



BOOK REVIEW:

*Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community  
Survival from Speculative Fiction*

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Yoshinaga, Ida, Sean Guynes, and Gerry Canavan, editors. *Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival from Speculative Fiction*. The MIT Press, 2022. ISBN: 978-0262543941.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic forced us as a human society and as a planet to confront a number of unpleasant home truths – multiple, even willful, instances of neglect of the health outcomes of underserved and marginalized populations, colossal failures of empathy for suffering, as well as epic political and social displays of selfishness and the exacerbation of extreme economic inequalities. Together with the ongoing existential threat of climate change, the pandemic was one of those earthshattering events that oblige us to reconsider our approaches to living and to our relationships with the planet. If there ever were a time for speculative fiction to exercise strenuously its traditional role of both imagining and reimagining futures, this would appear to be it. In aid of solving seemingly insoluble problems, the editors of *Uneven Futures*, who produced this book in COVID’s long shadow, gave their contributors a task: “choose an SF text you love and explore how it helps us think of ways to live in, survive, and grow beyond the inequalities and injustices of our times, with *SF*, *love*, *survive*, and *our* all open-ended categories that assume no clear or final definitions” (xiii).

If *Uneven Futures* has an operating mantra, it is social activist, writer, and editor Walidah Imarisha’s observation in her 2015 volume *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* that “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction” (3). As the editors argue (and as even a cursory glance at the news appears to confirm), the

speculative fiction enterprise at the present moment is operating within a world in profound crisis. In the editors' view, this requires a new dedication both to the centering of community power and to listening to disparate voices and experiences. These in turn can function as methods of overturning an international capitalist order that prizes corporations over people – an order relying on intrusive surveillance techniques, the censorship and misuse of information, and carceral mindsets to preserve elite power that only speeds on the continuing destruction of the natural environment. This volume's editors call for an Imarishan commitment to the imaginative power of speculative fiction to reshape the ways in which we consider the world around us, with stakes that are dizzyingly high. But as co-editor Yoshinaga notes in her heartfelt essay at the volume's midpoint, "Now is the time to talk of science fiction and ethos" (165), and she proposes a "Science Fiction Studies 3.0" which will examine the genre through its ability to help imagine methods by which diverse communities might hold back, withstand, and resist the forces of capital.

The volume is organized into four thematic and tactical sections of brief essays, each one representing "a collective strategy for survival" (xiv): *Emergence*, in which the considered texts are centered on values such as empathy and solidarity as engines for community development; *Rupture*, where the texts look to challenge normativity and bring inequalities into sharp relief; *Transformation*, in which texts offer or model community-based solutions including tactics of harm reduction, reformation, and alliance-building; and *Revolution*, which concerns texts that center on revolutionary acts or movements that reimagine people, societies, or systems. Not all the texts considered in *Uneven Futures* fall neatly into these categories, suggesting the limitations of this particular intellectual framework. However, the editors and contributors do recognize that the examined SF texts and the strategies they document inform one another, overlap, and form parts of a continuum in a process that requires multiple approaches. This also illustrates that texts are not islands, nor are they modular components that slot neatly into a large simple model, but rather they are complex narrative instruments that carry different levels and kinds of meaning.

With nearly 40 texts – including novels, short stories, films, television productions, games, operas, and even an active social movement – included in the volume, to discuss all of them would be unwieldy. Instead, this review focuses on two entries per section in order to provide examples of the myriad ways in which speculative fiction works may serve as powerful frames of reference for rethinking the social and economic order. In *Emergence*, Hugh Charles O'Connell examines Tade Thompson's 2016–2019 groundbreaking Africanfuturist *Wormwood* trilogy through the lens of what O'Connell calls *salvage utopianism*, an "alternative sense of apocalypse ... expressed [by] sifting through the detritus of capitalist modernity to reappropriate its means towards new ends" (48). That is to say, Thompson gives us a society in which people resist and thrive in the ruins of a post-colonialist society. The crisis is here and will pass, so we must choose how we plan to live in the legacies it leaves behind. In a world under immediate and lasting threat from anthropogenic climate change, this has deadly serious relevance for the way life will proceed in the human future. B. Pladek, meanwhile, looks at the Cartoon Network series *Steven Universe Future* (2019–2020) and studies the ways in which a cartoon based around the concepts of unconditional love and empathy creates an

aftermath in which the campiness yet earnestness of hope – hope that reparation is not impossible – allows for serious personal and societal redemption.

Within *Rupture*, Andrew Ferguson produces a fascinating analysis of the storyworld of the SCP Foundation, a fictional organization whose mission is to capture, contain, and study paranormal entities and phenomena. The SCP world is documented in a sprawling collection of short, born-digital horror stories now living on a wikified website, but with its origins in the notorious online stew of 4chan. Ferguson describes how the SCP experience – through the power of collaboration and imaginative buy-in from numerous creators – migrated (or, rather, escaped) from a harmful community marked by toxicity, misogyny, racism, and right-wing trollishness into a vast, monitored, creative shared space and in the process charted an ethical way forward for other online communities to carve out positive digital universes. Meanwhile, Cathryn Merla-Watson looks at Virginia Grise's 2011 play *blu*, which adapts tropes from apocalyptic literature, mapping apocalypses (both in our modern understanding of the word and its original definition as an “uncovering” or “revelation”) onto the lives of a queer Chicana couple and their family. As Merla-Watson argues, Grise's play makes the onslaught of injustices that affect and oppress so many marginalized people in the United States – police brutality, unfair labor practices, racist housing practices, domestic abuse, the weight of the military-industrial complex – into part of a mundane normalcy infused with elements of Aztec myth. The radicalness of Grise's work – the *rupture* – creates, through the restructuring of these multiple apocalypses, an intimate and collective sharing of experience that hopes for a new way of living and the incitement of new, liberating beginnings.

As part of *Transformation*, Farah Mendlesohn looks at Joanna Russ' 1976 novel *We Who Are About To...*, a twist on both the time-honored space colonization novel and its companion subgenre the robinsonade, a novel that, rather than humor the reader with the imperial positivity of a colonization narrative, radically reinterprets such narratives by uncoupling human endeavor from a hostile universe. As Mendlesohn puts it, Russ' novel “is a novel of refusal: a refusal to present a false narrative, to center either the human individual or the human species” (191). Instead, Russ tells the story of the dwindling of a marooned group of interstellar passengers down to the last woman, and of her choice to die herself in the face of the realization that the universe was and is never about humanity or the individual human experience. In a world facing incalculable damage due to human-centered impulses and selfishness, the novel has particular resonance in its proposal that we rethink our relationship to life that does not need us, does not exist to service us, and that will go on in some fashion without us, and to its concomitant suggestion that choosing the manner of our death may be our ultimate, untouchable freedom. Ayana Jamieson imbues her emotional, even joyous description of Toshi Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon's 2020 opera based on Butler's prescient *Parable of the Sower* (1993) with the tenets of Octavia Butler's Earthseed precepts. It is a work that (like the novel) prioritizes the vital significance of sharing resources, sharing voices, and weaving together a sharing community in the face of apocalyptic catastrophe, reminding us, as Butler did, that God is Change.

Two very different examples from the final section, *Revolution*, continue the volume's laudable dedication to variety of examined texts, reflecting the

richness of the speculative genre. Gerry Canavan analyzes one particular issue of the legendary Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons/John Higgins comic book epic *Watchmen* (1986–1987), famous, of course, for its deconstruction-verging on disembowelment of the character of the superhero. Canavan rather creatively chooses to focus not on the overarching concern of the series with the failures and flaws of people calling themselves heroes, but instead with one particular and generally overlooked moment: Issue #11 of the series, in which ordinary, nonheroic New Yorkers collectively intervene in stopping a moment of public domestic violence in Times Square. Here, the comic creators, in the middle of an ongoing struggle between intensely flawed, even corrupt “heroes,” pause to offer a moment of ordinary heroism by people who only want to aid others. It is a short and quiet alternative to superheroic egotism, one that suggests another pathway out of the overwhelming forces of capitalism and imperialism that drive the world. As Canavan put it, “Neither Rorschach nor Ozymandias. No cops. No presidents. No gods. No masters. Only us – trying to help.” (255). The final essay of the volume brings the reader back to the Imarishan impulse of social activism as speculative fiction, as Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada offers the real-life story of Native Hawaiian activists coming together in 2019 to oppose a construction project at Mauna Kea. The piece frames the protest in terms of *mohihi’o*, the Hawaiian term for science fiction with links to the concept of experiencing or interpreting dreams. In exercising *mohihi’o*, the Mauna Kea protesters were not only imagining new futures, but doing so in light of their ancestors’ centuries of experience in interacting with the land and the natural ecosystems of Hawaii. It was in this deep, ancestral context that the protestors asked themselves speculative questions that go to the heart of the human experience and that speculative fiction asks of its readers – Who are we? What do we want from the world around us? What is the future we envision for ourselves? What can and will that future be?

It is those very questions that each of the texts examined in *Uneven Futures* asks and that each of the volume’s contributors asks, often in creative, clever ways. Overall, the book is refreshingly light on jargon and accessible by both academic and more casual readers alike, suitable for a volume whose mission it is to forge pathways through which we who love speculative fiction and center it in our lives can make new communities and new worlds.

*Biography:* Jeremy Brett is a librarian and archivist at Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, Texas A&M University, where he is the Curator of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection, one of the largest of its kind in the world. He has worked at many different libraries and received both his MLS and his MA in History from the University of Maryland – College Park in 1999. His professional interests include science fiction, fan studies, and the intersection of libraries and social justice.

## Works Cited

Imarisha, Walidah. *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. AK Press, 2015.