ellie's journey. On the other hand, the series closely approaches the game's most memorable moments, with some occasional changes and omissions, for pace and rhythm. As an adaptation, however, *The Last of Us* stands out not only for its fidelity to the source material or the renewal of the zombie subgenre, but also for the eco-criticism and other pressing issues the series brings to screen.



But we live in this particular reality, where the film hit a number of deep emotional chords with a wide range of viewers, not least, perhaps, because at the movie's core is an intensely widespread concern—the weight and outcomes of decision. The multiplicity of timelines featured throughout the movie all spring from individual decisions made by Evelyn Wong (Yeoh) at one time or another in her life, and, as the film demonstrates, these decisions have universe-changing consequences. All our fates touch each other, as they, and we, can be everything, everywhere, and all at once. The film is an important addition to the sf canon that involves the multiverse concept, not least because it centers on the idea of *choice* as a determinant in creating alternative timelines. Of course, the multiversal concept is not a new one in sf: the idea of infinitely overlapping and concurrent parallel worlds was brought into the modern day by Michael Moorcock in his

expansive sf/fantasy cycle, taking on new imaginative life by Marvel Comics and DC Comics in their ongoing attempts to give structure to over eight decades of competing storylines, occurring recently in the anarchic nihilism of *Rick & Morty*, and lately becoming the movie buzzword of the moment with the introduction of the multiverse to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Where *EEAAO* is singular is in adding an additional layer of emotional complexity these earlier instances lack, namely the presence of both regret and curiosity about one's life and the choices one makes in determining the course of that life.

Evelyn is the stressed, un-notable matriarch of a Chinese-American immigrant family in Los Angeles, running a laundromat, having trouble relating to her depressed lesbian daughter Joy (Stephanie Hsu), and facing possible divorce from her loving-yet-frustrated husband Waymond (Quan). Like many immigrants, Evelyn exists in a liminal space between worlds (explicitly signified in the film by her and Waymond's switching—and code-switching—back and forth between Chinese and English), struggling to get by without really living (Evelyn's emotional distance from Joy and Waymond is palpable). In addition, she faces a loss of her usual taut self-control and position as director of events when the family is called to the local IRS office for a business audit. The water is rising ever up above her head, when she suddenly comes into collision with the realization that both she and the universe are bigger than she could ever have imagined. The multiverse is in existential peril because of a choice that a different Evelyn made, and the entire film follows from that individual choice. The Evelyn from what the film terms the 'Alphaverse' was a brilliant scientist who discovered a way to access unique skills from alternative selves, but in doing so she released the film's adversary Jobu Tupaki, an agent of pure chaos seeking to destroy the multiverse. In a world where multiversal media tends to focus on the weirdness or humor of superficial surface differences between worlds (look at films like *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* or the J.J. Abrams *Star Trek* reboot series), *EEAAO* instead examines the power of people to effect significant life-altering changes for themselves and others—though the consequences can and often are dire, the film is ultimately positive in its depiction of an empathic humanity and of the strength of familial bonds.

The intersecting and myriad timelines of the film make the plot challenging to recount; suffice it to say that Alpha Waymond makes Evelyn aware of the looming multiversal catastrophe and provides her with the technology necessary to jump universes and access skills and knowledge needed to fight Jobu—much humor, by the way, is mined from the lunatic triggers often required by verse-jumpers to obtain this knowledge. In an ironic twist that reflects the inherent power of choice, Alpha Waymond has chosen Prime Evelyn as the one best suited to stop Jobu because she has “failed” in so many other universes to live the life she wants, that she now has a surfeit of untapped potential. In the course of the film, as Evelyn moves towards her ultimate confrontation with Jobu, we watch her experience a number of variant lives, many of which contribute to her defensive arsenal of skills—a mystical kung fu master, an international film star (both of these, of course, being riffs on Yeoh's real-life career), a sign spinner for a restaurant, a singer, the loving domestic partner of IRS agent Deirdre (Curtis) in a world where everyone has hotdog fingers,



a chef, and even a rock existing alongside Rock Jobu in a moment of calmness and peace on a lifeless Earth. Many of these lives provide Prime Evelyn with cinematically exciting things like fighting abilities, but along the course of her journey these alternate worlds give her moments of emotional wisdom that help her to realize her true empathic self. This is the self that will save the universe from the chaos she brought into being—the film turns on the revelation that the superpowered, reality-manipulating Jobu is, in fact, Alpha Joy (Hsu), who had been pushed by her mother to explore the multiverse and whose mind became hopelessly fractured by the infinitude of possibilities.

Jobu's appeal to existential despair causes Prime Evelyn to waver in her course, to lash out at the people in her various lives and to nearly join Jobu in the latter's plan to end everything and finally bring peace. But before the multiverse can collapse, Prime Evelyn takes to her heart the voice of Waymond, who combats Jobu's bleak nihilism with a cry from the heart—across multiple lifetimes—to human goodness and love. In the film's pivotal scene, two Waymonds make that argument (the first one to Film Actor Evelyn, the second to Prime Evelyn and the verse-jumpers seeking to take her and Jobu down) in an alternating chorus:

Alternate Waymond: When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naive. It is strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive through everything.

Prime Waymond: I don't know. The only thing I do know... is that we have to be kind. Please... be kind... especially when we don't know what's going on.

The appeal to empathy works, and Prime Evelyn makes her final choice, to embrace Jobu with caring and kindness and to fight for the connections between people that unite us as human beings. In her final exchange in the film with Joy, she says:

Maybe it's like you said. Maybe there is something out there, some new discovery that will make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, always, want to be here with you.

And when Joy responds: "So what? You're just gonna ignore everything else? You could be anything, anywhere. Why not go somewhere where your daughter is more than just this? Here, all we get are a few specks of time where any of this actually makes any sense", Evelyn responds simply and beautifully, "Then I will cherish these few specks of time." It is a moment of sublime connection, a quiet moment of beauty that caps a wild multiversal ride.

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a singular film in the multiversal sf subgenre in presenting the multiverse both as a learning opportunity and an arena for exploring the complex range of human emotion: from mutual mother-daughter love and frustration, to husband-wife estrangement, to daughter-father exasperation, to the fear and confusion generated by immigrants trying to cope with American government bureaucracy, to the unexpected reach and ultimate power of empathy as a refuge and safety. That all goes a long way towards explaining much of the

film's popular, runaway appeal. The best genre films, like *EEAAO*, touch the heart and mind alike, and call into question our preconceptions about who and what we are and the world in which we live. They make us imagine different and better futures, whether in this universe or another.

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## MEDIA REVIEWS

### *The Peripheral*, season 1

Ian Campbell



*The Peripheral*, season 1. Amazon Prime, 2022.

Amazon Prime has done a very good, though not masterful, job at something I'd long thought next to impossible: adapting a William Gibson novel for the screen. They accomplish this by essentially turning the novel inside out, giving us the same story but filming the bits that Gibson leaves implied in the text and leaving out much of what Gibson focuses on. It's a remarkable exercise in adaptation, and it very much does what Gibson clearly wants to do in the 2014 novel: to show how the seeds of the "Jackpot", the looming and multi-pronged anthropogenic disaster facing us, are already present, and what of our humanity must be sacrificed in order to survive.



The remainder of this review will contain spoilers for both book and show. The essential structure of the story remains the same from novel to series: communication is established between a parallel-world early 2100s London and what is said to be our own world in Appalachia of 2032. A somewhat less openly toxic faction of the *klept*, Gibson's word for the mostly-Russian mafia that dominate the future, makes use of the video-game skills of Flynne Fisher (Chloë Grace Moretz) for what seems to be a trivial job; other factions discover this and try to dominate Flynne's world, which they view as a "stub", ripe for exploitation; Flynne and her friends prevail upon what remains of humanity in the first faction to help them defend themselves. The 2030s characters "travel" to the future by means of inhabiting android bodies through "quantum entanglement": these bodies are the titular peripherals.

Showrunner Scott B. Smith and his team deserve our attention and praise for transforming a long prose poem into television compelling enough to deserve a renewal for Season 2, to be aired in early 2024. The production, settings, acting and episodic structure are all remarkably well-done. Especially notable is Moretz, who is a fantastic actress: she uses an entirely different set of body language and facial microexpressions when she plays Flynne in 2032 and when she plays Flynne inhabiting the peripheral in 2100, even though the peripheral is a direct copy of Flynne in appearance—even better, she plays the uninhabited peripheral on standby in a different manner. 2032 Flynne is looser and has a much greater range of expression than the inhabited peripheral, which is much more poised, and the uninhabited peripheral, which is nearly robotic. The effect of this is to subtly underline the inhumanity of the future: everything we see in 2100 is very beautiful—though much of this is in fact illusion—but has been stripped of its human warmth by the adjustments necessary to survive the Jackpot.

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The Peripheral, *season 1*

Nearly all the particulars of the story have been changed, however, and this is where the show and its adaptation of the novel become most interesting. In the novel, Aelita West is murdered because Wilf Netherton wants to impress her sister Daedra by giving her access to Flynnne's world; in the show, Daedra is entirely missing and Aelita and Wilf grew up together as orphans in the worst of the Jackpot. Aelita is a socialite in the novel, but works for the Research Institute in the show—its existence, like so much else, is only implied in the novel—before stealing access to Flynnne's world in order that it not be used as fodder for experimental drugs or warfare. In the novel, the threat to Flynnne and her friends in their own world is shadowy, corporate and unclear; in the show, the threat is concrete, in the form of a human assassin hired by the Research Institute (and played very well and creepily, by Ned Dennehy). Local drug lord and car dealer Corbell Pickett (Louis Herthum) is mostly an implied menace in the novel, but very present in the show, and his wife Mary (India Mullen) is a welcome presence. Deputy Tommy Constantine (Alex Hernandez) gets his own plotline instead of being only a supporting character, and his romance is with Flynnne's friend Billy Ann Baker (Adelind Horan) rather than with Flynnne herself. The effect of all this is to concretize what Gibson leaves implied: the novel gives us everything in 2032 from Flynnne's perspective, whereas in the show, she's much more part of a group that has already organized for self-defense in a collapsing society and is thus prepared to defend itself from an incursion from an alternate future.

Whereas Gibson focuses his prose on details not germane to the plot such as what's embedded in the resin coating the inside of Burton's Airstream trailer as a means of showing the passage of time, the show drops most of this and introduces the technological changes between 2022 and 2032 directly. For example, in the book, we're told that Burton and Conner were in Haptic Recon, and left to infer most of what that might mean; in the show, at the first opportunity we're shown that Burton, Conner and their other friends have enhancements that allow them to access one another's perceptions. In the novel, we're left mostly to infer the political structure of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century; in the show, this is spelled out explicitly as a duumvirate between klept and Research Institute, with the Metropolitan Police as mediator/enforcer. The most moving chapter of the book, "The Jackpot", tells the story of the catastrophe, but through multiple filters: the narrator summarizes what Wilf, through a screen and between universes, is telling Flynnne. All of this has the effect of rendering it something of a fairy tale, as a way of showing how removed Flynnne currently is from something that will affect her and everyone else she knows. In the show, by contrast, Flynnne in her peripheral is taken to a cemetery in London where the events are [shown](#) to her. These events are much more specific than they are in the book, as well. Much of this rather different formation of "show, don't tell" is quite effective and just as moving, but with the added advantage of being easier to access for viewers unaccustomed to SF, unfamiliar with the looming catastrophe—I should note that I write this on the fourth consecutive day announced as the world's hottest day in 125,000 years—or with Gibson's poetic and challenging writing style.

What the show does best is focus on how *empty* the post-Jackpot world is. In the novel, like so much else, we're left to infer this, but one of the first things Flynnne says in the show when she

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visits 2100 is “Where are all the people?” Nearly everything is silent in the future; nearly everyone is an autonomous peripheral; Lev’s house seems homey because there are at one point five actual humans in it. All of this is allowed to hit home well before Flynnne is shown what the Jackpot was (will be) like.

Nearly everyone reading this review is going to have spent most of their life reading SF, likely including at least *Neuromancer* from Gibson’s oeuvre, so we’re accustomed to having to sort our way through the words on the page to get to what’s really going on behind the scenes, and we don’t always take into account how difficult this actually is. There are points where the show goes a little too far in the other direction: the final episode’s depiction of how Flynnne cuts off access to her own “stub” borders on deus ex machina, for example. Yet Smith and Amazon have provided us with an adaptation that has the potential both to bring far more people into contact with the scope of the Jackpot we’re all about to experience and also with SF as a genre.

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### *Neptune Frost*

Özgür Çalışkan



*Neptune Frost*. Dir. Uzeyman, Anisia & Williams, Saul. Swan Films, 2021.

*Neptune Frost* is often described in reviews as an Afrofuturist musical science fiction film. Opening the door to a fascinating world where art, technology, and revolution merge, the visually and narratively stunning film, directed by visionary duo Anisia Uzeyman and Saul Williams, is an exciting production that defies convention and immerses audiences in an Afro-futurist dreamscape. In the ever-expanding and prominent world of Afrofuturist cinema, this film shines as a visual, poetic, and aural jewel weaving black identity, gender, and cosmic wonder. The narrative unfolds nonlinearly, seamlessly blending elements of science fiction, magical realism, and social commentary. *Neptune Frost* explores the boundaries of gender and sexuality, the power dynamics between oppressor and oppressed, and the potential for technology to be a liberating or controlling force.



*Neptune Frost* tells the story of the journey of two bereaved characters and the crossing of their paths after their journey. Matalusa (Bertrand “Kaya Free” Ninteretse), after the death of his brother Tekno in the coltan mine, embarks on a journey and decides to go to the city and questions his identity from a class perspective with the death of his brother. On the other hand, twenty-three-year-old Neptune (Cheryl Isheja and Elvis Ngabo) embarks on a journey to resolve her sexual identity confusion after the death of his aunt. Both characters’ journeys are patterned with obstacles. The dreams the two characters encounter for the first time, equipped with cables and illuminated with neon lights, where time-space is complicated, fuel the transformation of both characters. Through Matalusa and Neptune, the film explores the tension between digital existence and the longing for worldly human connections. This exploration raises profound questions about the role of technology in shaping our identities and the need to strike a delicate balance between progress and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Digitaria, where the journeys of the two characters reach, is the place of those who try to stay out of the political and world conflict and rebel against exploitation. The film’s other characters, Innocent (Dorcy Rugamba), Memory (Eliane Umuhire), and Psychology (Trésor Niyongabo), finally come together. Neptune brings power, energy, electricity, or whatever is missing to Digitaria because in a world where television, radio, and the Internet are cut off, access to them is a right. This idea is embodied in the phrase “we mine, but we do not own what we dig,” closely linked to the unchanging history of colonialism. The people of Digitaria, pondering concepts such as

oligarchy, patriarchy, tolerance, wisdom, self-control, ignorance, and understanding, manage to hack into the world system through connections with Neptune's ability and gain access to the Internet. As a result, all these social and political abstract concepts are concretised in a revolutionary struggle.

*Neptune Frost* unfolds in a neo-African society where the tangible and the virtual merge seamlessly. Uzeyman and Williams bring to life a world where Afrofuturistic elements are intertwined with ancient mythology, where tradition and technological innovation merge in an enigmatic environment. One of the most important factors in creating this environment is the aural space of the film because the soundscape is as vital as the visuals.

The film's haunting and ethereal soundtrack, composed by Saul Williams himself, envelops the audience with the fusion of electronic Afrobeats, African rhythms, spoken words, and experimental sounds, creating a mesmerizing sonic landscape that mirrors the film's otherworldly setting. The music serves as a conduit, connecting the audience to the characters' emotions with evocative lyrics and the film's larger themes, elevating the film to a transcendent realm where sound becomes its language.

The film's directors stated that the film's influences date back to 2016 and events like the conflict between ethnic groups in Rwanda, student protests in Burundi, the Arab Spring, and hacker movements. These influences explain why the plot and layered narrative of the film combine different subjects. The subtext of the film's story is a powerful exploration of cultural resurgence and the preservation of African identity in an increasingly globalized and technologically driven society. By elegantly weaving together the wisdom of the past, folklore, and the struggles of a community, the film paints a vivid picture of a people reclaiming their heritage and resisting cultural erasure. It does so by taking Afrofuturism beyond mere aesthetics, utilizing the genre's core themes of identity, empowerment, and cultural preservation to present a narrative of hope and reclamation where Afrofuturism and technology collide. The film transcends the constraints of earthly conventions by embracing the cosmic diaspora of identities that exist beyond binary structures.

Compared to other Afrofuturist films, *Neptune Frost* uses a more vernacular and interrogative language and exemplifies the multifaceted evolution of storytelling as a source of inspiration that echoes the timeless legacy of the Afrofuturist and Afrosurrealist works that came before it. Different than the earlier examples such as *Space Is the Place* (John Coney, 1974), *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991), *The Last Angel of History* (John Akomfrah, 1996), or recent ones such as *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (Ava DuVernay, 2018), *Neptune Frost* ventures into new territory, combining technology and heritage to illuminate the rich tapestry of black identity and techno-centric resistance. *Neptune Frost* charts the path of its resistance, adding a new chapter to the genre's ongoing cosmic symphony.

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