



BOOK REVIEW:
*Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and
the Alt-Right*

Jaime Segura San Miguel

Carroll, Jordan S. *Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and the Alt-Right*.
Forerunners: Ideas First. University of Minnesota Press. 2024. ISBN:
9781517917081

The last two decades have borne witness to the rise of populist politics championed by authoritarian, conservative alt-right parties. The misappropriation of cultural productions for political purposes has also increased in ubiquitousness and deviousness. In the last few years, the academic world has responded to these cultural shifts with an increasing focus on research into how these movements consciously employ narratives to support their ideologies. Jordan S. Carroll's *Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and the Alt-Right* exists at the core of these renewed efforts by the academic world to better understand the discursive strategies of hate groups that represent a threat to democratic values worldwide. The book covers several topics, from the historical connection of science fiction (SF) to white nationalists, to the struggles for the representation and control of SF awards, and to the different theoretical concepts that support Carroll's argument. Throughout the volume, the author provides examples from SF works and their reception to explain the underlying theoretical apparatuses and discursive topoi used by hate groups.

Carroll focuses his criticism on the concept of "speculative whiteness," an idea that underlies much white supremacist discourse and which maintains that only white men can possibly offer a viable future for human civilization. This is explained to work mostly through two different mechanisms: Firstly, Carroll shows that there is a connection between supremacist discourse and traditional misconceptions of developmental psychology and social Darwinism,

some of which hail all the way from the Victorian Era. For example, alt-right groups maintain that the reason why white men – referring to men from Western, Caucasian cultures – have found themselves at the zenith of civilization and in a position to control and exert power over other cultures, is simply because they are innately superior. Secondly, in their worldview, biological predestination to greatness is enmeshed with the idea of unrealized white potential to explain why white men – groups or specific individuals – are sometimes unable to access the power that they consider their birthright. The recurring interpretation of these groups is that historical contingencies, such as feminism, socialism or leftism in general, have impeded them from realizing their full potential. As a result, hate groups often believe that not only does SF offer perfect scenarios for white men to speculate about possible futures with alternative types of governments or social categories, but also that SF is the sole province of white men. Carroll explains these ideas in the three sections of their book. Though there are a variety of topics covered, the sections mostly follow a chronological order.

In the first chapter, “Introduction: Fascist Worldmaking,” Carroll provides a brief overview of the historical links between SF and white nationalists. In his discussion, this ranges from the discussion of early figures, like James H. Madole, the founder of the American Renaissance Party, to current ones, like Jason Reza Jorjani, the co-founder of the AltRight Corporation. Here, Carroll lays out the theoretical foundations for the discussion, from the ways in which right-wing hate groups attempt to misappropriate SF narratives, to the metapolitical use of cultural works. The discussion is illuminated with abundant references to SF works and to explanations of how white nationalists and other hate groups have laid claim to SF narratives for discursive purposes.

One of the key topics Carroll emphasizes in the first chapter is how, regardless of how alt-right groups have attempted to twist SF for spurious and deliberately misleading uses, they have not come up with anything new. Indeed, he argues that alt-right groups have consistently simply used what *was already there*; in other words, the speculative nature of SF leaves it open to being more easily misused and misappropriated than other genres. Moreover, even though a significant majority of SF authors often portray an alternative future in an attempt to criticize aspects of present-day politics or the dangers of certain ideologies, a few have embraced fascist talking points and themes in their works. What is more, even works that endeavor to fight against anti-democratic values can be misinterpreted: many SF narratives portray dystopian societies or authoritarian and autocratic rulers with satirical or cautionary purposes, but the alt-right has frequently engaged in what has been called an “irony bypass” (Jonathan Bowden, qtd. in Carroll 7). This idea refers to how fascists, having figured out the fact that “orthodoxy must reproduce heretical ideas if only to negate them,” (7) often take advantage of it. As Carroll concludes, the alt-right uses SF not to look at a future where humankind finally breaks with the current state of affairs, but, in a reactionary way, to go back to an idealized past.

The second chapter, “Invaders from the Future,” moves from examining how the racial essentialist and determinist discourse of white supremacy shows in alt-right appropriation of SF, to looking at how it uses SF to support its fallacious meritocratic argument that white men are destined to greatness because of what they do. Carroll introduces the white supremacist idea that

white men are like the “nerds” of SF narratives through the example of the accelerationist and Neoreactionary philosopher Nick Land, who perceives Western culture as an eternal struggle between the “nerds” and the “masses.” This entails that while the masses need the nerds to keep the wheel turning, the nerds no longer need the masses, for they are “in the process of automating the kind of drudge work performed by the unintelligent” (27). This argument – which the alt-right aims to make more appealing by phrasing it as the driven and hard-working person triumphing over the careless and lazy one – is in reality only new dressing for the same old essentialist values of racial determinism that permeate the far-right ideological apparatus. Carroll promptly dismantles the alt-right usage of such doublespeak. For example, he points out that Land characterizes the masses with the same descriptors long used by the American far-right against African-American communities, accusing them of being “hedonistic, hypersexual, unintelligent, and violent,” and claiming they only want “welfare handouts” (30). Additionally, Land maintains that the masses lack the low-time preference – the capacity to withstand discomfort now for a greater reward later on – required to further civilization. Likewise, the chapter discusses how alien and mutant narratives which SF often uses to criticize the process of otherization or to embody an external threat, are in alt-right discourse commonly misappropriated as narratives representing oppressed white males. Carroll explains how the “Slan” phenomenon that followed van Vogt’s 1940 novel *Slan* – a narrative about superhuman beings who are persecuted – sprouted a wide range of fan initiatives. Although these were initially innocent activities such as simple fan and book clubs, they soon gave way to more obscure projects. As an example of this, Carroll discusses Claude Degler’s project of spending most of the 1940s managing a rural compound in the Ozarks and calling on fans to come live there to “initiate a eugenics program, breeding science fiction enthusiasts together to produce a race of supermen or ‘Homo Cosmens’, who’d rise up to build a new civilization” (32). This racial determinism, in turn, is shown to be linked with neoconservative talking points about wealth accrument, since capitalist accumulation is understood by the alt-right as “an expression of racially determined providence” (44), as exemplified by Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*.

Finally, Carroll’s third chapter, “Whitey on the Moon,” moves the focus of the book from discussing the underlying ideas of SF that have long appealed to supremacists and fascists, to examining how SF narratives are often used directly to justify antidemocratic measures. Carroll introduces this topic through the idea that SF narratives introduce “illiberal ideas past gatekeepers who would otherwise balk at them if they were presented in realist narratives” (Spencer, qtd. in Carroll 63). This idea has been praised by Richard B. Spencer, a neo-Nazi and White supremacist political commentator. This demonstrates the ideological divide between mainstream far-right groups and the most extreme and fringe of the alt-right spokespersons. The latter, as exemplified by Spencer, espouse views that SF narratives where an elite group of nerds dominate other races basically betray the essence of true white men who should aspire to shoot for the stars and explore “outer space and the universe” (Spencer, qtd. in Carroll 63). Carroll explains that some SF narratives are readily adopted by the alt-right to contextualize their demands because of the sometimes-fine line that separates satire and criticism from representation. Thus, in the alt-right view, *Interstellar* (2014) perfectly explains why the USA

is no longer allegedly at the fore of space exploration, since it accurately depicts how multiculturalism has led to stagnation. For example, in his 2016 *“Whitey on the Moon”: Race, Politics, and the Death of the U.S. Space Program, 1958-1972*, Michael J. Thompson argues – counter to all factual data – that NASA failed because the money that used to be allocated to space research had been rerouted towards welfare payments for Black people, a point that illustrates the fight between white supremacists and Afrofuturist writers (Carroll 65-66). Likewise, the chapter examines the debates that SF writers and alt-right personalities have had in the last few years about the types of governance depicted in SF works such as *Elysium* (2013) or *Dune* (1965). Carroll points out that in these debates the works are often stripped of all critical qualities and presented as narratives that call for antidemocratic governments as the only way to “suppress the fickle demands of the masses” (72). As Carroll concludes, white nationalists favor SF narratives because they allow living in a perpetual cognitive dissonance of rooting for a speculative future where white men can explore their full potentials, while at the same time hoping that this future becomes a monumentalization of their present identities as “glorious, necessary, and eternal” (100).

Overall, Carroll’s *Speculative Whiteness* joins the growing body of scholarship on the intersection of SF and politics, such as André M. Carrington’s *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016), or David M. Higgins’s *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood* (2021). Readers should understand Carroll’s book as a historical view of the relationships between the far-right and SF, rather than a book on literature theory; expecting the latter, given its short length, would be a discredit to the author. Even though the argument could at times benefit from a deeper exploration of the ways in which alt-right discourses use doublespeak or show ideological incoherence, it is still an interesting volume for scholars looking for a brief and entertaining introduction to the association between the alt-right and SF. Due to its brevity and approachable language, it will be of interest also to students of literature, political sciences, and film, as well as to SF fans and those concerned citizens who might want to better understand the interplay of culture and politics.

Biography: Jaime Segura San Miguel is a substitute lecturer for the Complutense University of Madrid. His preferred genres for research are Gothic horror, fantasy, and dystopian fiction, and he works with the fields of medical humanities, myth criticism, history of ideas, and the political uses of literature. His main body of research analyses how the discourse of psychiatry has affected the representations of madness, and how this has in turn affected how society stigmatizes mental health problems.